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Feminist politics and gender equality in Britain

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Abstract
According to some indicators, Britain has become a more gender-equal society over the past two decades. And yet, as we argue in this article, these gains are undermined by persistent gendered inequalities and violence. Progress has been made principally in relation to what we might think of as liberal feminist demands—especially access to power. Yet even this progress is undermined by persistent and pervasive gendered violence and inequality—all of which takes place against the backdrop of the 2008 financial crash, the departure of the UK from the European Union, as well as the global COVID-19 pandemic. We recognise and welcome the presence of active and vibrant feminist groups and organisations in Britain who have campaigned creatively on a range of issues. Nonetheless, there remains much to do to advance feminist interests and to achieve gender equality for all women in British politics.

Keywords Women · Feminism · British politics · Austerity · Violence · Representation

Introduction

In March 2024, it was revealed that Frank Hester, the Conservative party's largest donor, had said that looking at MP Diane Abbott 'makes you want to hate all Black women' and that she 'should be shot' (*Guardian* 11.3.2024). A few years earlier, a Conservative councillor was suspended during the 2017 General Election for sharing a Tweet that portrayed Abbott as an ape wearing lipstick (Palmer 2020). Many both within and without Labour derided Abbott's bid to become the party's leader during the 2010 leadership race: 'she is abrasive, evasive and hectoring' and 'many of her colleagues, left or right, dislike her on both a personal and political

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level' (Labour List 30.7. 2010). And of course, the first couple of weeks of the 2024 General Election campaign were dominated by discussions over whether Abbott would even be allowed to stand as a candidate, despite being selected by her local party and having the whip returned to her following an arguably lengthy internal investigation into her views on racism and antisemitism. Perhaps unsurprisingly, research has found that Diane Abbott, the first elected Black woman MP, receives more abuse than any other MP (Amnesty International 2017). In many ways, the sexist and racist abuse of Diane Abbott illustrates the limited impact feminism has had on British politics. Her treatment should, we argue, not be read in isolation but rather understood as part of a wider permissive culture in which gendered and racist violence and inequalities circulate, hampering the advancement of gender equality.

According to some indicators, Britain has become a more gender-equal society over the past two decades, and yet, as we discuss in this article, these gains are undermined by persistent gendered inequalities, not least pervasive misogynistic and sexist violence. Our analysis reveals that whilst progress has been made, this is principally in relation to what we might think of as liberal feminist demands—notably those related to access to power—however even these are undermined by the gendered violence experienced by those women who occupy and aspire to occupy, positions of power (Collignon and Rüdig 2021). To be sure, there are active and vibrant feminist groups and organisations in Britain who have campaigned creatively on a range of issues, some of which we explore below; however, it is our contention that there is still much to do to advance feminist interests in British politics.

A recent study revealed that 43% of the public think feminism has done more good than harm, concomitantly 43% also believe that feminism has had some negative impact, these perceptions were notably higher amongst young men (King's Global Institute for Women's Leadership 2024). These findings come at a time in which teachers report a noticeable rise in school sexism (BBC 2024), with the insidious influence of online misogyny exacerbating and increasing forms of gendered violence and extremism in the UK (Bengtsson Meuller 2024). Meanwhile, and to identify just a few examples of gendered inequalities, data reveal that 1 in 5 women experience sex discrimination (UK Parliament 2023); maternal mortality rates are 4 times higher for Black women than for White women; and 1 in 2 disabled women experience domestic violence (Women's Budget Group 2018a, b). At the same time, the share of people who fear speaking out about gendered inequality for fear of reprisals increased fivefold over a 5 year period (King's Global Institute for Women's Leadership 2023). Thus, despite the UK moving up to 15th place in the latest World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index (2023), the reality is that the UK is mired by persistent and pervasive gendered inequalities.

This paper offers a review of the impact feminism has had on British politics over the past two decades. There are many issues we could focus on to explore this impact, however, we have chosen three key areas which we use to structure this paper: (1) women in public life—to what extent do women occupy positions of power? (2) Women and the economy—what role do structural and material inequalities play in women's everyday lives? (3) Violence against women—what are the levels and forms of gendered abuse experienced by women? These three areas also reflect the broad priorities of key strands of British feminism: liberal feminist

interest in institutional reform (Evans 2015); socialist feminist focus on economic and class-based inequalities (Mankki and Aho 2020); and the radical feminist emphasis on violence against women (Mackay 2015). Of course, we recognise the multiplicity of feminisms in Britain, including Black and Queer feminists, as well as the wider range of areas we could have focussed on, however, these three broad areas enable us to explore issues which are of interest to feminists from across the ideological spectrum. Importantly, our analysis is underpinned by Black feminist work on intersectionality, which highlights the overlapping ways in which structural oppressions intersect (Crenshaw 1991; Collins and Bilge 2020). In other words, any feminist gains which only benefit certain groups of women should not be understood as meaningful feminist gains.

