

Women's urban safety and the structural violence of austerity

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The UK (United Kingdom) government's austerity programme, which addresses the issue of public debt following the 2008 financial crisis through cuts to public and welfare spending, has a disproportionate impact on women's lives.

In this blog, I share findings from my PhD research on the politics of women's safety in Manchester that illustrate the impact of austerity on women's lives. Data was collected for this study via interviews with those who have professional knowledge on what is being done to address women's safety in Manchester, including people working in and with the local authority, and in Manchester's voluntary and community sector. Interviews were conducted between September 2022 and February 2023, and interview data was supplemented with the analysis of documents such as policy papers, news articles, local authority minutes, and reports.

The findings presented in this blog post draw attention to the relationship between austerity policies and women's safety from gender-based violence in urban areas. I argue that the impacts of austerity on public and voluntary sector services that women who are victims/survivors¹ of domestic abuse rely on for their safety in Manchester is a form of structural violence.

Galtung's² theory of structural violence distinguishes between direct, or personal, violence, and indirect, or structural violence. Structural violence can be defined as the "social arrangements that put individuals and populations in harm's way [...] The arrangements are *structural* because they are embedded in the political and economic organization of our social world; they are *violent* because they cause injury to people (typically, not those responsible for perpetuating such inequalities"³. Considering this, in the following I argue

¹ The term 'victim' can be used to refer to someone who is still recovering from domestic abuse, whilst the term 'survivor' can be used to refer to someone who has undergone the recovery process. The term victim/survivor is therefore used here to be representative of those in all stages of recovery from domestic abuse.

² Galtung, J. (1969). Violence, Peace, and Peace Research. *Journal of Peace Research*, 6(3), pp.167-191.

³ Farmer, P.E., Nizeye, B., Stulac, S. and Keshavjee, S. (2006) 'Structural violence and clinical medicine', *PLoS Medicine*, 3(10). doi:10.1371/journal.pmed.0030449. (p.1686, emphasis original)

that austerity's impact on the services women rely on for their safety in Manchester exposes women to further gender-based violence and trauma.

The impact of austerity on women

The Women's Budget Group⁴ calls austerity's impact on women a 'triple whammy'. Cuts to public and welfare spending disproportionately impact women because, (1) women use more public services and are the majority of welfare benefit recipients; (2) women comprise the majority of the public-sector labour force; and (3) women are more likely to fill the gap created by lost services through unpaid care work⁵. Furthermore, gender inequalities intersect with and compound racial inequalities, black and minoritised ethnic women, particularly those with the lowest incomes, are hit the hardest by austerity⁶.

'Gender-based violence' is violence directed at a person because of their gender, or is violence that disproportionately affects people of a particular gender⁷. Domestic abuse is defined by Women's Aid⁸ as "an incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening, degrading and violent behaviour, including sexual violence, in the majority of cases by a partner or ex-partner, but also by a family member or carer." Domestic abuse is recognised as a form of gender-based violence due to the disproportionate impact it has on women. According to Manchester's Domestic Abuse Strategy⁹, over 13,000 domestic abuse incidents were recorded in the city of Manchester in 2020/2021, and 75% of the domestic abuse offences recorded by Greater Manchester Police within this period involved a female victim.

⁴ Women's Budget Group (2019) *Triple whammy: The impact of local government cuts on women*. Available at <https://www.wbg.org.uk/publication/triple-whammy-the-impact-of-local-government-cuts-on-women/> (Accessed: 29/07/24)

⁵ Women's Budget Group (2018) *The Impact of Austerity on Women in the UK*, OHCHR. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Development/IEDebt/WomenAusterity/WBG.pdf> (Accessed: 17 June 2024).

⁶ Women's Budget Group and The Runnymede Trust (2017) *Intersecting Inequalities: The impact of austerity on Black and Minority Ethnic women in the UK*. rep.

⁷ European Commission (no date) *What is gender-based violence?*, European Commission. Available at: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/gender-based-violence/what-gender-based-violence_en (Accessed: 13 June 2024).

⁸ Women's Aid (2023) *What is domestic abuse?*, Women's Aid. Available at: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support/what-is-domestic-abuse/> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).

⁹ Manchester City Council (2021) *Domestic Abuse Strategy*. Manchester: Manchester City Council.

Victims/survivors of domestic abuse rely on support services for their safety. 'General' domestic abuse support services such as social services, health services and social security, are provided by local authorities, while 'specialist' support services are often delivered by organisations in the voluntary and community sector and provide support and assistance specific to the needs of victims/survivors¹⁰. These support services for women have been significantly impacted by austerity.

The impact of austerity on women's safety in Manchester

The impact of austerity has been geographically uneven, with deprived communities in the north of England bearing the brunt of cuts¹¹. Manchester is one of the local authorities with the highest proportion of neighbourhoods amongst the most deprived in England¹². Manchester City Council states that it is one of the hardest hit councils by cuts in Government funding under austerity and has had to make £443 million in savings since 2010¹³.

