Is Blue Labour feminist?

Ivana Bartoletti challenges
Maurice Glasman

Launch issue...

with contributions from:
• Harriet Harman MP
• Seema Malhotra • Yvette Cooper MP • Sadiq Khan MP
• Bethan Cansfield • Rachel Reeves MP • Claire Leigh
• Rushanara Ali MP • Giovanni Allegretti
It is a challenging time for politics in general and women in particular, which is why we have created Fabiana magazine.

Recent years have seen a new wave of feminism as a fresh generation of women have entered the public sphere, in NGOs, public bodies, think tanks and social media. There is an increasing awareness that the quality of politics and policies is much better where women are present at all levels.

But it is not just about presence. Politics and policies which include women, are led by women, and represent the communities where women live and work are most likely to be politics of change, true reform and modernisation for all. Feminism is both the lens through which to regard society and the power and potential for policy analysis and comment, and effect change.

Fabiana is grounded in the vision of equality that is enshrined in international conventions, achieved by international women’s movements. We will be building links to those overseas who are vigorously pursuing the empowerment of women.

To succeed with our magazine, we continue to need the help of many people. Our first issue owes a great deal to the support of many unpaid evenings and weekends worked by sub-editor Suki Ferguson.

Above all, this magazine will thrive on the passion of those of you who will write for it. Whatever your walk of life in politics, business, the public sector or civil society, I look forward to interacting with you. Ideas and proposals can be sent to me directly at Fabiana.Magazine@fabianwomen.org.uk.

It is a privilege to welcome you to Fabiana. This is an exciting new venture for the Fabian Women’s Network and we are determined to make the most out of it. Read on, and please send me your feedback!
A NEW GENERATION, A NEW AGENDA
Seema Malhotra, Director Fabian Women’s Network

Since we launched the Fabian Women’s Network (FWN) six years ago, we have constantly sought to raise the profile and contribution of women in political and public life. I am absolutely delighted that this year we are launching Fabiana, our new magazine, which we know will become a strong voice in political and social debate. My thanks to Ivana Bartoletti and her team for their tireless efforts to make this happen.

We all have great dreams in life – and in true Fabian style (the early motto of the Fabians being “the inevitability of gradualness”), it can sometimes take time to see them become a reality. When the FWN was founded it was done with the aspiration to increase visibility of women in politics and better connect women in the Fabian Society with our Parliamentarians. Over the last six years, the FWN has grown as a network, holding seminars, events and receptions. This year we launched a unique political education and mentoring programme, supported by an Advisory Group chaired by Meg Munn MP.

The Fabian Society has over 2,000 women members and approximately 70 Fabian women parliamentarians across the Commons and the Lords, all of whom blaze their own trail for progress and who help give our network the vibrance and political vitality that makes it so unique.

We are still far from where we want to be in terms of women’s representation. The early Fabian Women’s Group, founded in 1908 and ending in 1944, existed at a time when women were fighting for the right to vote. Those early women, including Beatrice Webb, Maud Pember Reeves and Harriet Stanton Blatch left a legacy for us to take forward. They campaigned for equality, for changes to policy and for the right to vote. Today the fight is also moving to having an equal political voice for men and women – witness the Lead4women grassroots network campaign for 50:50 gender representation at all levels of the Labour Party, the Labour parliamentarians vote last year on quotas in the Shadow Cabinet and Harriet Harman’s call for gender balance in Labour’s leadership to be enshrined in our rule book, as it is for many sister social democratic parties abroad.

Our House of Commons includes just 22% women, lower than over fifty other nations including Rwanda, Iraq, Sweden, Mexico and Canada. But still we can be proud of the lead Labour has taken. Labour has the strongest record and a current proportion of 32% women in the Parliamentary Labour Party. With 16% of current Conservative MPs being women, their highest proportion ever, David Cameron can point to more progress than his predecessors but even he acknowledges the need to do more. The Lib Dem face the possibility of losing almost all their women at the next general election unless they adopt new strategies to address the issues they face – particularly that of women being selected in less safe seats.

But what we also know is that in a global world, one parliament can have an impact on the lives of women everywhere, and women in political life who may not themselves be in elected positions can have an impact on campaigns and outcomes. Our commitment is to progress of women in the UK and around the world, hence also the additional focus of women and international development in this first issue. The world is undergoing great economic and political turbulence and women must have a greater voice in the new settlements. It is time for a step change in women’s power and leadership in all areas – women in politics, women in employment, women in business, women in families and women in communities.

This magazine will spark a rich forum for debate. As a complement to the Fabian Review and the Young Fabians flagship magazine Anticipations, I look forward to it taking its place in the Fabian family, and being a platform for new women writers to also make their mark.

Message from Norma Stephenson

"Congratulations to all in the Fabian Women’s Network on the launch of Fabiana, which I’m sure will make a real contribution to ensuring the voices of women are heard in our Party. I would like to take this opportunity to wish you all a very successful Conference and every success for your new magazine."
WHAT WOMEN WANT

Deputy Leader Harriet Harman addresses the National Conference in Liverpool

At our conference in Liverpool this autumn there will be a great gathering of hundreds of Labour women

GREAT LABOUR WOMEN THROUGHOUT THE PARTY

There are terrific Labour women throughout the party – in all regions, of all ages and of all ethnicities. They are active in their wards and General Committees. They are serving on their local councils. We have a woman leader of our team in the European Parliament, and strong women in the Assembly and government of Wales, and in the Scottish Parliament. In Westminster our team of Labour women speaks out clearly from the backbenches and in the Shadow Cabinet. Labour has more women MPs than all the other parties put together.

WOMEN IN THE COUNTRY UNEQUAL

But women remain unequal. At work, women are still paid 22% less than men and women are poorer in retirement. Human traffickers sell women for sex, and every week women lose their lives to domestic violence. In the developing world, too many women die in childbirth and millions are subjected to the barbarity of female genital mutilation.

WOMEN IN LABOUR UNEQUAL

As Labour women we want to work to bring about equality here and abroad. To do that we must be equal in our own party. But while compared to other parties we are way ahead, and despite the fact that Labour has always seen itself as the party of equality, Labour women remain far from equal. Though we have made progress we still have far to go at all levels of the party.

WHAT WOMEN WANT

So, as we meet in Liverpool the theme of our women’s conference is “what women want”. What we want for women in the Labour Party is to be on equal terms with men, so we can strongly speak up for the hopes and aspirations of women in this country. No other party will.

NO OTHER PARTY WILL MAKE CHANGE FOR WOMEN

Yvette Cooper has shown how the Tory-led government has hit women hardest. Of nearly £17bn worth of cuts £11bn have fallen on women – in the child benefit freeze and cuts to tax credits, including a reduction in childcare support. And as the deficit reduction axe hits the public sector it is, disproportionately women’s jobs, that are being lost across local government, the police and the voluntary sector. Rachel Reeves has highlighted the rank unfairness of the pension changes which will deny 33,000 women in their mid-50s more than £10,000 because of changes to accelerate increases to their state pension age.

And it is thanks to Labour women that the government is waverong on changes to the DNA database which would make it harder to convict rapists.

The government says that in developing countries, it is women and girls who are their priority. But they are a men-only ministerial team. They do not practice what they preach and, as a result, are less effective internationally.

PRESS ON WITH PROGRESSIVE CHANGE WITHIN THE PARTY

But we cannot rest on our laurels in being ahead of the Tories on women’s representation. The Tories are clearly determined to push forward into the public eye the few women they have. We must press on with women-only shortlists; we must change our leadership rules to ensure that we do not revert to a men-only team; we must have 50% in the Shadow Cabinet; we must ensure that coming out of our policy review, all our policies deliver for women and we must strengthen the links with women in trade unions.

IMPROVING OUR ELECTORAL PROSPECTS

Our electoral prospects are only strengthened by a determined and outspoken voice from Labour women. We are a party looking to the future and it is the essence of a society’s modernity for women to be on equal terms with men. As the “optimists” against the pessimism of the Tories, we represent women’s aspiration and expectation for a fairer future.

FEMINIST SOLIDARITY

And as women we must ensure that we all support the women we work alongside, and pave the way for the women who come after us. We have some tough battles to fight – but we will have failed unless we leave things more equal than we found them.
Now is a vital time for organisations like the Fabian Women’s Network. Things we once took for granted in the march towards women’s equality now seem to be in doubt. For generations we have seen major improvements in women’s opportunities, chances and choices in Britain. Yet suddenly the scale of the onslaught by the Tory led government on women’s lives not only puts further progress at risk, it also threatens to turn the clock back. For the sake of women across the country, we need women and men to come together to challenge the damaging action by government, but also to look forward and get progress for women’s equality back on track.

No doubt we have come a long way in the last 100 years. From the right to vote to the equal pay act, from childcare to the first woman MP and from Sure Start to the Equality Act, considerable progress has been won. But this progress is now under threat. Sure Start centres are already closing despite David Cameron’s promises to protect them. Child care and summer play scheme places are being cut back - making it harder for women to work. The Prime Minister’s top advisor has even proposed scrapping maternity leave altogether.

