



# From municipal feminism to the Equality Act – Legislation and gender equality work in UK local government 1980-2010

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## ABSTRACT

For decades local government has been an important site for the development of gender equality practice, and the implementation of legislation attempting to address inequality in the UK. The rise of ‘municipal feminism’ during the 1980s marked a particular instantiation of gender equality work. Yet at the time the relationship between this phenomena and legislation was not given significant attention. The Equality Acts of 2006 and 2010 have been key milestones for local government gender equality work subsequently, yet little work has considered the detail of their implementation at the ground level by council employees. This article contributes to addressing this gap by examining the influence of legislation on local government gender equality practice at this level, and how this has changed over three decades. It draws on findings from a comparative historical study of three sites within the UK.

## Introduction

Post-feminist narratives – positioning gender equality as achieved, and women in particular as the bearers of opportunity – can suggest the very existence of gender equality legislation means this inequality has been addressed. Thus, it can seem that legislation (such as the Equality Acts) represents the end of a process. In reality, the significance of legislation depends on its implementation. Nor is its permanence guaranteed, indeed, immediately after the 2010 Equality Act was passed, the extent to which it would be brought into force was uncertain, and more recently the 2013 government's Red Tape Challenge placed its status in question. This has also been borne out in other European contexts such as Finland (Holli et al., 2006), and raises the question of the longer historical trajectory of gender equality work within specific institutional contexts. The theorisation of post-feminism (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2004, 2007, 2009), in conjunction with the rise of neoliberalism (Brown, 2003; Thorsen & Lie, 2006; Walkerdine, 2003) and shift towards new public management (Leach & Barnett, 1997; Newman, 2000; Swann & Fox, 2010) are significant contextual developments in thinking through the evolution of local government gender equality work between 1980 and 2010. Councils in the UK must respond to this legislation as public bodies. They have also been important sites for the development and practice of work on gender equality – in terms of internal organisation and working practices, and externally provided projects and services (Lovenduski & Randall, 1993). This article contributes to addressing a gap in the literature by scrutinising the practical enactment of gender equality legislation by

professional workers, at the level of local government, over the trajectory between municipal feminist working of the 1980s, and the present day.

Following the literature review, and presentation of my methodology, I argue for the increasing significance of legislation in shaping local government gender equality work and the standardising influence of the Gender Equality Duty. Alongside this I suggest the distinctions between the three sites evidences the space of interpretation around this, where the knowledge and understanding of individual equalities workers is key to its enactment. I highlight knowledge and understanding of gender equality, and not just related legislation, as a potential vulnerability in the quality and sustainability of this process. Lastly, I discuss the implications this has for the definition and prioritisation of gender and other equalities work in light of the Public Sector Equality Duty. I suggest that this is valuably considered alongside the specific institutional histories of gender equality work in seeking to understand this process.

## Mapping the field

The 1980s saw a notable rise in specific local government initiatives addressing women's rights. This work on gender equality, or ‘municipal feminism’ as it was coined, represented a particular instantiation of feminist activity among others, although it has generally been underplayed in the literature examining this (MacKay, 2008). At the time such work was contested as opposed to universally welcomed – both by other feminists (Coote & Pattullo, 1990; Halford, 1990), and those

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within councils (Button, 1984; Stokes, 1998). Although this phenomena received some academic attention at the time (for example, Brownill & Halford, 1990; Bruegel & Kean, 1995; Button, 1984; Edwards, 1988, 1989, 1995; Goss, 1984; Halford, 1990, 1992; Harriss, 1989), this was largely focused on documenting the establishment, topics and form of work taking place, and discussing its political dynamics and significance. Although certain political figures involved came to public prominence in part through media coverage, such as Valerie Wise in London, the present study focuses specifically on the non-elected council workers involved across the UK. Research at the time was also positioned within broader debates at the time about gender, organisation(s) and the state (Watson, 1991; Witz & Savage, 1991). Historically, the theory and praxis of the relationship between feminism and the state has been a significant and fundamentally ambivalent area. Ranging from a wholesale rejection of the state as a site for productive engagement or action, to more statist or nuanced accounts (Chappell, 2013, Franzway et al., 1989, Kantola, 2006, Randall, 1998, Rowbotham, 1979, Rowbotham, 1996). There has also been a significant body of work examining 'state feminism' where states are seen to act in a quasi-feminist manner (Mazur & Stetson, 1995; McBride & Mazur, 2010), which continues to evolve (for example, Kantola & Squires, 2012). Yet this literature is usually at the level of the nation state rather than federal level, and focusing on the political rather than micro level processes at play within an institution. There has not been much work subsequently that has examined municipal feminism, nor in relation to more recent local government gender equality work. Notable exceptions are Stokes (1998), and Bashevkin (2006) who examined the legacy of municipal feminism in London and Toronto. Thus, the relationship between municipal feminist initiatives and gender equality legislation has not been fully examined. This is significant, particularly as Edwards (1989), and Coote and Pattullo (1990) pointed out, legislation directly supporting their work would have helped to legitimise their sometimes controversial endeavours. Edwards also discussed how pre-existing legislation on equality and employment made work on this particular area easier. Although the literature on municipal feminism touches upon it, there is little specifically considering the role of legislation in driving and shaping the work of municipal feminist initiatives.

