

The legacy of the coalition government: a double standard on women's rights



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As the general election looms large on the horizon, and the days of the current coalition government appear numbered, what are we to make of progress on women's rights during the last five years of Tory-Liberal Democrat rule?

The question is not a straightforward one to answer. Certainly examples spring to mind of government ministers speaking out about the need to protect "the most vulnerable women" around the world. The high-profile Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative (PSVI) is one such example. Launched by former Foreign Secretary William Hague and Angelina Jolie at the Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict in London last June, the initiative received widespread media coverage. Supporters argue that it has mobilised significant support and attention in this neglected area, not least the recent opening of a new **Centre for Women, Peace and Security** at LSE.

The government has also focused attention on ending what it calls '**the scourge of modern slavery**' – or human trafficking – in the UK. Home Secretary Theresa May's Modern Slavery Bill, introducing tougher penalties for traffickers, has recently become law, and the first Independent **Anti-slavery Commissioner** has been appointed.

Campaigners and women's organisations have highlighted shortcomings in both of these measures. At the summit, there were reports that the main events were elitist and restricted to politicians, whilst the voices of African women were literally silenced, with **activists being locked out** of the events. Organisations working with asylum seekers in the UK have also **highlighted the 'hypocrisy'** of how the UK treats sexual violence survivors who manage to make it to the UK, with their claims being frequently disbelieved, leaving them at risk of being returned to the countries they have fled. The Modern Slavery Bill, meanwhile, has been criticised for doing **too little to protect victims** and for failing to **protect migrant domestic workers**.

Despite these criticisms and others which have been made, both policies represent important efforts to address deplorable violations of women's (and men's rights). And yet significant limitations remain in the language and framework of abuse and trafficking, which invoke highly gendered and racialised notions of victimhood.

These policies have come at a time when women in the UK have suffered disproportionately from the impact of the government's self-imposed austerity measures. Analysis done by the **Women's Budget Group** has demonstrated how women suffer most from cuts to benefits and public sector job losses. Women's organisations have been severely affected by funding cuts, leading to **closures of domestic violence shelters** and organisations working with black and minority ethnic communities, such as Southall Black Sisters, have highlighted how **services for these groups** have been put at risk. Changes to legal aid eligibility have further increased the vulnerability of domestic violence survivors, many of whom are no longer to obtain legal representation, as argued by the charity Rights of Women who recently **brought a legal challenge** against the government.

The Fawcett Society has termed this the combined effect of these austerity measures – cuts to jobs, benefits and services on which women depend – '**the triple jeopardy**' and argues that it is a threat to gender equality in the UK. Prime Minister David Cameron has also **been criticised** for his

handling of the equalities ministry, including his appointment of Nicky Morgan as minister for women (but not equalities, given that she had previously voted against gay marriage legislation).

Taken together, these decisions seriously undermine the coalition government's commitment to women's human rights and gender equality – and financial support for organizations working to achieve this. A report published by the Joint Committee on Human Rights in February accused the government of a **double standard** in the way it treats violence against women and girls in the UK compared to international development funding priorities, for example. Whilst gender-based violence has become a key pillar of the UK government's strategy abroad and anti-trafficking legislation has been introduced at home, those women most impacted by austerity have been put at risk of poverty and violence. These structural and insidious violations of women's rights to an adequate standard of living, to protection from violence and to access to justice have not just been ignored by the coalition government, they are a direct result of policies introduced during the last five years. Whichever political party (or combination of parties) forms the new government in May, they will have their work cut out to ensure women's rights are protected amidst the ongoing climate of austerity politics; the challenge for campaigners remains to ensure the government is held accountable for all violations of women's human rights, not just those which make good headlines.

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