FABIANA
The magazine of the Fabian Women’s Network
ISSUE 13
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This edition of Fabiana gives voice to many of the contemporary concerns of women—and also gives voice to those who have sadly been lost to us or who are hidden from view. Our contributors all have authentic and relevant personal experience in their field of writing.

These women, our friends, are innovators and communicators, are voices for a range of female generations, both nationally and globally. Experience and ideas are a powerful combination and the more of us who join together to take these messages to the public, the more chance we have of reversing current damaging trends.

We give a very special place to the Grenfell tragedy, with a heartrending hands-on piece from Dr Sonia Adesara and at the same time of course remembering all those impacted by needless waste of life—whether in Manchester or Myanmar. Each and everyone counts.

At the time of writing, a series of hurricanes on a seismic scale are ripping their way through the Caribbean heading towards Florida and beyond. It’s as though the climate is echoing the political turmoil which has beset us over the past couple of years—warnings about climate change and the dangers of populism may yet be heeded, but it feels as though time is not on our side. We need to act—and not soon, but now.

This week we learned the shocking news that Theresa May is attempting, with the help of Henry VIII, to use Brexit to lock down Parliament in the most anti-democratic way, stifling not only debate, but overriding its very sovereignty, hitherto so vaunted by Brexiteers.

Other than Mrs (sic) May, it seems that women will not benefit from this in any way. The intent is clear. A reduction in human rights, of equality legislation and in all probability environmental controls, worker safety and public sector investment—anything which comes under the 1,000 (or so) pieces of legislation now intended to be turned into statutory instruments—creating what the Hansard Society has described as a legislative blank cheque. These are no empty threats, for as was repeatedly said to Davis in the and Reading of the renamed (not Great ) Withdrawal Bill, if it won’t be used, why do it?

Our hope must be that these extreme regressive and reactionary aims will not ultimately succeed—and despite no little press bias, with the help of increasing armies of canvassing activists, the public will soon gain a real understanding of how the government’s Brexit games will disastrously impact upon our collective wellbeing, pressing MPs to take a better approach.

This should be our time, but instead we fight to save the best of who we are. Yet we are not simply women of words. We are women of action. Let’s find even more of us—not just in our narrow groups, but as widely as possible—and wow the world to make all our futures more aware, more secure and more productive. And remember—as Andrea’s piece reminds us:

Laughter rises out of tragedy when you need it the most, and rewards you for your courage.

(Em llama Bombek)

Jos Bell is the Health & Wellbeing Lead, of FWN. She is chair at SHA London, researcher, campaigner, writer and activist.

Jos Bell

Women’s activists face dangers and pushback—from Turkey to Honduras to Zimbabwe. In the UK, Jo Cox MP too lost her life while doing her daily, political work. We talk of shrinking space for feminist activism, also recognised in official discourse.

Women’s bodies have become, or perhaps remain, the landscape on which battles are fought—including the use of women’s bodies as rewards for men who wage terror on the world. The particular experiences of Yazidi women have had significant media attention but Boko Haram and others also sexually abuse and objectify women and girls.

Women’s sexual and reproductive health and rights have been mulled over, debated and determined by powerful men.

The USA has re-instated the Mexico City policy, also known as the ‘global gag rule’, prohibiting aid funding being given to any organisation that provides or promotes abortion. At the London Family Planning Summit (July 2017) organisations and governments affirmed their commitment to promote these services and rights. A fund and initiative – SheDecides – has been launched to support work that will lose resources through this rule.

Policy measures that hurt women and the continuing dominance of men in politics are encouraging more women to enter politics.

Jumping together

UN Women’s mandate is to further gender equality and the empowerment of women. Women are core to holding accountable those who are in a position, or indeed have an obligation, to bring change that works. Despite the specific challenges to women’s organising, women continue to be the irreplaceable key to change.

At UN Women we sometimes employ an image of women jumping, to speak about the impact of strengthened women’s solidarity, their vision their energy; their / our ability to make profound and lasting change. If women across the world could jump at the same time, we could shake the pillars of patriarchy so that they crumble and not be put back together.