Meanwhile the House of Commons library analysis of the direct tax and benefit changes in the government's emergency budget and spending review found that women are paying more than twice as much to get the deficit down - £8.80 a week is coming from women compared to £4.20 from men. Yet women still earn less and own less than men. How on earth can that be fair?

The far reaching, damaging and cumulative effects of these policies make it untenable to naively believe this is just a Conservative and Liberal Democrat blind spot on women. The truth is that this goes much deeper.

No one could contemplate ending maternity leave unless they either had no idea about working women’s lives, or thought mothers should stay at home. government ministers clearly believe public sector intervention to secure things like employment rights and support for families is undesirable and should be minimised. David Cameron, Nick Clegg and George Osborne all see public sector intervention as promoting dependency.

But we know that for millions of women, things like maternity rights, tax credits and public services give women independence and choices. For example, we know that cuts in childcare support have meant some women can no longer afford to go out to work. Conversely we know some women, who want the choice to stay at home while their children are small, will no longer be able to afford to, they will have to go back to work after all.

That’s the problem with cutting support for families, you cut women’s choices, and their independence at the same time. This is not just the view of the Labour party. There are women gathering across the country, in all walks of life to stand up against these cuts, to fight against the clock being turned back. And the Labour party and Fabian Women’s Network need to do more. We need to not just defend the progress made, we need to look forward to the future too. That means working with women and men across the country, harnessing the convictions of young and old alike, because increasing women’s equality is vital for women and men so everyone can benefit from stronger families, fairer communities and a stronger economy too.
WHAT’S HOLDING US BACK
The two main obstacles to women’s full political representation

The argument over the need for a substantial presence of women in parliaments is thankfully over – or is it?

True, the feminists - who were ridiculed in the 1980s for saying all elective decision-making bodies must contain at least 40% of female representatives, simply because women are half the population - have won the argument at the international level. While Nordic countries and the French socialists were in the vanguard in the 1970s, Europe-wide and worldwide Labour and social democratic parties active in the European Parliament and the Socialist International accepted the principle of gender parity representation in the 1990s. The United Nations got all member-states to endorse the universal goal of “a full and equal share in political decision-making” for women in Beijing in 1995. By 2010, 15 parties of post-communist Eastern Europe had adopted some form of minimum quotas for women, thanks to pressure from local women’s movements. Currently 108 parties in the world have party rules to oblige their selection committees to adopt a balanced number of male and female candidates.

Undoubtedly, this is progress - though country responses vary excessively: the worldwide average is only 19%, yet 24 countries have over 30% of women legislators in their lower house, and 7 of them have reached a gender balance of over 40% of women parliamentarians.

As we know, Britain is not one of these, sharing 48th place in the world ranking with Uzbekistan, Eritrea and Czech Republic, with Serbia snapping at their heels. This is not wholly Labour’s fault - women’s parliamentary presence doubled in 1997 from 60 to 120 as part of its historic victory. And even though the Conservatives trebled their numbers of women MPs in 2010, Labour is still way ahead with 81 women to their 49.

Still, at 22%, UK women still suffer a huge deficit of political representation. Why is this so? Two big obstacles lie in the way of improved representation of women.

Obstacle one: the single-member bias

The first culprit is the ‘single-member plurality’ electoral system (FPTP’s official name). Canada and Australia are ranked 38th, and the United States 70th in the world rankings and they also have single-member constituencies. This is the single-member obstacle. Evidence shows that where the choice is between one man and one woman, electorates are biased towards the lone man, whereas they accept women in mixed teams. The small population size of Westminster constituencies is part of the problem, creating a focus on individuals and personal leadership capacity, which is to the advantage of traditional-looking white males thanks to biases in the popular imagination about what a leader looks like.

In addition, the widespread desire for a “good constituency MP” masks a focus on what are too often local problems or NIMBY issues that should be dealt with by local government. What Britain and Labour need are good national legislators who will fight to advance social justice for the vast collectives of
under-privileged men and women all over the country.

In contrast, many other countries use fixed administrative districts as electoral boundaries and elect several MPs to represent each one, which allows teams of candidates to include women. The winners will usually be from several parties, enabling successful men and women MPs to compete to develop and maintain their electorate’s support for their party’s policies. Although small constituencies give the public an impression of greater closeness and feel more manageable to give the public an impression of greater closeness and feel more manageable to the individual MP, it is the overall number of MPs per population that counts. The high or low density of MPs on the ground is what encourages each to get closer or remain distant.

"When it comes to selecting a woman, her sex is suddenly perceived as a potential handicap only overcome if she can display an array of superior intellectual, lifetime career, and personal merits."

Obstacle two: the gender bias

The second culprit of women’s political representation deficit—bias against women candidates. This is the elephant in the room: popular conceptions around the ‘merit’ or ‘qualifications’ needed for someone to perform the MP’s ‘job’. We all feel we know instinctively what this ‘merit’ is and hold it up as a benchmark, but subjective images, biases, and myths abound. The national conversation is still ignoring this, taking only baby-steps forward, such as all women shortlists in only half of free seats. What to do about the unacknowledged assumption that all our current 500+ male MPs were originally selected because they were outstanding individuals of unchallenged personal probity, highly educated, with extensive or relevant previous experience, expert knowledge of Britain’s problems, and a good idea of likely legislative solutions? When it comes to selecting a woman, her sex is suddenly perceived as a potential handicap only overcome if she can display an array of superior intellectual, lifetime career, and personal merits.

In case this seems incredible, a recent four-country study (including Britain) that used the more confidential setting of focus groups instead of a quick-question survey uncovered a persistent malaise among the male and female public about women in politics. Women were not entitled to be in parliament just because there were few there already, or just to represent women in the way (former) working class male MPs can claim to represent workers, or businessmen can stand for enterprise. Nor indeed are they trusted as politicians to represent the constituency, their party, or the country, unless they can show they have a series of publicly recognised qualifications or merits, as if going for a top executive job instead of a political representation role. While few voiced anxiety about men’s capacities for becoming candidates, male politicians were criticised for their poor performance in office, but without this coming back to haunt them at selection time.

As far back as 1979 an aristocratic conservative Spanish politician published an opinion article in the leading Spanish newspaper El País, saying “we will have equality in parliament when as many mediocre women manage to gain seats as there are currently mediocre men.” This is far from being achieved. Already in 2003 the Congress of all social democratic parties members of the Socialist International called for at least one third of parliamentarians to be female, in order to achieve “a higher quality of political decision-making” (sic). How long before this paradox is resolved? The hidden presumption is men can be competent just by being average, but women can only be competent after passing tests to prove they are above average.

What Labour can do

Labour needs to grasp this anti-rational nettle by launching a debate on the function of our elected representatives: to represent people who must necessarily be grouped in social collectives around common interests, identities, or values (the three often do not overlap but each has an internal consistency) in order for their needs to be articulated and for parties to aggregate them into a coherent political strategy.

In voting terms, women are the largest collective, on a par with the male collective that has held dominant power so far and shaped our institutions in their own image, despite manifest class divisions among them. Yet at election time, Labour fails to address women as women, or at least address particular sub-groups of women such as those on low income, mothers, victims of violence and those living in fear of it, or members of one or other of our many British ethnic minorities. Until the discourse changes, women will not in effect be represented by the Labour party, and there will never be 343 women MPs instead of 143.

Bill Clinton on taking office announced he wanted his government ‘to look like America’. If the House of Commons looked like Britain, with a full gender balance and a significant presence of different classes, ethnicities, abilities and disabilities, and sexual identities, it would surely pay more attention to reducing social and economic inequalities, to provision of effective public services, and be more reluctant to launch wars. This is not to essentialise women MPs as feminists, but to recognise that if the composition of parliament radically changed to 50/50 for both genders, it would be transformed.
One day it suddenly dawned on me that, born in Britain in 1913, my grandma was born into a country where women couldn’t vote. When she was four, Parliament would finally take the decision to give certain women over the age of 30 the vote, and her own mother would just be eligible as a 31-year-old wife of a householder. Aged 14 years old, my grandma would have seen the celebrated day when all women in the UK were given the right to vote on equal terms with men, and at 21 she would have been added to the electoral register – a new and prized right.

This is my grandma we’re talking about. Just two generations before me. How quickly we have forgotten. To have a voice in democracy, to be an equal citizen with the power to fully participate in politics, was a dream to be fought for. It matters that women are in politics; it mattered then and it matters now.

And so, to any woman reading this article who feels like an outsider to politics: don’t focus on what you don’t know, focus on your right as a citizen to be involved. You don’t have to know everything before you join in. If ‘Left’ and ‘Right’ are confusing, if you can’t recognise people in the Cabinet, if you have to google people or terms that others assume you would know, that is fine. The key is wanting to see change in society and change in your community. Confidence, confidence, confidence! You can do it, you can be involved. Women before you fought to give you this right.

And for those women who are already involved in politics: please bring people with you. Don’t pull the ladders up behind you, don’t make it an exclusive club with confusing jargon. Every door that is opened to you can be opened to others. Find women standing on the sidelines, tentatively watching but unsure how to begin. Find young women who care about their communities and explain that politics is a channel for change. Find women to bring on the journey with you.

