



A LIFE RAFT FOR WOMEN'S EQUALITY

Measures to reduce the deficit are hitting women hard: cuts to their jobs, cuts to the benefits and services supporting women's every day lives, and a growing likelihood that women will be the ones left 'filling the gaps' as state services are withdrawn.

This triple jeopardy is turning back time on women's equality. It is pushing women out of the workforce, driving down women's incomes and undermining women's hard won rights to protection from violence and access to justice.

Women on average earn less, own less, and are more likely to work and retire in poverty than men. They can ill afford to bear the brunt of cuts. It is those who have least to lose – women who are unemployed or on low incomes, pregnant women, families, single mothers and pensioners, victims of sexual, domestic or other violence – who will lose most.

The government has the power to help stop the clock turning backwards.

In the short-term, we call on the government to recognise the harm caused to women's equality by austerity measures and take immediate steps to address some of the worst effects. The following actions can be implemented before or at the March 2012 budget and represent a life raft for women's equality:

1. Help support families

Families are shouldering an unfair burden of the impact of austerity. Cuts to maternity, pregnancy and child benefits and changes to the funding available for early years services affect those on the lowest incomes and women, who continue to provide the lion's share of care for children within families, most.

To help support families the Government can:

- **Protect Sure Start children's centres** through reinstating the ring-fence to the Sure Start grant to local authorities.
- **Ensure that the value of child benefit is not eroded** through committing to the restoration of child benefit to its previous level plus the value of inflation once the freeze is lifted in 2014.

2. Help support women and girls who are the victims of violence

Despite calls from Ministers that violence against women services should not be a 'soft target' for funding cuts, specialist services up and down the country - many of which provide literally life-saving help to women - are currently facing considerable cut-backs, putting both their current provision and future stability in jeopardy.

To help support women and girls who are the victims of violence the Government can:

- **Protect violence against women services from local authority cuts** by requiring that local authorities ring fence funding for specialist services as part of local violence against women strategies, as some are already doing.

3. Help make work pay for low-income mothers

Increasing numbers of low-income mothers are being asked to move into paid work. At the same time, support to help cover childcare costs – which in the UK are amongst the highest in the world - is being rolled back.

This is squeezing tight incomes even further. In some instances it is resulting in mothers having to give up paid employment as it no longer makes financial sense to work. It both undermines the government's aim to "make all work pay" and risks penalising families who are unable to balance the benefits of paid work with the ever-increasing costs of childcare.

To help make work pay for low-income mothers the Government can:

- **Restore support for childcare costs for low-income families to pre-April 2011 levels** through restoring the childcare element of the Working Tax Credit to its previous level of up to 80% in the 2012 budget.
- **Provide an adequate level of support for childcare costs in the new Universal Credit system** – that is up to 80% of childcare costs up to existing weekly limits.

4. Help protect women from poverty in retirement

Two thirds of pensioners living in poverty are women, and as many as half of all women are not able to make adequate pension provision for their future. The average pension for a woman working in local government is just £60 per week. Yet changes to the way state pension contributions are calculated mean that millions of public sector workers, the majority of whom are women, will be expected to work longer and pay more in contributions, only to get a smaller pension.

To help protect women from poverty in retirement the Government can:

- **Ensure nurses, social workers, teachers and other public sector workers receive a fair income in retirement** through proper negotiations with the unions that represent them as pension reforms are considered.

The above recommendations offer a life raft for women's equality. In taking these steps, the government would show it is listening.

But these recommendations are no more than a life raft. The government must also find an answer to:

- the hundreds of thousands of women made redundant from the public sector, who face an uncertain future unless the supply of jobs is increased;
- the persistent income gap between women and men in work and retirement, made worse by the public sector pay freeze, widespread pregnancy discrimination, pension reforms and the projected move of jobs from the public to the private sector where the pay gap is almost double;
- the double care crisis our country faces, as a result of the lack of affordable services for children and older people; and
- the impoverishment of many disabled women, retired women and mothers by changing the indexation of benefits and pensions to make them worth less year on year; and
- the current postcode lottery of service provision for victims of violence against women.

We call on the government urgently to develop and implement a strategy for women's employment.

We call for a review of policy on work, welfare, pensions, health, childcare and justice that considers how the cumulative impact of these policies affects women's daily lives.

We urge government to put in place a national oversight mechanism and local specialist commissioners to tackle patchy provision of violence against women services.

We insist that the government complies with its legal duty to advance gender equality.

And we urge the government to involve women and the organisations representing them, who have valuable expertise to offer, in policymaking.

These recommendations have been drawn up by the Fawcett Society and are endorsed by a wide range of organisations, across the charitable, voluntary and union sectors:



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| Eaves Housing for Women | Rights of Women |
| The End Violence Against Women Coalition | Coventry Women's Voices |
| UNISON | Welsh Women's Aid |
| Women's Budget Group | Scottish Women's Aid |
| Child Poverty Action Group | Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland |
| Single Parent Action Network | London Feminist Network |
| Women's Resource Centre | Newham Asian Women's Project |
| Daycare Trust | Ashiana Network |
| Maternity Action | Bristol Fawcett |
| Gingerbread | Rape Crisis - South London |
| White Ribbon Campaign UK | Against Violence & Abuse |
| Equality Now | Respect |
| FORWARD | Zero Tolerance |
| Platform 51 | |
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