Every activist needs to be able to do her work safely. No woman should pay with her dignity or her life for her political work. Now, in a time of challenge, women need safety and funding for their work.

Purna Sen is the Policy Director for UN Women and is based in New York.

'The most important and consistent factor driving policy change (on violence against women) is feminist activism'.

Autonomous women’s movements have greater influence even than increasing the number of women in the legislatures, progressive political parties or improvements in national wealth. They raise awareness, lobby governments for change and hold them accountable for their obligations and promises. They do this for national and domestic work, local laws, local services and commitments. Women’s organisations do this also for international work and laws—pushing for them to be followed up at home.

In 2015, for example looking at the Sustainable Development Goals, states across the world promised a great deal to women, including that they would:

- end violence against women
- end discriminatory laws
- recognise and value unpaid and domestic care
- ensure women’s equal opportunities for leadership
- achieve equal pay for work of equal value

They promised to do this (and much more) by 2030. It is clear: if we are to have policy changes that make a difference for women’s equality, if promises made internationally to women are to be made real at home—then women’s mobilisation, activism and autonomy is a critical factor.

Challenges

Globally: women earn on average 23% less than men; more than 70% of women in paid work are in the informal sector—beyond legal protection; women have not breached what has become in effect a 25% barrier in representation in national parliaments.

There is so much to be done. The crucial elements in the changes we need—women and women’s autonomous movements—are neither safe, nor certain, nor receiving adequate funding.

There has undoubtedly been significant progress in women’s lives—each of us has only to compare the generation that went before us with those that follow us to see the evidence. More girls at school, more women able to take up paid work and be active in trade unions, more women in public life including in politics. Just this month, laws that exempt rapists from prosecution if they marry their victims have been overturned in Jordan and Lebanon.

Yet, these gains and a forward direction of travel are challenged. Young feminists feel targeted for speaking out about what matters in their lives.

Purna Sen is the Policy Director for UN Women and is based in New York.

Abena, Sarra and Jos
42 years ago, in 1975, during the national referendum to join the then Common Market, women were not only addressed by mainstream politicians in their campaigns, but many were also active agents in the referendum process, promoting “vote yes” to join. Moreover, Europe needed women; it needed their labour market participation in the name of equality and freedom. Today, much has changed. We can hear about ensuring equal rights for workers in the present and rapidly changing socio-politico-economic context, in the era of the global financial crisis and Brexit, where have women’s rights vanished?

The national referendum, the 2017 general elections and now the ongoing Brexit negotiations have been near silent about women’s rights and gender equality and made women’s voices secondary in political and media discourse. Since the elections, all political parties have addressed the potential impacts of Brexit on women’s rights – to make Brexit a women’s issue. The Labour Party’s promises of achieving a progressive change and making women visible by “doing politics differently” has not exactly been translated into significant reality within Brexit discussions. What is more, Theresa May has appointed only one woman (Caroline Dinenage) in the core Brexit negotiation team, which significantly marginalises women’s visibility in decision-making. Yet again in British history, a female PM is not promoting women.

Likewise, May’s Tories continue to use strategic silences about how women’s and minorities’ universal EU rights will be enriched in UK law. They even aim to practice ultimate power with the help of the EU Withdrawal Bill by also eradicating the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. This is especially dangerous as women and other marginalised groups in society who are the most vulnerable to these changes may well lose individual human rights gained under EU law after Brexit – and the danger is increased more with the notorious ‘Henry V111 clause’ which in the Bill’s present form, extraordianrily gives ultimate power to individual ministers, overriding Parliament and ignoring democracy, where well over 1,000 pieces of delegated legislation will be given ‘the least possible scrutiny’. Yet even in current EU member states, it seems women’s issues (like other minority rights) are hidden under mainstream politicians’ priorities and goals. Due to the main focus being placed on economic advantages, the passive approach-based EU laws, directives and charters (e.g., equal opportunities of women and men in legal terms and anti-discrimination law etc.) may not now bring about permanent social and political change in British society.