I saw my grandma 2 days before she died. She kissed me and whispered ‘God bless’. My grandma’s legacy is her family and the people she touched through her work as a teacher. We too will leave a legacy. As far as politics goes, may the legacy we leave be one of open doors and increased opportunities for others. Not long ago, for women in Britain, this was only a dream.
was born in Bulgaria, a country that once belonged to the East-European Soviet Bloc, during the communist regime. I was five years old when it collapsed. Although I don’t remember much from that time, one episode is stamped on my mind: I saw countless numbers of women and men, standing in front of the National Assembly and yelling out “Democracy!” I didn’t understand the meaning of the word then, but I was told it was something good and that better times were coming.

Between 1989-1990, Bulgaria overhauled its political development and called it ‘transitional democracy’. People soon realised, however, that the neo-liberal pattern of transition wasn’t an overnight solution to the communist legacy. In the last twenty years Bulgarian society endured many political, economic and social experiments, and during this painful process women became its biggest losers and victims. To cut a long and bitter story short, I grew up in a crippled, fake democracy: a democracy without women.

Times are now changing, and in this article I will focus on the positive democratic factors that contribute to gender equality in modern post-communist Bulgaria.

First, the education system was gradually modified to comply with the Western education model, enabling students to broaden their horizons beyond the Iron Curtain. Thus, for example, in high school I studied English, Politics, Law, Ethics, Psychology and Civil Society. These subjects helped me understand some of the problems and paradoxes in post-communist countries, and compare Eastern and Western Europe. Furthermore, I was free to explore topics I was passionate about such as fairness, equality and women’s rights. Thanks to this, I felt empowered to pursue my dreams of working towards a gender equal society.

Further democratic changes came about thanks to United Nations and Council of Europe incentives, and the field work of international non-profit organisations. Due to the anti-feminist culture that emerged after the fall of communism, there was a gender equality vacuum that was gradually diminished by the work of international organisations. Therefore, these organisations played - and are still playing - a crucial role in defending women’s rights by promoting equality and empowerment. They also acted as a catalyst for the development of the third sector in Bulgaria and other countries in the region. Thanks to the financial support of such an organisation, for example, I had the opportunity to visit the UK - one of the oldest democracies in the world - and learn about women’s political representation.

"Bulgaria eloquently illustrates that numerical representation of women doesn’t always translate into their influence over decision-making processes."

The European Union accelerated reinforcement of equality in general, and sex equality in particular. The first positive aspect is that candidates are required to transpose EU Equalities Directives as part of acquis communautaire. Although member states possess the exclusive right to initiate and enforce practices aiming at increasing women’s political representation at national level, the transposition of the EU Equalities Directives provides an ideal environment and legislative framework for this to happen. The other positive impact of EU membership on women’s political representation is the desire of national parties to be legitimised by the European party families; thus some national parties are starting to apply quota and/or platform initiatives to increase women’s representation.

Parties are at the centre of European and national political life, and have a crucial impact on women’s representation. Their impact can be either negative, by acting as ‘gatekeepers’ to political decision-making and locking women out, or positive, by being ‘guarantors’ of women’s empowerment and ensuring balanced political representation. The UK is an excellent case study for the impact of party politics on the representation of women, given that when one party declares and demonstrates a serious commitment to increasing women’s representation, the competition for voters forces the other parties to follow suit. Though Bulgaria saw similar competition for women’s votes in 2001, the country lacks the UK’s organised feminist movement, which supports women’s empowerment strategies.

In conclusion, both countries have a long way to go in order to achieve balanced political representation. However, while the UK progresses slowly but surely, Bulgaria falters. Bulgaria eloquently illustrates that numerical representation of women doesn’t always translate into their influence over decision-making processes. The result? Although the percentages of women’s political representation in Bulgaria and UK are almost the same (respectively, 21% and 22%), the gender outcomes are very different.

Despite this, I remain optimistic: recent studies show that women’s descriptive representation has a positive effect on their knowledge and interest in politics, and it is this that ultimately encourages them to engage as voters and political participants.
Lord Glasman is undoubtedly a controversial figure. His take on where the Labour Party ought to be heading is set out in the pamphlet ‘The Politics of Paradox’ and his views have generated a lively debate. Many have pointed out that the Blue Labour ideas he advocates envisage a society where men go to work while women stay home with the children. Helen Goodman MP voiced concerns that his theory will be hijacked by those whose real agenda is to destroy the welfare state on which so many people depend. Fabiana decided to interview him about women’s issues, and so to take him to task over his perspective on the role of women in a Blue Labour society.

MG: They are completely central to BL. BL is fundamentally a relational politics in which people resist their domination. BL rejects domination, it completely comes out of feminism and this is the most neglected aspect of it all. My own story was influenced at university by 1970s and early 80s feminism. In A Different Voice by the American gender studies professor Carol Gilligan was a very big book for me: it was about how egotistical, wilful, materialistic and professional conceptions of liberty and freedom were destructive, and how the meaning of life lay in both love and liberty, and the combination of love and liberty was to be found in building strong relationships with others. Particularly for women’s lives, the issue of care and obligation to others was fundamental to how politics could work to offer partnership to women, childcare and care of the elderly, and to find a way of acting in the world to be more powerful without denying who you are and what you are.

MG: In my conception of political power I try to complicate the relationship between the patrimony and the matrimony, which are the ancient ways in which we conceptualise political power. So, in Rome, the patrimony (patrimony) was the male inheritance, it was the household which had autonomy. The citizen, acting as the head of the household, could be free in the public realm precisely because of the assets and relationships which they brought to bear in the public realm. So material assets, political liberties, power were to be found in the man. Then there was an alternative power and institutional form which is the matrimony (matrimony), and those were the relationships of love, fidelity and care.

IB: Mr Glasman, where do women fit into Blue Labour (BL)?

MG: In conception of political power I try to complicate the relationship between the patrimony and the matrimony, which are the ancient ways in which we conceptualise political power. So, in Rome, the patrimony (patrimony) was the male inheritance, it was the household which had autonomy. The citizen, acting as the head of the household, could be free in the public realm precisely because of the assets and relationships which they brought to bear in the public realm. So material assets, political liberties, power were to be found in the man. Then there was an alternative power and institutional form which is the matrimony (matrimony), and those were the relationships of love, fidelity and care.

IB: Issues like childcare and care of those with disabilities or the elderly are crucial to women, as they clearly have a deep influence on the opportunities they have to join the workforce on an equal footing with men. And the recent debate on pensions has shown how women’s contributions overall are lower than men’s because they work less due to disproportionately bearing caring responsibilities, which in turn highlights the issue of women’s relative poverty.

While there is much radicalism in the way you approach issues of oppression and marginalisation, you seem to consider care as very much a women’s issue. I wonder if that radicalism could go a bit further and shape a different way for society to see care.

IB: Lord Glasman, where do women fit into Blue Labour (BL)?

MG: First of all, to clarify any misunderstandings, there is a very strong role of the state in this, and it is exactly in this area. On one hand you have men, or women, that look after children in the home, and that’s a relational matter. But on the other hand there is a need to redistribute resources so there's childcare available. By the way, that’s not exclusively for the central state to provide, strong local institutions can have an important role as well.

We tend to think very one-dimensionally in regard to these things, but let’s begin from the question that I begin with, my organising feminist question, which is: ‘What do women
want?’ Then we see that women want support with living their life, a meaningful life, a fulfilled life, and that involves not exclusively work but also free time. This is what I mean by family: decommodifying time, relational time, when particularly women and men with children can find time to enjoy themselves, to be together.

**IB:** I still find it difficult to understand. When I think about women I think about pay gaps, accessibility to careers, leadership and power - while it seems the main thing you think about is the family. There is a big gap here.

**MG:** First of all, apologies. This is not at all where I want to be in the conversation. I tried to make clear that I was talking about power, patrimony, as well as matrimony. I have been working for years in London Citizens with low-paid women, so I am aware of how women have got a very hard deal at the moment, because they have a very high burden of care, are exploited at work and are still trying to find some space to have loving relationships. From my own experience of talking to women, the first issue for me is about power. What we have to do is to build up a redistribution of assets so that women can have more autonomy and power.

**IB:** And how do you achieve that?

**MG:** Well, I think there are forms of welfare redistribution that we have to look at, whereby when women have children there is a money transfer directly to the woman. We have to think about transfers directly to women in families, so that they’re not dependent exclusively on an earner for wages, or on their own labour power. One of the great initiatives that the Labour Party did was SureStart, where isolated, poor women were brought in relation with others. That was a wonderful thing. What wasn’t so wonderful is that it became a welfare-to-work scheme. Over time, it went from being a relational form of welfare to being a very administrative form of welfare. Something that was designed to bring women together with their children became something designed to separate women from their children.

We have to honour women’s choices. If women want to work, we have to do all we can to support that work, and to support the equality of work. If women make decisions in a period of their life to spend time with their children, we also have to support that. But the relational aspects of life should not be neglected, and in order to honour them you have to have material redistribution.