Women in public life

Feminist scholars have long argued that women lack political representation: both in terms of the number of women politicians as well as the extent to which attention is paid to issues and interests that are of concern to women (Lovenduski 2005). Feminist theorists have also explored and identified the links between these two forms of under-representation; for instance, Anne Phillips has argued for the 'politics of presence' (1995) on the grounds that having more women politicians is not only important as a matter of justice and equality, but also because their presence has the potential to bring about positive legislative changes for women, as they are more likely to be aware of and interested in pursuing issues and interests that women care about. Moreover, women politicians destabilise the default image of a politician as male, whilst their presence can encourage other women to put themselves forward for elected office. Beyond academia, several women's civil society organisations campaign to increase the number of women politicians and to raise the profile of women's policy interests: these include well-established equal rights groups, such as The Fawcett Society, the UK's leading organisation for women's rights founded 1866, as well as newer organisations, such as Glitch, a charity with a focus on intersectionality that was established in 2017 to tackle online abuse. In 2007 a new organisation dedicated to increasing women's representation was launched, 50:50 Parliament, meanwhile the issue was one of the key motivators for the 2014 founding of the UK Women's Equality Party (Evans and Kenny 2020). In other words, women's representation is an issue which concerns feminists and women's civil society organisations.

The data in Table 1 above illustrate that there has been significant progress over the past two decades. The overall number and percentage of women and minority ethnic women MPs has steadily increased. Indeed, women currently constitute the majority of Labour MPs, whilst minority ethnic women Labour MPs outnumber minority ethnic men 29 to 12. Turning to the devolved administrations, there has been progress in Scotland where women make up 46% of all Members of the Scottish Parliament (up from 33% in 2007—although there are currently only 2 minority ethnic women MSPs). Meanwhile in Wales, women make up 43% of the Welsh Senedd (down from 50% in 2003)—with the first minority ethnic women

Table 1 Number of women MPs by party, parliament and ethnicity 2005–2019*

	2005	2010	2015	2017	2019
Conservative women MPs	17	49	68	67	87
% of parliamentary party	8.5%	16.0%	20.5%	21%	23.8%
Minority ethnic women MPs	–	2	5	6	6
% of parliamentary party	–	0.6%	1.5%	1.8%	1.6%
Labour women MPs	98	81	99	119	104
% of parliamentary party	27.6%	31.3%	42.6%	45.4%	51.2%
Minority ethnic women MPs	3	7	14	19	29
% of parliamentary party	0.8%	2.7%	6.0%	7.2%	14.2%
Lib Dem women MPs	10	7	–	4	7
% of parliamentary party	16.1%	12.2%	–	33.3%	63.6
Minority ethnic women MPs	–	–	–	1	2
% of parliamentary party	–	–	–	8.3%	18.1%
SNP women MPs	–	1	20	12	16
% of parliamentary party	–	16.6%	35.7%	34.2%	33.3%
Minority ethnic women	–	–	1	–	–
% of parliamentary party			1.7%	–	–
Other women MPs	3	5	4	6	6
Minority ethnic women	–	–	–	–	–
Total women MPs	128	143	191	208	220
Total minority ethnic women MPs	3	9	20	208	220
% of women MPs who are minority ethnic	2.3%	6.2%	10.4%	12.5%	16.8%
% of all MPs	**19.8%**	**22.0%**	**29.4%**	**32.0%**	**33.8%**

*Excludes those elected at by-elections. Data compiled using a variety of sources, including the UK Parliamentary data. The term 'minority ethnic' is that used by the UK parliament

elected in 2021 (Cymru 2021). Women make up 52% of the London Assembly and around 41%, 35% and 28% of local councillors in England, Scotland and Wales, respectively.

Beyond the aggregate data, we can see from Table 1 that there is a persistent asymmetry between the parties when it comes to women's representation, with the Conservatives consistently lagging both in the overall number and percentage of women and minority ethnic women. That Labour are so far ahead when it comes to the number of women politicians reflects their use (on and off) of all women shortlists over the past two decades. Furthermore, the party has in recent years paid greater attention to the representation of racialised minorities which has positively benefited minority ethnic women (Krook and Nugent 2016). Despite several reports and public debates about the use of gender quotas, to date the Conservatives have refused to adopt any form of gender quota, although Cameron's modernising reforms of the party, including the use of open primaries for selection, did result in a more diverse Parliamentary party (Childs and Webb 2011). Despite initial opposition from both the SNP and Liberal Democrats they have now adopted all women

shortlists to increase the number of women MPs. Although, the topic of women's representation has certainly increased in prominence over the past 20 years, it is also the case that women seeking to put themselves forward as election candidates, especially racialised minority women (Begum and Sobolewska 2024) and disabled women (Evans and Reher 2023), continue to face discrimination both within and without their parties which creates additional barriers to elected office.