Let me start off by getting one thing straight: EU nationals leaving the UK aren’t “going home”. They may be going back (if they are not moving to other parts of the EU) but Home is here. Would it ever occur to anyone to ask their neighbour of many years from, say, Shropshire whether they didn’t have friends and family at home and would they rather go home? Probably not.

A different language, currency, a few customs and driving on the other side of the road not withstanding, this is what we’ve done: move from one part of the EU to another. Not to sponge or commit crime, to steal jobs or benefits, but to work or study, for love, to live – because we could.

My first reaction to the referendum result was to be distraught for this country, my country. I believed “project fear” was actually spot on and that this country would be so much poorer for leaving the EU – and not just in economic terms. For myself I felt lucky, lucky to have my EU passport and therefore a chance to remain a part of this amazing (though not flawless) project of peaceful co-operation. It simply didn’t occur to me that after Brexit in the country and with a British partner all this, women and children would have to face uncertainty about my own future.

But then my life as a bargaining chip began.

There were no guarantees, no reassurances, not even promises of future guarantees. Instead there was an 80 page document and the sudden request to have had Comprehensive Sickness Insurance if you please. A term nobody had ever heard of when our tax contribution was still considered the same as the contribution of someone with a different colour passport.

“It is my understanding that after living five years in the country…” my Leave voting Tory MP pompously said, but people who’ve worked part-time, volunteered, studied, took time off to look after their children (mostly women) are not eligible for ‘PR unless they’ve had an insurance that nobody at the time told them about. But even for those with a clean full-time work history it doesn’t seem to be straightforward: 28% of applications for Permanent Residency were rejected in the second half of 2016.

Whatever next? Oh yes, Settled Status. So if you did decide to bite the bullet and find five years’ worth of bank statements, utility bills and what not and did manage to fill in the form without a single mistake (people’s applications have been rejected because one looked like a 4 or 4 vice versa) and you’re now the proud (or maybe just relieved) owner of a Permanent Residency card – be prepared to do it all again because the Brexit Britain is becoming the Wild West and we’re settlers now. After Britain has left the EU that’s what we’ll need, a Special Status. But the Home Office now officially discourages people from applying for ‘PR because it won’t be valid in two or more years’ – even though it is still the prerequisite for applying to become a settled or naturalized citizen. And that seems to be the only way of buying ourselves some security these days. But it does come at a price, about £1,600 all in. (It will also buy you the vote, of course, in any future referendum)

This could all be explained away with bureaucracy and red tape though it certainly does feel like deliberate hostility. Add to that the suggestion of a special ID card and fingerprints on record, the talk of those lawfully in the country (T May) or those who contribute (K Stammer), and it feels more and more like it’s not just the tabloids who assume that we’re in essence all criminals until proven innocent.

Now, from Theresa May, one of Britain’s most reactionary Home Secretaries, it’s expected that our current awkwardness doesn’t surprise me. More surprising and considerably more hurtful is it to me that Labour, too, fails to point out to communities who are unfamiliar with immigration that immigration brings great benefits to this country. That there isn’t a “lump of labour” and if the jobs are gone they’re gone but that immigrants create jobs just as much as they take them up. Treat EU migration in particular, has been a net contributor to the exchequer; that for every pound in services used by an EU national they have paid £2.01 in taxes – and that many sectors such as hospitality, care, fruit & vegetable harvest and, perhaps most pressingly, the NHS, rely to a huge extent on foreign workers.

My cousin for example, is a GP and has worked for the NHS for 25 years. She has no inclination whatsoever to go begging for a “Settled Status”. Going back to Germany would be a last resort though. Yes, some brothers scattered across the country and maybe an old school friend here or there, but otherwise, friends & family are here. Home is here. Even if it doesn’t feel very homely at the moment…

Ulrike Bulle  

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Not settling for becoming a bargaining chip!
Dr Sonia Adesara

A volunteer told me there was family that had escaped and were worried about their baby’s breathing, but worse was to seek help as they had a 15-year-old son who was undocumented. We were told of an African woman in her 40s, who had fallen down the stairs on the same day. The government has focused on issues around identity, race, gender, and Islam. As an intersectional feminist I think the lens through which I work.

