

For women, the losses are more than financial ^[1]

Editorial

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EXCERPTS

The government can't afford to abandon female voters who, as a new report by various bodies shows, have been particularly badly hit by cuts

David Cameron has been told. A 20-strong coalition of charities, academics, women's groups and unions, led by the campaigning charity the Fawcett Society, has warned the prime minister that the female electorate is facing "the greatest risk to their financial security in living memory".

The Fawcett report, *A Life Raft for Women's Equality*, ^[3] lists the carnage of this "war on women" – a war that is costing the Conservatives dearly as its female support slides away. The number of out-of-work women has reached a 23-year high of 1.07 million, while half of mothers still working full time say they may have to stop or go part time because of a reduction in the childcare subsidy.

In addition, there have been cuts to child benefit; 50% of Sure Start children's centres have closed; a £500 maternity grant for low-income families has been axed and housing benefit has been reduced, "saving" £1.7bn but making almost 3 million women worse off. Women have been particularly badly hit by cuts that affect up to £11bn out of the £16bn sliced from the welfare budget. The consequence of this is plain. Returning more women to the home means fewer women in paid work, lower tax revenues and a higher benefits bill – not what Britain needs.

Research on what helped to ease poverty and improve life chances under the former Labour government shines a light on precisely those areas that are now being hardest hit by the cuts. Britain has a very significant number of people on low pay rates, while 50% of parents work untypical hours (otherwise known as the dawn, graveyard and weekend shifts).

The trade-off for rotten wages, under Labour, were supplements from working families tax credits, subsidised childcare, a minimum wage and a significant investment in early years (now cut by 20%) via Sure Start and children's centres. The Labour inheritance is the current popular offer of 15 hours of free childcare for all three- and four-year-olds.

As these valuable foundations are now desperately weakened by the cuts, there is also anxiety about the replacement of an admittedly complex web of benefits with a single payment, the universal credit, in 2013. The benefit is calculated on family income and may discourage a second part-time earner from taking up paid work – another direct hit on women.

Theresa May, the home secretary and women's and equalities minister, has responded with the announcement that she is setting up a women's business council and recruiting 5,000 mentors to help female entrepreneurs.

In a speech on Friday, she also conceded that 700,000 women who wanted to increase their hours were stuck in part-time jobs, resulting in £21bn a year in lost skills. And she robustly defended parental leave and the need for flexible work. But as she well knows, advisers and empathy make a thin brew. The tide of female discontent with the coalition continues to rise.

Among the measures the Fawcett Society proposes is that the government restores childcare support and protects Sure Start centres.

The Fawcett report is only the latest in a series of warnings to the coalition. The female vote counts. Turning back the clock on women's rights is a foolhardy path for any political party to follow.

Region: Europe ^[4]

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