Some scholarship has connected the development of women's initiatives to broader changes and legislation on gender equality. This discussion was already taking place during the period in which the initiatives were being established — for example Coyle (1989) and Lovenduski (1989) mention the role that local government played as an innovator in the equality field. Lovenduski and Randall (1993) also suggested the achievements of municipal feminist women's initiatives included legitimising the discussion of the gender dimensions of council policy and practice.

Alongside this, the past decade has seen several significant pieces of legislation specifically addressing gender equality, with particular implications for local government. There has been some research examining these developments (for example, McLaughlin, 2007; Squires, 2009) and related institutions (Lovenduski, 2007), including the 2010 Equality Act and Public Sector Equality Duty (Fredman, 2011, Hand et al., 2012, Squires & Hermanin, 2012) focusing on their legal and theoretical implications, as opposed to their implementation in practice, and considering this within the wider European context, at national level. Little work discusses this in relation to gender and local government however — with Conley and Page (2010), Monro (2006), and Richardson and Monro (2013) notable exceptions. Richardson and Monro's article considers the views of practitioners, but focusing on sexualities rather than gender. These authors raise important questions about its utility and operationalization also discussed earlier by Halford and Leonard (2001), as for example, what an organisation says it does can differ from what it carries out. Relatedly, Callerstig (2014) examined the implementation of gender mainstreaming in public sector organisations in Sweden, providing insights into the central role

different actors play in this process. This article builds on this, making an original contribution through a comparative analysis — over time and between sites — focusing on the role of legislation (including specific duties) at the practical level of UK local government gender equality work.

## Methodology

To examine the significance and enactment of legislation over time, I utilised a mixed qualitative method with a comparative element. I constructed a sample of three sites of local government; categorised as the 'pioneering', 'enthusiastic follower', and 'late adopter' councils, based on the time period in which they first developed their women's initiative. This drew on work by Halford (1990) mapping the occurrence of municipal feminism in the UK. The selection was designed to represent a spread of the national political and organisational conditions of the period for the inception of the initiatives, while maintaining similar urban socio-political conditions across all three. The pioneering council was and remains a Labour-led borough council in London, which formed its women's initiative at the start of the 1980s. The smallest of the sites, its population was and remains ethnically diverse, with high levels of deprivation. The enthusiastic follower council was a Labour and later Liberal Democrat-led city council in the South-West, which formed its women's initiative in the mid-1980s. It is larger, though less ethnically diverse and relatively less deprived than the pioneering council. The late adopter council was and remains Labour-led, a city council in the North, which did not develop its women's initiative until the beginning of the 1990s. It has the largest in terms of population, the least ethnically diverse, with levels of deprivation between those of the other two sites.

In each site I undertook semi-structured interviews (lasting approximately an hour) with six gender equality workers within the council — current (2011) and from the period of the initiatives' inception. The contemporary interviewees were selected following negotiation with gatekeepers, and identification of those with most oversight of gender equality. Using archival records from each site, the names of the initial staff members were identified before being approached to participate. Comparable texts relating to the councils' gender equality work were collected at each site for both periods (including policy texts, reports, job specifications, impact assessments) — following searches in local archives and council records, and insights from interviewees. All texts and interviews were transcribed in full and analysed using NVivo. Utilising texts and interviews enabled the triangulation of sources, as well as facilitating the examination of the way in which ideas about gender equality are articulated through legislation, policy and the actors responsible for this. The historical comparative dimension was valuable as it enabled the examination of the relationship between legislation and gender equality working over time — something which has not usually been the case in research on this topic.

In analysing the data I drew insights from hermeneutic approaches that can encompass both the interpretive, experiential and material (Cerwonka & Malkki, 2007), as well as those focused on discourse (Allan, 2008; Parker, 1992). These are useful in recognising both the constructed and constituting nature of 'talk' about gender equality, and the need to consider this talk in its broader institutional, historical and socio-political context when seeking to understand it. Central concepts for my analysis were Connell's account of gender (2002); which regards it as a multi-dimensional set of relationships structuring social relations, yet with practice central to its production and change. Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo's account of the discursive politics of gender equality (2009) was also a key referent. This recognises the significance of (dynamic) discursive framings of gender equality for policy enactment; the way in which the notion of gender equality can undergo processes of shrinking, fixing, stretching and bending as policy and legislation is created and implemented. These provide a constructive framework through which to consider the changing significance, understandings

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