Unfortunately, their fears are not ill-founded. Under public pressure, Theresa May stated that migrants would not face immigration checks when accessing services. However, the government has not stated details of how these exemptions should work in practice. There are also fears that information on those seeking help could be kept by the Home Office to be used at a later date, once the spotlight has left Grenfell. For our charity (Doctors of the World UK), migrants too scared to access care is not a new story. At our clinic in Bethnal Green, we regularly see pregnant women, cancer patients, victims of trafficking and abuse, too scared to access mainstream health services. This is due to laws brought in under Theresa May’s hostile environment policy, which uses healthcare as an anti-immigration tool. The most recent, brought in this April, has made it mandatory legal requirement for healthcare staff to refer migrant patients to the Home Office if they access hospital care.

There are also new concerns about GP surgeries. This is due to a CRM overhaul deal. The Home Office has a local NHS Digital (that was introduced without the knowledge of NHS staff) allowing the Home Office to access patients’ data held by GP surgeries. The British Medical Association has vehemently opposed this, stating this breach of confidentiality undermines the sacred doctor patient relationship and will deter the potentially vulnerable from seeking health care. It is under these circumstances that Doctors of the World was forced to launch a safe and confidential pop-up clinic near Grenfell Tower, staffed by volunteers, to help survivors who were too afraid to get NHS care. We have also written to Jeremy Hunt, urging him to publicly state that survivors will not have their details shared with the Home Office. It is shameful the need to be done, in the aftermath of this horrific tragedy. Encouraging fear around accessing services is a dangerous policy, makes migrants vulnerable, marginalised and invisiblised.

Grenfell exposed the human cost of austerity. To give justice to the victims, we need to ask the difficult questions. Should the lives of all those on our streets have equal worth? If yes, all we need to confront those in power. Please use your privileges to give a voice to the voiceless.

Dr Sonia Adesara is a junior doctor specialising in sexual health. She is Chair of the Young Fabians Health Network and volunteers with Doctors of the World.

Shaista Aziz

The key to women countering hate is coming together and opening space to share their lived experiences and stories — their narratives. In order for this to happen space has to be granted, open, women, especially marginalised women have to be reached out to and trust has to be built for them to speak up about their experiences. Anonymity and boundaries must be respected and above all else women’s agency has to be retained. A one size fits all formula very rarely works — every context and every woman’s experience is unique and just as white women are afforded the luxury and dignity of being seen as individual women — non-white women and women with intersectional identities need to be afforded this same human right. This is one of the key ways of building trust with vulnerable women. To see and hear women and to build a two-way relationship of equality in the shared space where discussions are taking place.

In North East Nigeria I met two women, unpaid for their labour and committed to defending the rights of women impacted by the Boko Haram insurgency. I met women doing the same work in Iraq and in Pakistan, informal networks of women with no resources, with no access to funding struggling through their own daily realities to pull up women of the world who have hit rock bottom. In many cases these women are putting their own lives at risk to do this work.

Here in the UK I’ve spent the past year talking and most importantly listening to marginalised women’s experiences of being subjected to racist hate. The parallels between the experiences of all these women are stark, more often than not, they know that they have to first depend on themselves and then second on each other.

Shaista Aziz is a freelance journalist and anti racism and women’s rights campaigner. She tweets at: @shaistaaziz

Shaista is a graduate of the '16-'17 FWN Mentoring cohort.
TEACHING AI TO UNLEARN GENDER BIAS

Ivana Bartoletti

In reality, it will probably be a mix of both: AI will transform work as we have always experienced it. Some jobs will be destroyed but it is possible that some new jobs will be created. I think that those companies which will be better at integrating AI with human intelligence will be the ones more able to compete globally and therefore grow and expand their workforce.