This is a mix of the patrimony and the matrimony that we talked about before. All women should be full citizens, where citizenship is to be understood not just in terms of individual agency, but in terms of the relational power with other citizens, women and men. At the same time, men have to have a more relational life, a more loving life, more engaged with their responsibilities with children, and I think they are getting there.

**IB:** What I think makes all this sound slightly awkward is that when you talk about women, a man always seems to be needed! Relational life is surely important but it ought to be a choice, not the only route to fulfillment.

**MG:** Just to clarify completely: if a woman wishes to have an exclusively public life, good! If a woman does not wish to have a family, if she does not wish to have a relationship, then that’s a full patrimonial life. That’s full, uncomplicated citizenship. My experience, however, is that there’s a very rare instance. To generalise from that instance is not to honour women’s experiences, it’s not to honour the definite power relations that come into women’s lives, as well as the dilemmas confronted by women in the world. My critique of liberalism is that it has taken that case and generalised from it, when the vast majority of women in the world are living in a much more power-constituted field, where inherited and chosen relational obligations come clustering in. We have to find ways of making those commitments easier to bear in partnership with others.

**IB:** Yes, but countries where women are more powerful are the ones with a model of welfare which focuses on persons, not families, which is quite a different approach.

**MG:** Yes, I would reconceptualise this as saying not persons, not families, but relationships. That’s the crucial BL theme. Obviously I would defend to the death and always support the right of divorce and autonomy. But it is very good if people can find a way of being together in the world, and all the evidence suggests that this is a good thing – obviously not in the case of abusive relationships, that is always bad.

Bringing people together, relational energy, this is the basis of democratic policy. BL is an Aristotelian theory that believes that a fulfilled life is lived with others, in relationships of reciprocity, as opposed to individually in terms of individual fulfillment. It is a theory of the common good, so there has to be always a negotiation. It doesn’t view women’s interests as divorced and distinct from men’s interests.

**IB:** When you talk about negotiating the common good I immediately think of non-negotiable values. If we start opening everything to negotiation, what happens to things that are very important to women’s life, for example abortion?

**MG:** I absolutely believe in an ultimate system of rights, that people shouldn’t be tortured, abused and exploited, and I believe in freedom of association and expression. So every citizen has their liberties, however their liberties are embedded in their relationships and their obligations to others. Otherwise what we have is capitalist domination. For example, my concern with the excessive reliance on careers and professions is that it leads to greater freedom for professional women and greater exploitation for poor women. So again I see citizenship as relational power, both in work life and in civic, local life, that resists that domination and exploitation.

**IB:** Maurice, where would you like to go with all this?

**MG:** What I don’t want to do is to be arrogant in the classical male, Western way, of Marx as well as of Plato and Aristotle, that says ‘I know what the future will be.’ I don’t know what the future will be. I just want to open up the space, the free space of relationships for people to negotiate with each other and see what matters to them. And what I’ve learnt in my life is that life is surprising. What will come out of these politics could be quite shocking. What women want is yet to be fully expressed in the public realm, and I look forward to seeing it and being part of it. I share the non-negotiable concern with the autonomy of the person, the liberties of expression and association, but after that it’s all up for grabs, and our welfare state is the result not of rights, but of political action, particularly by the Labour movement.

As the conversation draws to a close Maurice sighs, and reflecting on the discussion ends with the words “Heavy shit, as they say”. With this, he rolls another cigarette and waves goodbye.

Go to next page for conference details
**SMALL INTERACTIONS, BIG CHANGES**

**Women as change-makers in ethnic minority communities**

Sadiah holds up a leaflet, turns to me and proclaims that ‘the spoken word is stronger than the written’ before donning her headphones, turning up the mic and softly spoke to the rhythm of some Lollywood music. This article is about the power of daily communication on air by key women figures to enable incremental change within isolated communities. The quotes come from a period of research undertaken at a community radio station in Yorkshire.

A couple of years ago there was great consternation about the amount of NHS and local authority money being spent on producing public information leaflets for members of ethnic minority communities. The truth was, Sadiah confirmed, ‘people migrate for economic and financial reasons, and they’re the ones who are illiterate so just because they can speak their language does not automatically mean that they can read or write it either’. This meant there were few target ‘customers’ for leaflets published in Punjabi, Urdu, Bangla, Arabic, Pashto etc. Hers, despite growing up in a mainly white area, was unable to confidently write a word of the latter.

Sadiah’s quote reminded me of McLuhan’s declaration that ‘the spoken word was the first technology by which woman was able to let go of her environment in order to grasp it in a new way’. What Sadiah was referring to was radio’s potential power to transport her to a new environment, especially when the written word had so often failed members of her community. These were women who ‘lived in their own silos’ due to familial arrangements so were cut off from daily companionship that the written word brought no nearer. However, radio it was more than company through the day; a technology used with knowledge and care, its broadcast messages provide the incremental nudges needed to engender greater change that city-wide social strategies, communicated in leaflets, will usually fail to achieve. The technology of radio enabled broadcast women’s voices to reach isolated listeners and create a shared space to conceptualise a different environment than their daily lived experience.

Women, particularly ethnic minority women, are often recognised as potentially powerful change-makers, sitting at the heart of wider familial and community networks. Yet, authorities and social agencies have yet to alter their modes of communication to fully grasp the potential of the spoken word. How can a woman be empowered to look after her and her family’s health if she cannot read the leaflet? How can she hope to engage in local neighbourhood committees if she can’t read the detail? In areas of inner cities where pockets of deprivation are often tied to legacies of migration, the ability of these outside organisations to play their positive role is made harder. These difficulties are coupled with a natural suspicion aroused within these communities of outside interests after events such as the Bradford riots and the 7/7 bombings.

Breaking off from talking and cueing up a well loved Ghazal (a deeply intellectual poem) Sadiah tells me about one lady who began calling between tracks, speaking with a quiet voice and referred to on the phone system as ‘Anonymous’ in Punjabi. Sadiah became a bridging figure, available to provide private encouragement, publicly translate the leaflets whilst playing host to NHS and local authority guests to create community discussions on health and social issues. These daily broadcasts mixed with private telephone conversations meant Anonymous came out of her shell, started to go to college to learn English and maths and has started a business catering for weddings. Sadiah recalled other conversations with an older female listener who lived alone. The listener said “it’s not just about songs, the songs help you pass the time but it’s what you learn in between the songs and in between you’re chatting away and you’re talking to each other and you’re discussing things and you bring in organisations, that’s when we learn the most” and she says “you don’t know how much you’ve helped me”.

During one broadcast Anonymous called in to say ‘hello’ and how she hadn’t slept for four days in preparation of an Asian style wedding for English clients. To Sadiah, she is unrecognisable from the muted and fragile woman she once knew. To anyone else, the health and social agencies, Anonymous never existed.

Large changes come from small, incremental interactions. It is only through being part of and understanding these broadcast conversations as a woman, as a volunteer, as a station board member, that future social policies can be community shaped, owned and effective.
AN INJUSTICE TOO FAR
Why Labour opposes the government’s legal aid cuts that hit women hardest

From tax and benefit changes, cuts to childcare support and Sure Start, reductions in domestic and sexual violence specialist support, public sector job losses, the provision of social care and in their pension reforms, this government are hitting women the hardest.

But it isn’t just in these social policy decisions that the government is letting women down – in the reforms of legal aid, the government’s attack on women goes right to the core of our justice system, by restricting access to justice and undermining the principle of equality before the law.

For over sixty years legal aid has performed a critical role in providing support to those most at risk of being excluded from our legal system. Its creation, by a Labour government, was a recognition by the state that the government has a duty to protect the right all citizens have to access the courts’ system despite their financial circumstances. Legal aid has been used to provide women in abusive relationships the legal means to protect themselves from violence and psychological abuse, enabled women to seek legal advice and support on housing, debt and child maintenance and allowed some of the most vulnerable women facing forced marriages access to vital, specialist legal help.

Social welfare legal aid has been a lifeline for women, in some cases quite literally. Women make over 60 per cent of all applications for legal support in civil and family law, including divorce, child custody and child support. They said they would still provide legal aid for victims of domestic abuse, but their original proposals used a very narrow definition of domestic violence, and not the standard Association of Chief Police Officers definition: physical, psychological, emotional, financial or sexual abuse. Instead they planned to only give legal aid to women that had suffered physical violence in a narrow timeframe before their claim was brought and not for any other forms of abuse. After intense opposition from the National Federation of Women’s Institutes, advocacy groups including End Violence Against Women and Rights of Women, and the Labour Party, the government announced they would broaden their definition although they still haven’t adopted the standard definition and some groups claim they barely made any changes at all.

There remains, however, a fundamental problem with making family law legal aid only available to people that have suffered domestic violence. Doing so would create a perverse incentive to claim domestic violence in situations in which it hasn’t occurred, which would have the corollary effect of defence lawyers arguing in criminal prosecutions of domestic violence that claims have only been made to obtain legal aid; in short it would create institutionalised doubt in the legal system as to whether claims of domestic violence are truthful, potentially making cases of domestic violence even harder to prosecute.

