

Spending cuts will increase inequalities between women and men and may seriously harm the human rights of some women

Blog Admin

[James Harrison](#) and [Mary-Ann Stephenson](#) recently launched a report that assessed the impact of the public spending cuts on women. Coventry was used as a case study but the findings are applicable to the whole of the UK; namely that the spending cuts will increase inequalities between women and men and may seriously damage the human rights of some women. Here the authors argue that there is a particular problem of the combined impact of multiple cuts on vulnerable groups, for instance women victims of abuse and lone parents. Many public authorities are not doing enough to understand what the impacts of such spending cuts are on vulnerable groups. Better analysis is required and that analysis must then be acted upon.



Our report entitled '[Unravelling Equality?: A human rights and equality impact assessment of the spending cuts on women in Coventry](#)' considered the impact of the spending cuts on women across eight key areas that we identified through a process of consultation with individual women and women's voluntary organisations: employment; housing; tax and benefit changes; education; violence against women; health; social care and other support services; and legal advice.



We found a range of potential and actual equality and human rights impacts across all these areas. However, there are a number of areas where a combination of cuts – often by a variety of different agencies – will impact on particularly vulnerable or disadvantaged women with potentially devastating effects. Here we briefly look at two such groups: women victims and survivors of violence and abuse, and lone parents ([92 per cent of whom are women](#)).

Women victims and survivors of violence and abuse

Women victims and survivors of violence and abuse will be affected by a range of cuts in Coventry. Such cuts are being replicated (often more severely) in many other parts of the country.

Services for women facing violence including emergency accommodation, counselling, crisis support and outreach work are under threat. Some organisations providing key support services have already lost significant funding. Funding for other services is under review leaving organisations very uncertain about their future. Cuts to legal aid will reduce the ability of women suffering violence to get the legal help and support they need. Moreover, reductions and other changes to welfare benefits will make it harder for women to leave violent relationships, and cuts to housing benefit will make it harder for some women to move area to get away from their attacker.

In addition, the police and the Crown Prosecution Service are both facing budget cuts which voluntary organisations fear may reduce the support available to victims and survivors. For instance, the number of specialist domestic violence officers in Coventry has been cut from eight to two. The NHS is also facing a budget cut which may reduce the level of support available to victims of violence and the funding for voluntary organisations.

Lone Parents

Lone parents will be affected by several layers of cuts. Changes to housing benefit will particularly affect lone parents according to the conclusions of the Government's own [equality impact assessment](#). Lone parents will also be disproportionately affected by reductions in child tax credits and in the decreasing amount of child care available. This is because lone parents have to meet childcare costs out of one salary and do not have a partner to share childcare with. Lone parents will also be affected by the replacement of the Child Support Agency with the Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission which will charge up to £100 and 7-12 per cent of maintenance recovered where lone parents cannot persuade the absent parent to provide child support voluntarily.

Furthermore, lone parents will suffer from cuts to flexible public sector jobs combined with increased conditionality and sanctions on benefits. Past experience tells us that this will lead to cases where benefits are wrongly withdrawn. But now there will be no legal aid available to fund challenges to decisions.

Single parents are also over three times more likely to have experienced domestic violence and are more likely to be looking after a disabled child than other women. So they will be disproportionately affected by the cuts to support for domestic violence services and cuts that affect disabled people and carers.

Our report also identifies cumulative impacts on a range of other groups such as Black and Minority Ethnic women and those giving and receiving care ([an issue highlighted by a court case last week](#)).

Monitoring and Action by Public Authorities

Public authorities have duties to promote equality and not to violate human rights. Many public authorities are arguing that they are monitoring equality impacts of spending cuts through equality impact assessments. But our research shows that these assessments are often poor-quality tick-box exercises that fail to uncover the underlying issues raised by the public spending cuts such as those catalogued above.

Worse still, as a result of [new government proposals for specific equalities duties](#) under the Equality Act, many authorities are under the impression that there is a weakening of obligations on public authorities to assess and monitor impacts.

But the [government proposals](#) themselves say:

Under the requirements of the general duty to have “due regard” to the matters set out in the Act, public bodies will need to understand the effect of their policies and practices on equality – this will involve looking at evidence, engaging with people, staff, service users and others and considering the effect of what they do on the whole community.

This sounds very much like a *good* impact assessment process. Public authorities should therefore make sure they carry out the kind of detailed analysis of the combined impact of the cuts they are making as was undertaken to produce our report. Partly this should be done to avoid ending up in court. But also because our research demonstrates that the public spending cuts have the potential to reshape our society in all kinds of (often unintended) ways. Public authorities need to take action now to make sure that equality is not unravelled.