Whatever we think about this, there are a number of issues we need to deal with now. I want to mention two.

AI works, in part, because complex algorithms adeptly identify, remember, and relate data. Although such machines processing has existed for decades, the difference now is that very powerful computers process terabytes of data and deliver meaningful results in real-time. Moreover, some machines can do what had been the exclusive domain of humans and other intelligent life: learn on their own. It’s this automated learning that introduces a critical question: can machines learn to be moral? And if so, what defines what moral is?

The second relates to the gender bias I mentioned at the beginning: how are we going to stop AI replicating and perpetuating the stereotypes we are experiencing in our society already?

The ethical dimension of AI is very complicated but dealing with it is a challenge incumbent on us all. My first thought is that the diversity of the people working in AI will be absolutely crucial. Having more diverse mathematicians creating algorithms governing our AI is an absolutely priority, and something we cannot postpone. If AI will indeed take over areas of human function, let it be a wake-up call that we must take another step backwards in equality and progressive values – otherwise we ultimately stand at risk of being taken over by malevolent forces which could make Trump look like a benign uncle with a funny hair-do.

Andrea Mann

And unfortunately this, plus the distance created by online communication, increases the chances of both thoughtlessness on the part of the people making jokes and overreaction on the part of the people receiving them.

The biggest worry, however, is the idea that humour – like political commentary or other kinds of writing – is a replacement for action. It isn’t. It can encourage us; and satire can also successfully wound those it targets. But in what feels like an increasingly polarised, partisan world, it also risks fueling the very person or views it hopes to bring down. We only have to witness how Donald Trump’s fan base dig their heels in even deeper when Their Man – and they themselves – are under attack. Not to mention the man(b)child himself, of course.

Moreover, it can lead to complacency. “I always regarded myself as not even preaching to the converted,” observed the great satirist Tom Lehrer. “The audiences like to think that satire is doing something. But, in fact, it is mostly to leave themselves satisfied. Satisfied rather than angry, which is what they should be.”

Making fun of Donald Trump didn’t stop him getting elected; laughing at the Brexit campaign didn’t stop Britain voting to leave the EU. So while I firmly believe that making jokes and writing satire and mocking Nazism is absolutely right and necessary, it has to be accompanied by concrete action. I’ve realised that more than ever over this past year – and it’s partly why I’m standing to be a Labour candidate in the 2018 Westminster City Council elections. The jokes won’t stop (indeed, I have a feeling that my sense of humour will be more necessary than ever). But I know that if I become an elected representative, I will be able to help people in a very real, tangible way. And no number of Donald Trump jokes is going to come close to that.

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Stitching is easy - you just follow the thread and the thread follows you.

Words can come easy. They can be kind and they can hurt. Words can also describe difficult moments - but how to find the words to do justice to those who have come to harm from more than words? Councillor Roxanne Ellis tells us about the Women's Quilt Project......

When I read the data of how many women had perished at the hands of a partner or ex-partner in recent years - 598 between 2009-15. I first redded in shock, then I got to wondering how we could best pay tribute to all these lost lives, not just in a briefly written piece, but in a fitting memorial which would illustrate their lives in a way which their loved ones would be happy with and which would make strangers who visit or pass-by remember them forever, both in their own right and as a group.

Reporting is almost always skewed in favour of the ‘nice man’ rejected author/perpetrator, with very little told about the life of the murdered woman. Victim blaming is all too common. Each of the 598 women deserved to be depicted in a way which would illustrate aspects of their lives which had been most important to them - their family, their careers, their hobbies and homes.

A quilt. These women deserved a beautiful quilt. A patchwork of named squares, with one for each woman, bringing their lives together in one place in a way which she will be displayed and photographed, written about and talked about.