I accept that our legal system has changed since Clement Attlee’s Access to Justice Act was implemented in 1948, and that savings need to be made to our legal aid bill which has expanded beyond I imagine even Attlee’s expectations. Labour would have also made cuts to contain the overall legal aid budget and outlined last year, while still in government, where efficiency savings would have been made. But we would have also sought to protect social welfare legal aid and ensured that the poorest and most vulnerable weren’t excluded from the justice system.

We strongly oppose this government’s plans that make women carry the heaviest burden for Britain’s stalling economy. It’s not right that of the nearly £8 billion worth of cuts to tax and welfare an estimated 70 per cent will fall on women. But excluding vulnerable people from the justice system and denying their human and constitutional right to access justice through the courts hits right to the heart of our democratic system and we must oppose this with equal strength and vigour. ☑
GOING THE WRONG WAY ABOUT IT

How the pension age rise penalises women in their 50s

An unfairness runs through the centre of the government’s pension policy. By accelerating the increase in the State Pension Age, the government is hitting a group of women in their fifties disproportionately.

The Fabian Women’s Network has taken the Minister to task on this, and I have sparred with him in the House of Commons – but throughout the passage of the Pensions Bill so far, nothing has been done to soften the blow.

Increasing longevity makes rises in the State Pension Age inevitable. We support the equalisation of pension ages, but 500,000 women will have to wait more than a year to get their pension - and 33,000 will have to wait exactly two years. The women worst affected have less than seven years to plan for a significant change in their pension age.

Because these women have typically earned less than men during their working lives, taken career breaks to care for children, and often worked part-time in an era when part-time workers were not offered occupational pensions, they have on average one sixth of the savings of their male peers. 40% of the women affected have no pension savings: they are not in a position to cope with these changes at such short notice.

I have backed alternatives that would accelerate the increase but do so fairly between men and women and between different age groups. Piling the burden on the shoulders of women born in 1953 and 1954 is unfair.

At the start of the coalition the government promised that they would not increase the pension age so rapidly - but their plans went against that promise. This has rightly angered affected women, who have inundated MPs with emails about their revised pension age. A mass lobby of parliament, a 12,000 strong petition handed in at Downing Street and cross party support for motions has not persuaded the government to make any changes, even though they hinted at ‘transitional arrangements’ when the Pensions Bill was debated in parliament. The government has sat on its hands, and time is running out fast for them to make the necessary changes.

The Pensions Bill is set to get its final reading in parliament this autumn. We have said that we will work with the government but any changes must meet three requirements: 1) Any transitional arrangements must treat men and women equally 2) not delay anyone’s pension age by more than a year and 3) give people enough time to plan for the new situation they are in. Only then could the changes to the pension age be considered fair.

BOOK REVIEW:
The Future of Feminism,  
by Sylvia Walby (Polity, 2011)

Review by Felicity Slater

As readers of Fabiana will doubtless be aware, describing oneself as feminist today provokes familiar, narrow reactions. At best seen as eccentric, at worst extremist and ‘anti-men’, feminism is overwhelmingly perceived as passé.

As the title indicates, in The Future of Feminism Sylvia Walby seeks to prove the contrary. A dense, rigorous - yet pleasingly concise - academic account of the myriad manifestations of contemporary feminism, it refutes common assertions that feminism is dead.

Through meticulously deconstructing multiple domains within civil society and beyond, Walby uses great swathes of evidence to demonstrate feminism’s many great advances. Yet these are not only its tangible achievements, from the women’s vote to equal pay legislation, but are symbolised by the permeation of its objectives. Feminism may be less immediately perceptible than it was when linked to past protest movements, but its principles are now to be found - and to varying degrees accepted - virtually everywhere: from trade unions to UN conventions.

For Walby, feminism is both vibrant and an integral part of any rational response to the great challenges we now face, be it climate change or the financial crisis. As women - and as the Labour Party more broadly - we should be vocal in advocating this fundamental notion of feminism as a force for good: beyond qualitative and quantitative improvements to the lives of women, it is more broadly about creating a social dynamic and instilling norms and practices that will be beneficial to all.

We should embrace Walby’s definition of feminism as a broad church that simply seeks gender equality. By doing this, we can show up the outdated notions of what feminism is, and affirm that Labour carries on its proud progressive political history of standing up for women.
POWER SHIFTS AHEAD
The value of engaging marginalised women

In December 2010 the Coalition government launched the Localism Bill, a broad piece of legislation designed to decentralise power from central government to a local level. The intention of these government reforms is to shift influence away from big government and to create a bigger society, reduce bureaucracy and empower communities.

Whilst there is some cynicism attached to the idea of the Big Society, the government’s decentralisation strategy presents interesting opportunities and challenges for women. As government seeks to strengthen communities by devolving power to a local level, it’s important to look at the role of women in local decision-making. It’s also important to examine who - and how - people are empowered within the community organiser model, and consider the representation of women’s voices within that process.

Whereas initiatives to increase women’s political representation are supported by most political parties, the issue of community engagement appears to offer fewer incentives. Women’s capacity and desire to be more active in their communities appear to be declining, perhaps because they are being disproportionately affected by public spending cuts. Women already represent the Big Society, if one takes their caring responsibilities, existing volunteering work and community work into account.

Helpfully, the Office for Civil Society has recently commissioned the Women’s Resource Centre to conduct a study regarding the barriers and supports to women’s participation in the Big Society agenda. They are keen to explore solutions which promote women’s inclusion in social action and ensure the potential of women is unleashed.

Whilst the government’s social action strategy is a mainstream policy, its ultimate success will be judged by the government’s ability to engage marginalised groups. Ensuring that an equalities framework underpins the empowerment strategy will help to prevent the perpetuation of existing power structures in communities and the reinforcement of vocally dominant groups.

The central question that lies ahead is simple: how can we all promote civic participation amongst women? And specifically, how can the Labour Party contribute to that project? In spring 2011 the government Equalities Office launched an exciting consultation paper, ‘Strengthening Women’s Voices in government’. One of the key elements contained within these proposals was the idea of utilising the expertise of the women’s voluntary sector.

Women’s organisations are an often untapped resource - they have a unique reach within communities and support and engage with diverse groups of women. They offer an important platform for promoting social action amongst women and - unlike wider programmes - provide a more relaxed setting, where women can learn more about local issues at a social level.

An excellent example of this is the London-based women’s organisation, Original Ranch. In 2010 Original Ranch hosted an event called ‘Politics Uncovered,’ which sought to educate and empower women in East London by teaching them about politics by using art, discussion and engagement. The organisation used animations to illustrate the difference that women make to their local communities and facilitate discussions on community, participation and public life.

Whilst supporting such women’s engagement projects may not present immediate political rewards for the Labour Party, they represent an important step in planting seeds of social change. By encouraging marginalised women to use their voices and become more active citizens, these programmes help to increase the representation of women’s views in public life. This can only serve to promote stronger communities and enrich the quality of local decision-making. As the Localism Bill approaches its final stages in parliament, Labour must begin to think about how it can encourage women’s engagement with local community issues - although concrete answers on how to do this are as yet unclear, this is an opportunity that should not be missed.

By Rebecca Veazey

Rebecca Veazey is Acting Head of Policy at the Women’s Resource Centre

LEAVING THE BIG STATE BEHIND

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A NEW WAY FORWARD
Girls and women at the heart of international development policies

Supporting the sustainable empowerment of women and girls in developing countries should be integral to any international development policy.

In the last ten years, we have seen significant progress made to address the rights of women in many developing countries and there has been a greater recognition that more must be done to empower women and to address the issue of gender inequality. But more action must be taken.

Women’s empowerment is critical to tackling poverty and inequality and if there is any hope of meeting the Millennium Development Goals especially in relation to maternal health and gender equality where progress has been very slow.

In many of today’s conflicts, women and girls are not only victims of the conflict itself but also face rape and sexual violence, and are affected by HIV infections, trauma and disabilities that often result from it.

Girls are disempowered when they cannot go to school because of the threat of violence, when they are abducted or trafficked. Whether in Haiti, Congo, Afghanistan, Darfur or Libya, women have been exposed to brutal attacks, with rape in some conflicts being used as a weapon of war. In Libya, there have been reports that rape has been used as a weapon of war by Gaddafi’s regime.

In Somalia, 95% of girls aged 4-11 years old are subject to genital mutilation and it has been reported that many women who have fled to the Dadaab refugee camp to escape the famine have been subject to rape and abuse.

That is why it is so vital for Britain and other countries to continue to provide aid to these countries and why we must support UN Women. Established in 2010 by the United Nations General Assembly, UN Women is focused on tackling violence against women, promoting peace and security, improving women’s leadership and participation, economic empowerment and human rights.