Cuts to local government budgets under austerity puts public services in a position where demand for services is increasing as the resources available to meet this demand decreases. My examination of the support and services available to victims/survivors in Manchester revealed that the strain austerity has placed on public services results in some women facing difficulties in accessing support for their safety. Interviewees working in Manchester's voluntary and community sector described the use of 'gatekeeping' strategies within public services, such as trying to deter women from engaging with certain processes or playing down women's circumstances, so they do not cross the threshold for domestic violence.

The deprioritisation of women's safety as a way for overwhelmed and under resourced public services to cope with the impact of austerity does not affect all women equally. As

¹⁰ House of Commons Library (2021) *Domestic abuse: Support for victims and survivors*. rep.

¹¹ The Guardian (2019) *Deprived northern regions worst hit by UK austerity, study finds*, *The Guardian*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/jan/28/deprived-northern-regions-worst-hit-by-uk-austerity-study-finds> (Accessed: 17 June 2024).

¹² Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2019) *The English Indices of Deprivation 2019 (IoD2019)*. rep.

¹³ Manchester City Council (2023) *Consultations and surveys budget consultation, Budget consultation*. Available at: https://www.manchester.gov.uk/info/500189/previous_consultations_and_surveys/8647/budget_consultation (Accessed: 17 June 2024).

Irene Gedalof¹⁴ observes, austerity narratives direct attention towards certain stigmatised figures, such as migrants, who have been framed as being a part of the crisis that needs to be solved. The stigma towards migrants engendered by austerity narratives can be understood as legitimising the exclusion of women with no recourse to public funds (NRPF)¹⁵ from access to support for their safety as a way for public services to reduce demand and preserve constrained budgets. An interviewee emphasised that the barriers to support women with NRPF face increases the risk that they will stay in dangerous situations, experience homelessness and destitution if they do choose to leave, and/or that they will return to a dangerous situation because no support is available.

In an interview with an employee in the voluntary and community sector, they described the negative experiences women have when trying to access support from public services as “repeat trauma”. These re-traumatising experiences creates concern that the impact of austerity on public services could deter women from seeking support when they are unsafe, thereby exposing them to further risks to their safety. The impact of austerity on public services makes services in the voluntary and community sector a critical source of support for victims/survivors of domestic abuse.

Manchester’s women’s sector is well-established and has a strong record of addressing gender-based violence and supporting women facing multiple disadvantage¹⁶. However, my findings highlight some of the challenges that austerity has created for voluntary and community sector organisations supporting women’s safety in Manchester. Organisations in the voluntary and community sector have worked to bridge the gap created by austerity cuts to welfare budgets and public services, but at the same time face increased competition for smaller pots of funding managed by local authorities who are under pressure to cut costs¹⁷. The Women’s Budget Group¹⁸ reports that between 2010/11 and 2015/16 £802 million was cut from the voluntary and community sector by local government. The impact of austerity on the voluntary and community sector also has gendered impacts. Many services dealing with

¹⁴ Gedalof, I. (2020) *The aftermath of austerity narratives, feminist review*. Available at:

<https://femrev.wordpress.com/2020/04/20/the-aftermath-of-austerity-narratives/> (Accessed: 01 July 2024).

¹⁵ No recourse to public funds (NRPF) is a condition imposed on people who are subject to immigration control meaning they will be unable to claim state benefits.

¹⁶ AVA and Agenda (2021) *Tackling women’s multiple disadvantage in Greater Manchester*. rep.

¹⁷ Dagdeviren, H., Donoghue, M. and Wearmouth, A. (2018) ‘When rhetoric does not translate to reality: Hardship, empowerment and the third sector in austerity localism’, *The Sociological Review*, 67(1), pp. 143–160. doi:10.1177/0038026118807631.

¹⁸ Women’s Budget Group (2019) *Triple whammy: The impact of local government cuts on women*. Available at <https://www.wbg.org.uk/publication/triple-whammy-the-impact-of-local-government-cuts-on-women/> (Accessed: 29/07/24)

violence against women and girls are dependent on local government funding. As one example, between 2010 and 2017, more than 75% of England's local authorities cut their spending on domestic violence refuges¹⁹.

Austerity as structural violence against women

The impact of austerity on the services which support women's safety in urban areas adds a layer of trauma to women's experiences of gender-based violence that is not adequately addressed within policy. A disconnect between the issue of gender-based violence and economic policy choices obscures the decreasing support available to low-income and marginalised women for their safety, which I argue is a form of structural violence.

The violence built into the systems women rely on for their safety in Manchester came through strongly during the interviews, with one interviewee working in the voluntary and community sector describing how women are "being abused by the systems", and another interviewee working in the voluntary and community sector sharing how "having to work within a system that I think is inherently quite violent [...] makes it really difficult to strive to make genuine long-lasting change on safety".

My findings demonstrate that understandings of women's safety in urban areas must include the structural violence of political economic processes, such as austerity, which disproportionately impact lower-income and marginalised women. At present, there is a gap between gender-based violence policy and practice, which necessitates a recognition of the erosion of resources available to support women's safety at the local level in a context of austerity and intersecting crises. Prioritising women's safety therefore also requires a consideration of alternative economic policy solutions.

¹⁹ Women's Budget Group (2019) *Triple whammy: The impact of local government cuts on women*. Available at <https://www.wbg.org.uk/publication/triple-whammy-the-impact-of-local-government-cuts-on-women/> (Accessed: 29/07/24).