As much as my mum Rachael and I love sewing and stitching, this would take us years, so we needed a stitching team. We put out a call on Facebook and forward they came - an army of stitchers. Not just locally in Nottingham, but across the UK and further afield from the US and Australia. We set up a stitching HQ in Rachael’s house where we would both make squares and stitch together the silk, cotton, embroidered and beaded contributions which tumbled through our letterbox, posted it seemed in an endless cascade of creative stitching – literally all the colours of the rainbow and all of it done with love for the women who have been lost. Some squares were made by expert stitchers, others by women who sat up all night trying to get it right. We also had squares from men who had never before held a needle but wanted to support the project.

As the hours and days went by, the squares gradually joined together - our Women’s Quilt HQ filling up with our stitching army and our sore fingers, until just in time, we rushed it down to Parliament for a launch on International Women’s Day - still backless, but hanging together as a group of our MPs and peers held it aloft for photos. We afterwards shared an added poignant, Lovely PC Keith Palmer had helped us with our photoscall on the same spot where he was felled just two weeks later.

After more mourning and with a couple more weeks of stitching, finally the united squares were backed and bound in dark blue & green. The Women’s Quilt was ready to travel and tour.

An early stop was at The Festival of Quilts. We had thousands of visitors. Comments included: ‘A picture paints a thousand words.’ ‘The Women’s Quilt is beautiful and tragic.’ ‘I got close up to read a few names and it brought tears to my eyes.’ “Many hands worked on the Quilt”.

Of course it’s the purpose of the Women’s Quilt, not just to act as a memorial, but as a catalyst to awareness raising about the dangers of cuts to refugee and to prevention and mental health services. Solutions to this are urgently needed - which can only come with proper funding for specialist support staff in places of safety, in GP practices and community provision, in nurseries, schools and in hospitals. For all these women it should never have come to this - there were warnings and there were cries for help. We can only hope that there will soon be enough voices saying ‘never again!’ for the government to pay attention and take action.

Look out for the Women’s Quilt visiting somewhere near you – and remember to bring a hanky.

Roxanne Ellis founded The Women’s Quilt project and co-ordinated it’s making. She is a Labour Councillor for Ernehale Ward, Gedling Council, Nottinghamshire.

Our prisons are in meltdown. Rioting, self-harm, self-inflicted deaths are inevitably up, just as funding and staff numbers tumble downwards. We have more people in our prisons than ever before, and prison safety has rapidly decreased over the last six years. Since Grayling’s austerity-driven reign as Secretary of State for Justice, his successors have only added to the damage. Society needs a justice system with rehabilitation at its heart to create safer communities and less victims. But instead we have a destructive, death-inducing, criminogenic mess.

Where are the women? Behind the press focus on male prisons, around 4000 women make up less than 5% of the prison population, held in 12 prisons - yet 10% of people sent to prison are female; the disparity caused in part by women being far more likely to be on short sentences - 84% of women going to prison have a destructive, death-inducing, criminogenic mess.

Who are the women? Behind the press focus on male prisons, around 4000 women make up less than 5% of the prison population, held in 12 prisons - yet 10% of people sent to prison are female; the disparity caused in part by women being far more likely to be on short sentences - 84% of women going to prison have committed a non-violent offence. Possibly the most damaging of Grayling’s policies, Probation Service privatisation and restructuring, has caused much of the recent destructive increase in the prison population. Many women who are serving the new compulsory 12month licence if they have served more than just 48hrs, are recalled for minor things eg.missing a probation appointment while taking their child to A&E.

Who are the women we send to our prisons?

Women who have families, jobs and caring responsibilities but who often had some of the most difficult starts in life: almost a third are care leavers; 53% report experiencing emotional, physical or sexual abuse as a child. Official figures state 46% of imprisoned women have experienced domestic abuse, whilst Women in Prison notes DA in 80% of their contacts. Horribly, almost half the women in prison have tried to commit suicide at some point.

Moreover, there is also the ‘Double Disadvantage’ faced by BAME women. The Lammy Report (released on Sept 8th) has firmly established that Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic women and men are far less likely to be fairly or appropriately treated by the system – including access to therapies. As Lammy says, ‘the wasted lives are unheeded.’