History has repeatedly shown that women’s rights and interests are often an afterthought in matters of war and peace. We must do more to strengthen women’s participation in peace processes and conflict resolution and ensure that women can positively affect change in their countries. The recent uprisings in Egypt and elsewhere could mark a turning point for women’s rights in these countries. Women in Egypt played an active role in the protests in Tahrir Square and made their voices heard. Now, many are finding it a huge challenge getting their voices heard with negotiations being largely dominated by men. The international community can play an important role in supporting leadership development of women in these countries and supporting grassroots initiatives for women to help women play an active role in peace building processes.

Giving women a political voice in conflict is also critical to long-term development and peace building. Women are often the key decision makers within their families and local communities. And the wider community benefits of women’s economic independence and political participation must not be underestimated. Women are the drivers of change and are far more likely to invest their incomes back into their families and we must ensure that in developing countries, women have the same rights as men to access finance, the workplace, education and fairer property rights.

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All agree that the need to understand and adapt to the current political and economic turmoil that has engulfed the Middle East (the ‘Arab Spring’) is very important - especially given the global nature of business, and the new possibility for civil disorder and popular discontent to spread through the internet to other countries on a mass scale. But beyond our own concerns with finance, technology and governance, the wider business, humanitarian, political and social impacts have all created potential for women involved in the Arab Spring – particularly those in oppressed Libya – to gain empowerment through political representation.

DO THESE ASPIRATIONS HAVE A CHANCE?

Women in the Middle Eastern regions affected face obstacles in the form of old, well-nurtured prejudices from their peers, and abuse from the state itself. There is also the burden of history – previous attempts at change have not been as successful as one would wish, and the old question of Islam’s role in politics - and its vexed relations with gender equality - will inevitably come to the fore.

Despite the centrality of women activists to the Arab Spring, they have seldom been recognized as significant by most of the male politicians who will undoubtedly benefit from what they have accomplished. For example, it was striking that women are unrepresented on Egypt's constitution revision commission in preparation for the September elections, and that only one woman (a Mubarak holdover at that) was appointed to the twenty-nine-person interim cabinet.

“The state’s opportunist attempts to play up the legislative role of the shari’a coupled with the promotion of conservative religious discourse that dominated the public sphere under Hosni Mubarak, contributed to stunting freedom of expression and breeding intolerance and bigotry.”

Deniz Kandiyoti Promise and peril: women and the ‘Arab spring’ 8 March 2011.
“As women look to the future, they worry that on the road to new, democratic parliamentary regimes, their rights will be discarded in favor of male constituencies, whether patriarchal liberals or Muslim fundamentalists. The collective memory of how women were in the forefront of the Algerian revolution for independence from France from 1954 to 1962, only to be relegated to the margins of politics thereafter, still weighs heavily.


“The abuse of women, a central issue in countries like Libya, even burst into consciousness when a recent law-school graduate from a middle-class family in Tobruk, Iman al-Obeidi, broke out at a government press conference in Tripoli to charge that Qaddafi’s troops had detained her at a checkpoint and then raped her. Her plight provoked women’s demonstrations against the regime in the rebel-held cities of Benghazi and Tobruk.”


These negative factors all confirm that the process of change will be a challenging one, but to focus solely on these is misguided – there are plenty of advances in the region that have already promoted women, and if these are conserved and built upon, women can develop a strong political platform for the future.

ADVANCES MADE, AND HOW TO PROTECT THEM

Politicians in the transitional government of Tunisia - for decades the most progressive Arab country with regard to women’s rights - are determined to protect the public role of women by making sure they are well represented in the new legislature. Elections will be held this autumn, and a high commission has been appointed to set electoral rules. That body has already announced that party lists will have to maintain parity between male and female candidates.

The sheer number of politically active women in this series of uprisings, however, dwarf their predecessors. That this female element in the Arab Spring has drawn so little comment in the West suggests that our own narratives of, and preoccupations with, the Arab world—religion, fundamentalism, oil and Israel—have blinded us to the big social forces that are altering the lives of 300 million people.

Women have been aided by this generation’s advances in education and the professions, by the prominence of articulate women anchors on satellite television networks like Aljazeera, and by the rise of the Internet and social media. Women can assert leadership roles in cyberspace that young men’s dominance of the public sphere might have hampered in city squares.

The Arab Spring has been a mass movement, and as a result women activists have come from all social classes. Middle and upper-class women often focus their political energies on issues of political representation and on laws affecting women’s equality. Seeking constitutional guarantees of electoral parity is one possible way of responding to any patriarchal political backlash.

The future for these Arab countries will depend on the political readiness of new governments to prepare for a well-rooted democratic form of governance. In Libya, the government will need to be prepared to adopt strategies within the Libyan Interim Transitional National Council (ITNC) to create a sustainable legal, social, political and business framework.

The Arab Spring calls for social justice, democracy and freedom. This new era must benefit women as well as men.

The path to positive and long-lasting change is rarely politically easy, but in this instance it is clear what needs to be prioritized if the lives of women in the Middle East are to improve. New governments need to:

> Build an inclusive democracy, to restore agency and human dignity.

> Consider the demands of a generation of women activists: they want new representation and a place at the table in the process of democratization and regime change.

> Take women’s concerns seriously, and reject dismissive reactions to the problems of representation.

> Harness the momentum of the Arab Spring to create empowering outcomes for women equality

> Move towards more genuine democratic participation and a strong social justice agenda.

> Use progress on women’s rights issues to illustrate democracy in previously non-democratic nations.

> Push towards a new polity, where democracy means substantive inclusion and equality.

This is a time of great opportunity. Further empowering women in Libya – and, indeed, the rest of world - will bring fresh hope in an unstable political region. The women that live in the Arab Spring countries that continue to strive for peace and security at local, national and international levels deserve nothing less.
AT THE TABLE, NOT ON THE MENU
Why you can’t build peace leaving half the people out

No country is a model of perfection when it comes to gender equality. The reality of what power imbalances between women and men means in practice sharpenes when looking at countries affected by violent conflict. Here, women experience sexual violence, displacement and torture but their needs, realities, experiences and perspectives are often excluded from consideration.

"Despite their crucial roles in calling for and working towards peace, human rights and justice, women are largely absent during formal peace negotiations."

As Kofi Annan, then United Nations Secretary General, said, “For generations, women have served as peace educators, both in their families and in their societies. They have proved instrumental in building bridges rather than walls.” Thousands of women mobilised onto the streets in Liberia demanding ‘peace and no more war.’ The Women’s Mass Action for Peace was instrumental in bringing the warring parties to the negotiating tables and its barricading of delegates in meeting rooms led to mediators securing agreements and setting deadlines. The Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition, consisting of Catholic and Protestant women, was able to engage all parties, easing tensions and promoting dialogue while ensuring the process moved forward. Women for Human Rights in Nepal ensured the rights of widows, a group particularly marginalised and vulnerable, were recognised in the interim Nepali Constitution through their advocacy efforts.

However, despite their crucial roles in calling for and working towards peace, human rights and justice, women are largely absent during formal peace negotiations. In the past 25 years only one in forty signatories to peace agreements has been a woman. Only 16% of peace agreements concluded between 1990 and 2010 mention women and many of these references contravene human rights. This is not a coincidence. There is a link between participation, power and voice in politics, the economy and culture, fulfillment of women’s human rights and fear of continuing violence. Women experience conflict and its aftermath differently from men and when women are excluded, their needs are not identified, prioritised and allocated resources. In Egypt, women were central in the revolution, with virginity testing of women activists in Tahrir used to oppress and intimidate, but have been marginalised in decision-making since. In contrast, the involvement of women civil society groups in peace processes has led to greater gender sensitivity in peace agreements in Guatemala, Uganda and Burundi. Women have an equal stake in building a durable peace and the potential to contribute to deliberative democratic processes in the same way as men. Women have the right to take part in decision-making processes that will determine their future and that of their country. Furthermore, decision-making that is more representative, inclusive and democratic is a more responsive process, leading to better decisions and outcomes. Experience shows peace negotiations and agreements that exclude women are far less effective than those where all within society are involved. Donald Steinberg, former US ambassador to Angola, believes that “The exclusion of women and gender considerations from the peace process proved to be a key factor in our inability to implement the Lusaka Protocol and in Angola’s return to conflict in 1998.”

Despite recognition of women’s right to be fully included in peace and security structures and in peace processes and post conflict governance in the form of human rights law and numerous resolutions passed by the Security Council, challenges remain. Family commitments, communication and safety concerns play a part. Furthermore, the prevailing view continues to be that, as women do not make up the majority of those carrying the weapons, they have no stake in being around the peace table and no influence that they can bring to bear. Issues around women, peace and security remain in the margins.

However, the UK has been a leader in this field, driving forward the agenda at the Security Council and being one of the first countries to have a national action plan on women, peace and security. However, much more needs to be done to translate rhetoric into reality. Gender Action for Peace and Security works to strengthen government policy so it has further and lasting impact for women. Our No Women, no peace campaign calls for leadership, coordination, investment and accountability around women’s rights in conflict. No women, no peace currently focuses on women’s rights in Afghanistan. At this crucial time, the UK must take action to ensure women and women’s rights are central to discussion around transition in Afghanistan. For peace to be meaningful, the end of conflict must mean the end of violence for women and women must be involved in decisions that shape their societies and their future.

Chitra Nagarajan is the Director of Gender Action for Peace and Security

By Chitra Nagarajan
PEACE WITH JUSTICE

Women’s rights and the UK’s legacy in Afghanistan

Ten years after the fall of the Taliban, Afghanistan is still considered by many to be one of the worst places in the world to be a woman. While the plight of women and girls under the Taliban was one of the justifications frequently touted for the 2001 military intervention in Afghanistan, the rhetoric to uphold the human rights of women and girls has not been matched with action. With a reconciliation process that includes talks with the Taliban firmly on the agenda - seemingly without guarantees on human rights - the promises made to Afghan women by the international community are looking increasingly precarious, and the gains that have been made by Afghan women and girls are at risk.

In many parts of Afghanistan, the Taliban continue to threaten and kill women who participate in political processes. Shinkai Karokhail, a female Afghan MP, told Amnesty International that “You can’t be an active woman in Afghanistan and not feel threatened. It is part of my daily life. I never know what is going to happen next.” Many other high profile women have been injured or killed, simply for defending women’s human rights, or exercising their own rights. In April 2010 Nida Khyani (a female Provincial Council member) was left in a critical condition after being attacked in a drive-by shooting in Pul-e-Khumri, the provincial capital of Baghlan in northern Afghanistan.

Getting girls into school is highlighted as a key achievement, but despite progress on this most crucial of human rights, education is threatened by the on-going insecurity, and attacks against girls’ education continue. The Afghan Ministry of Education reported in 2010 that 34% of schools in Helmand remain closed due to insecurity, as do 61% of schools in Kabul. There have been reports of acid thrown at pupils and teachers, and suspected poisonous gas attacks on girls’ schools. In May, the head Teacher of a girls’ school near Kabul was killed after allegedly receiving warnings and threats to stop teaching girls.

Afghan women have good reason to fear that their rights may be traded away in attempts to find a settlement with the Taliban and insurgent groups. Despite constitutional guarantees, in recent years the Afghan government has appeared to sacrifice women’s rights when it has been politically expedient. In March 2009, President Karzai signed the discriminatory Shi’a Personal Status Law. The proposed law included provisions that would have denied Shi’a women the rights to child custody and freedom of movement. In 2010 the Afghan government drafted a regulation that attempted to move control of women’s shelters from independent NGOs to the Ministry of Women’s Affairs. Included in the draft regulation were measures that would have curtailed women and girls’ freedom of movement, and imposed compulsory forensic medical examinations on women and girls who may have been victims of violence. Ensuring effective and appropriate measures are in place to protect girls and women from gender-based violence should be a priority of all governments, yet the danger of government interference has been highlighted by the Afghan Women’s Network, who raised the case of a 12-year-old girl from Shindand in Herat who sought refuge in a shelter. Under pressure from a member of parliament, the girl was returned to her family, who then killed her.

Despite the promises from Afghanistan’s international supporters that women’s rights would no longer be negotiable, there are fears that they may de-prioritise or overlook women’s rights as part of an exit strategy from Afghanistan. The phrase ‘Afghan-led’ process has is often used by the international community to explain their lack of action in openly challenging the lack of women’s participation in the reconciliation process. Yet women’s participation in formal peace processes is one crucial way to safeguard the rights of women and girls, and to help to build a sustainable peace.

The Afghan government and its international partners (including the UK government) must take the opportunities – for instance at the upcoming Bonn Conference - to ensure Afghan women’s human rights are firmly on the agenda and that Afghan women fully and meaningfully participate in the Conference, and all other transition and reconciliation processes.

"Included in the draft regulation were measures that would have curtailed women and girls’ freedom of movement, and imposed compulsory forensic medical examinations on women and girls who may have been victims of violence."

ActionAid, Amnesty International and Fabian Women will be holding a joint event at the Labour Party Conference ‘Peace with Justice? - Women’s rights, and the UK’s legacy in Afghanistan’ on the 25th September at 17.45. The event will be in an ‘in conversation’ style event with a prominent journalist and speakers include: Jim Murphy, Shadow Secretary of State for Defence (invited); Sabrina Saqib, former Member of Afghan Parliament, and Anas Sarwar MP.
Fifty years after independence, sub-Saharan Africa continues to be an epicentre of want, conflict and instability. The Millennium Development Goals, which expire in 2015, will not be met in most cases. Delivery of essential public services remains heavily reliant on international donors and NGOs, and here in the UK we are assaulted daily by images on TV of yet another coup, yet another civil war.

Poverty and instability in Africa are among the most important and stubborn challenges of our time, interacting in a vicious cycle of underdevelopment. International aid has been necessary but not sufficient as a response, and it is clear that aid alone will not provide the way out of poverty.

STATE FAILURE

But it doesn’t have to be like this. Nothing about the situation described above is inevitable. As Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the President of Liberia, has commented, “Africa’s crisis is a failure of leadership and management. Sub-saharan Africa is rich in resources, talent energy and spirit. But it has not been rich in leadership. It is made up of rich countries that have been poorly managed.” With a burgeoning middle class, massive untapped resources and huge growth potential, Africa could be the single biggest success story of the 21st Century.

As with all meaningful change, solutions to Africa’s problems must emerge from within, and be led and owned by Africans themselves. This is what the aid regime has hitherto failed to understand, that external assistance can never be a long-term solution, and can even become part of the problem. By circumventing African governments, aid organisations can weaken government institutions and emasculate elected leaders. What Africa needs is strong capable states, headed by strong capable politicians and able to deliver key public goods and services. And the rest of us need to support this objective.

The importance of ‘good governance’ and state capacity-building is increasingly acknowledged by the international community. But for most this means programmes to target corruption and promote the rule of law. That matters, but it is not enough. Effective states require not just the absence of corruption but the presence of capacity. At the organisation I work for, the Africa Governance Initiative, we have a broader understanding of governance that focuses on the internal capacity of a state, its leaders and its civil service structures to deliver security, public services and economic growth for its people. We work with committed leaders to develop this capacity.

WOMEN LEADING THE WAY

Early signs are encouraging. A new generation of African leaders is emerging that understands the need to deliver on election promises and of building state institutions capable of doing so. And among the new generation are represented a small but growing number of women.

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf led the way by becoming the first female African Head of State in 2005. But women increasingly hold high-ranking government positions across the continent. Among the rising stars are Joice Nujuru, vice-President of Zimbabwe, Louise Mushikiwabo, the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Rwanda, and Cisse Mariam Kaidama Sidibe, the Prime Minister of Mali. And African women are rising to the top of the major aid organisations as well. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala of Nigeria has recently been appointed Managing Director of the World Bank and Asha-Rose Migiro of Tanzania is Deputy Secretary General at the UN.

Efforts are also being made to encourage the next generation of young African women leaders. Michelle Obama recently travelled to South Africa to talk to the first Young African Women Leaders Forum. As the First Lady told the 76 participants, the contribution women will make to Africa’s leadership renaissance is not just as politicians or heads of aid organisations. Obama commented that “true leadership — leadership that lifts families, leadership that sustains communities and transforms nations — that kind of leadership rarely starts in palaces or parliaments.”

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T-shirts £9.50 each and mugs only £5 each

To order, email fabianwomen@fabian-society.org.uk
REAL RESPONSIBILITY
A masterclass in participatory budgets from a world expert

1. Dr Allegretti, why are you at the World Bank now?

A pertinent question, since my background has closer links to social movements and the World Social Forum. I encountered the World Bank in 2008, when I was invited to train local authorities in South Africa and Senegal. I realised then how important international institutions are to extending PBs and cross-pollinating quality examples. I like the World Bank’s double approach: on one side it supplies knowledge to institutions, and on the other it meets the demands of civil society by supporting bottom-up engagement with local public service problems.

2. Participatory Budgeting (PB) is about directly involving local people in making decisions on the spending and priorities for a defined public budget. Could you explain how this works in practice?

I’ll try - even though that’s a big question, given that there are some 1,400 PB experiences around the world, according to a 2010 report. Despite this plurality, all PBs apply 5 core principles. These are: explicit discussion of budgets; the involvement of local administrative power; regular meetings; public deliberation within specific forums; and finally accountability and feed-back on decisions and output.

Within these principles, different processes can be used to build relationships with citizens. For instance, if you plan to use the Internet as method for voting on spending priorities, think about what your goals are. If you aim – like Swedish PBs – to develop social ties among citizens, it’s better not to use the web. Similarly, if you want to foster socially inclusive decision-making, you must facilitate workshops for small groups of citizens to attend. The coherence between goals and means is what makes PBs successful, but it’s important to recognize that specific techniques are essential for creating their secondary benefits.

3. How do PBs bring communities closer to the decision-making process?

Every phase of the process can use different organizational models, provided that the collective action strengthens the sustainability of the experience and the citizen-institutional relationships. For example, almost all Brazilian and Spanish PBs establish their “rules” with the citizens and amend them every year to progressively better the process. People consider this to be a guarantee of not being trapped in bureaucratic pitfalls created by others.