The solution lies in holistic, community interventions such as those advocated by the Women in Prison campaign, that allow women offenders to retain ties with family and social networks, identify the root causes of their offending as well as keeping their housing tenure secure. Instead of building 5 new women’s prisons as the government are doing, this needs better funding so that magistrates have options other than custodial sentences when dealing with women.

It is up to those of us with the progressive, compassionate, pragmatic politics of the Labour movement to keep raising these issues and campaigning towards a justice system that delivers for women, their families and wider society.

Sara Hyde is Vice Chair of FWN. She works with women in the criminal justice system and is writing a report on deaths in custody. She stood as a PPC in 2017.

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Feminism Needs Wheels as Well as Words

Margherita Rendel

Feminism Needs Wheels as Well as Words - we need a Human Right for Public Transport. Public transport is a feminist issue. Women are less likely than men to have a driving licence, have a car or live in a household with a car. Other groups less likely to have a car are members of ethnic minorities, disabled people, young people, old people and those with scanty or insecure means. Sixty per cent of the people in Britain do not have a car – that is the majority of people do not have a car. They are dependent on public transport to get about.

Outside inner London at least and a few other cities, the existence of public transport, and especially bus services, is uncertain or even lacking in the evenings and on Sundays. In rural areas and villages, buses are usually few and getting fewer. Many services are subsidised by Local Authorities. LAs are being forced to cut funds for public transport (and for much else) because the Government refuses to allow them adequate funds for all the services they need to provide.

Without a car, and with fewer and less frequent bus services, women, disabled people, young people, children, older people and those with scanty means may well not be able to get to further education and training. They are reduced to cadging lifts – which can be embarrassing – or being excluded. The alternatives of moving house or buying a car may well be impractical or impossible.

Until very recently, the North of England was expecting large scale electrification and upgrade of the West to East network - until Grayling inexplicably pulled it, despite the ongoing diesel pollution and longer journey times than in the 1960’s. We may ask if the appalling upheaval of HS2 is the best use of transport funds? The Treasury certainly doesn’t seem to think so. Would it not be better to invest more in the North and the South West and also re-install some of the lost Beeching routes? Speed to and from London now seems to take longer than in the 1960’s. We may ask if the appalling upheaval of HS2 is the best use of transport funds?

There would be many advantages. With fewer cars on the roads there would be less air and noise pollution and therefore less asthma and stress, people walking to bus stops and using their cars less would contribute to less obesity and better health, there would be fewer road accidents, one of the highest costs of existing road transport.

All these results would both reduce the costs to the NHS and lead to fewer delays in treatments, and also make our environment more pleasing as well as ensuring a better contribution to reducing the present dangers of climate change. A right to public transport would tip the balance in favour of greater equality and fairness.

transport produces roughly one third of Britain’s greenhouse gases. So cars alone produce about one sixth of all Britain’s greenhouse gases. If we reduced car journeys by a half we could reduce Britain’s greenhouse gases from 16% to 8% - a worthwhile improvement. So, how to do it?

If public transport were recognised as a right, priority would have to be given to measures to improve public transport over measures to assist motorists. Some local authorities are already turning to innovation. Demand for Hammersmith and Fulham Council’s electric car scheme is already outstripping supply. Critics will say that the grid will not cope with national roll-out, but re-investing in solar power and other renewables is the easy answer to this. Trams have proved to be a popular accessible investment in a few urban areas including Manchester, Sheffield and South London – although Bristol sheered their tram plan a few years ago, Bath is now exploring the potential and Leeds too.

We could also insist on measures such as more bus lanes, better locations for bus stops (some are inconveniently placed for pedestrians so that they don’t impede the flow of traffic), longer time to ensure the less speedy can get across the road instead of having to wait in the middle, less parking on both sides of less wide roads which hold up buses, more controls on parking in the streets, traffic waiting for buses to pull out from stops as it waits at pedestrian crossings, traffic lights which turn green as buses approach, as in Zurich. Many other measures are possible such as expansion of dial-a-ride services which often turn into scheduled services, even legislation and litigation.

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@FabianWomen