The central idea of PB is that of learning by doing, rather than involving people superficially through consultation. When people are just consulted on “what they feel they need”, they tend to produce a long list of jumbled priorities, and then wait for elected officials to decide which ideas to use and which to ignore. People don’t feel “co-responsible” when someone else makes decisions for them, and – regardless of the final funding decision – they often feel frustrated that their high expectations have not been fully met. The result is that they lose interest in consultation processes.

PB, on the other hand, champions the equation “satisfaction = results – expectations”, so that people can feel represented by decisions. Because of the transparency of PB decision-making, people go home after a PB public meeting knowing exactly which priorities were approved; their expectations will be realistic, and when the decisions are implemented they will be satisfied.

4. Aren’t people too busy to attend meetings?

Yes and no. We live in an atomized, individualistic society, and work increasingly dominates our time; it’s not easy for people to make time for discussing collective matters if not strongly motivated to do so. More and more, PBs’ organisers understand that people’s time is precious, so they avoid demanding too much involvement. Thus, the number of key PB events are reduced, and they also become informal, social gatherings rather than serious-grey political meetings. This social aspect is very important in a society that can foster loneliness.

5. Do you think women would benefit from a more inclusive way of allocating money? What is your experience of this? How do more disadvantaged groups benefit from PBs? How do you ensure a democratic process in establishing the priorities?

Supporting women’s needs and empowerment through PB can be seen from various perspectives, although I have to admit that there is a lack of good research on the issue. There is a paradox I notice in many cases: women are very reserved components of PBs, but their presence is very effective. A study at the Center for Social Studies in Coimbra University – where I work – focuses on women’s contribution to PB decision-making. Our preliminary results show that – even in Portugal, where society is still very patriarchal – the majority of priorities selected during PB sessions were proposed by women. Maybe this means that their proposals are more holistic, integrated, realistic and attractive; it has to be further analysed.

Studies in Brazil show that women represent the majority of participants in PBs, but, when popular delegates are elected for the process, the majority are always men. Even if quotas are imposed, it can be difficult to find women who accept such an onus. This is mainly because all the high-engagement roles are too time-consuming for many women, who are already assigned an unfair multiplicity of roles and tasks by society. Many PBs tried to break this asymmetry through women-friendly initiatives, for instance creating special meeting schedules, offering babysitting services, providing internet connections to those with little spare time, or creating thematic groups where participants can be more at ease.
Examples of the latter case exist in several African rural village PBs, where groups of women – as well as of young people, ethnic minorities or the elderly – have been created, with the objective of challenging the cultural exclusions at work in society. As the European project “INCLUD: PB as a mean of fighting social and territorial exclusion” demonstrated, inclusiveness can’t be reached unless specific measures help fulfill this goal. If we consider the “republican way” of approaching PB – i.e. putting different citizens all together in a single assembly, and supposing that this increases the level of democracy - we may discover that all the injustices and asymmetries of society have been reproduced in that room. To challenge exclusion we must create means to empower the disadvantaged.

6. What do you think should be the attitude of progressive parties in Europe on PBs?

I think they should support PB experiences, and remember that they aren’t just for facilitating government in a period of scarcity - even if they can serve for that too! They should also remember that PBs are meant to redistribute powers in society, create more civic awareness of the complexities of governance, and raise civil influence on public institutions.

I realize that this isn’t an easy task. In fact, I think that parties (and all power structures) are inert; they do not relinquish power easily and mistrust anything that could threaten their autonomy. That’s why I believe more in people: all the interesting PB experiences I know of owe their survival to people who believed in them and fought against their colleagues and parties to make it a sustainable process for citizens to engage with.

7. What do you see looking at the UK?

I see a battlefield of contradictions - I’ll try to explain.

When I last came to the UK I noticed a wave of enthusiasm for home-grown versions of PB, which were often based on participatory grant-making and implemented many different methods. All of the projects shared a common aim: fostering community decision-making to distribute public funds. Whilst other countries used the PB concept to create a break from old methods, my impression in the UK is that PB gives new shape to existing community development practices. That also explains why the name “PB” is not much used as a primary definition, and names like “U-Choose”, “U-decide” are preferred.

Though I think that PBs are a positive challenge to the UK’s traditional political culture, the mushrooming of over 40 almost-PBs creates three risks. The first risk is that reserves of money will become insignificant and unable to implement strategy beyond a superficial level. The second risk involves using PBs to source problem-solving to communities without challenging the political culture of institutions.

The third and biggest risk I see is that the expanding myth of the “Big Society” - and its counter-twin the “Good Society” - is being used to fill gaps caused by spending cuts. What will this army of volunteers, that the government rhetoric evokes, do? It seems that the smaller charities that coordinate volunteer commitments are despairing over the cuts. After all, volunteers need training and support, and if they don’t receive it they can simply leave.

Imagining an effective participatory culture free of costs is very childish, and it will result in frustration and interrupted projects. For communities to benefit from PBs, they must feature investment in training, even if they are intended to manage scarce resources. I hope that the UK National Association of Local Councils (NALC) conference’s PB meetings this autumn will be able to clarify this point to those in government that dream of delivering state functions to volunteers without carefully organising, training, motivating and coordinating them.

3. In the UK the Conservatives are making enormous cuts to councils and public services. How do you see it from your experience since PB was pioneered in Porto Alegre? When do PBs work?

Unfortunately the UK situation is not unique. Except rare cases (like Brazil), we are helping many countries with strong cuts at a local level, whilst central government bureaucracy escapes them. Undoubtedly, PBs can help to manage scarcity, but they can’t serve as an emollient for reduced local public spending. They were never intended to; they were conceived as a way to revitalise citizen-institution relationships through re-politicising the budget, not as a tool to serve institutions’ interests.

About the Fabian Society

The Fabian Society has played a central role for more than a century in the development of political ideas and public policy on the left of centre. Analysing the key challenges facing the UK and the rest of the industrialised world in a changing society and global economy, the society’s programme aims to explore the political ideas and the policy reforms which will define progressive politics in the new century. The society is unique among think-tanks in being a democratically-constituted membership organisation. It is affiliated to the Labour Party but is editorially and organisationally independent. Associate membership of the Fabian Society is open to all, regardless of political persuasion. The Society has approx 7000 members of which around 2000 are women.

To join, visit our website www.fabians.org.uk or contact membership officer Giles Wright on 020 7227 4904 or giles.wright@fabian-society.org.uk

About the Fabian Women's Network

The Fabian Women’s Network was launched in January 2005 and is run by a committee of volunteers. It is part of the voluntary section of the Fabian Society, alongside local Societies and the Young Fabians. The Fabian Women’s Network aims to bring people together to:

► Create a thriving network for social and political change.
► Connect Fabian networks with Fabian Women Parliamentarians.
► Provide new ways in which women from all backgrounds and sectors can engage in topical policy debate.

The Network has held a number of high profile receptions and policy discussions and regularly works with voluntary sector organisations on areas including women and pensions, women and work and family related policy. Speakers at events have included Cabinet Ministers, Ministers, representatives from leading charities or agencies, business, academics and media.
FABIAN WOMEN’S NETWORK AT LABOUR PARTY CONFERENCE IN LIVERPOOL

Peace with Justice? The UK’s legacy in Afghanistan
Hosted by ActionAid, Amnesty International and the Fabian Women’s Network

Sunday 25th September 2011 17.45 - 19.15
ACC-BT-Convention Centre, Concourse fringe room 9 (secure zone)
Speakers: Chair: Anushka Asthana (Journalist), Sabrina Saqig (former member of the Afghan parliament), Anas Sarwar MP (MP for Glasgow Central, International Development Committee), Jim Murphy MP (tbc) (Shadow Secretary of State for Defence)

The debate will reflect on women’s status in Afghan society ten years on from the UK’s military involvement in Afghanistan, and what will happen to women’s rights as the international community turns its focus to the transition process.

SHOULD WOMEN WELCOME OR REJECT BLUE LABOUR?
Come and join us for this exciting fringe event which will debate the impact of Blue Labour on women’s progress. The event is free and open to all.

Monday 26th September 2011
7pm - 8pm (6.45 for a 7pm start)
West Reception Hall, Liverpool Town Hall

Speakers:
Helen Goodman MP, Marc Stears (IPPR/Oxford University), Ivana Bartoletti (Editor, Fabiana)
Chair: Seema Malhotra (Director, Fabian Women’s Network)

LABOUR PARTY NATIONAL WOMEN’S CONFERENCE
National Women’s Conference will bring together hundreds of women from across the Labour Movement. This is your opportunity to hear from high profile speakers, get involved in training and workshops, and meet other women from across the country.

Saturday 24 September
Main Conference 11am – 6pm

Sunday 25 September
Training and workshops for women members throughout the day, followed by the Women’s Reception 7 - 8:30pm.

Venue:
Labour Party Annual Conference, Secure Zone, ACC Liverpool

To register or for more information please contact Sarah Mulholland, Labour Party National Equalities Officer on equalities@new.labour.org.uk.