Notwithstanding, lagging in overall numbers of women and minority ethnic women MPs, there have been two Conservative female Prime Ministers, we now have our first female Chancellor in Rachel Reeves, as well as minority ethnic women serving as Home Secretary, Attorney General and Secretary of State for Business and Trade. At the devolved level, former First Minister Nicola Sturgeon led Scottish politics for close to a decade at the helm of a dominant Scottish National Party. Logically, from a liberal feminist perspective, having these women serve at the highest possible level is a feminist win; however, it is also clear from their records in office that presenting their presence as a feminist gain is far from straightforward. Whilst former Prime Minister Theresa May, a politician who openly identifies as a feminist, emphasises her work on domestic violence and is described by some as a 'feminist champion' (e.g. Gill 2019), her critics point to the fact that as Home Secretary she did little to tackle the sexual abuse suffered by immigrant women who were indefinitely detained at Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre (e.g. Walker 2016). Furthermore, despite the number of women serving at the highest levels of state, research continues to show the sexist and misogynistic ways in which women politicians are represented in the media: women politicians are hyper-visible and there is a significant focus on their appearance and personal lives which serves to undermine their legitimacy and credibility (Mavin et al. 2019).

Whilst the numbers of women MPs may have risen, so too have the levels of reported abuse faced by women politicians (Collignon and Rudig 2021); indeed, women MPs receive 'elaborate and emotional online attacks' which call into question their credibility and accomplishments (Esposito and Breeze 2022). Women MPs themselves have on several occasions debated the intense levels of gendered and misogynistic abuse that they receive, fearing that such hostility and violence will deter women from putting themselves forward for elected office (see Hansard 21.2.2019; 29.2.2024). Thus, whilst the overall number of women MPs has increased, the conditions under which women politicians serve complicates the argument that there has been straightforward progress when it comes to the presence of women in public life. The pervasive nature of gendered violence is an issue to which we return, for now we turn to women and the economy and consider what, if any, progress has been made.

Women and the economy

There are three key moments which have shaped the economic lives and movements of women and feminists across Britain over the past two decades: the 2008 financial crash and the onset (or resurgence) of austerity politics; the 2016 referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union and the emergence of the global

Covid-19 pandemic. Each invites reflection on how key structural changes and events in the British and global economies have shaped and continue to shape the experiences of women—as well as how women and feminists have responded and continue to respond to them as agents of social critique and change (Bassel and Emejulu 2014). We use these three moments as entry points into a discussion about the evolving relationships amongst women, feminism and the economy. However, we note that these crises are not the genesis of women's material and political inequities in Britain. For many working class, disabled and racially minoritised women, the effects of austerity simply meant a deepening of existing hardships stemming from structural inequities (Bhattacharyya 2015). Reflecting on three major economic events in Britain over the last 20 years thus serves to help us understand the persistence of structural and material inequalities and how they are configured and through the (intersecting) axes of 'race', class, gender and disability. These material inequities have persisted both *because* of and *despite* women's and feminist organising in Britain; indeed, both neoliberal and socialist feminisms have, amongst others, intervened in public discourse, particularly in response to austerity.

To return to 2007/8, Britain was starting to experience the sharp ends of a global economic crisis. In the wake of the crisis, the Conservative-led coalition government introduced billions of pounds worth of cuts to public services and spending. In 2010, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne announced £83bn cuts to public spending. In his Emergency Budget speech, he declared that in implementing austerity, 'we really are all in this together'. However, research from feminist organisations showed that the harmful impacts of austerity were not equally distributed across British society, with organisations such as the Women's Budget Group calling for austerity to be understood as a *form of gender-based violence* (2022). Austerity's impacts remain present and important today (Hall 2022). Since working women generally earn less than men in Britain and take on more caring responsibilities, they are disproportionately reliant on the state for welfare and services and have felt the cuts to public funding profoundly.

Overall, minoritised groups in Britain have borne the brunt of austerity policies, with the poorest Black and Asian women in Britain experiencing the greatest negative impacts of all groups (Women's Budget Group 2017). Meanwhile, research showed that disabled women and other marginalised women were often forced to rely on sex work because of the austerity agenda (Ryan 2020). This dovetails with the findings that cuts to public spending and services disproportionately disadvantage disabled women, lone parents, women doing insecure or unpaid work and women in private rented accommodation (Women's Budget Group 2018a, b). These material impacts also expose women to intimate violence and restrict their capacity to escape these dangerous settings (often a matter of life and death).

In response to the harrowing inequities deepened and entrenched by public spending cuts, austerity became a focal point of resistance for many women and feminist campaigners and politicians. This moment, and the resistance to it, is particularly important considering the ways in which the figure of the poor woman came to be demonised in public discourse and government policy at the height of austerity (Evans 2016, p. 439). Whilst organisations like the Fawcett Society, Sisters Uncut and the Focus E15 Mothers (unsuccessfully) campaigned against austerity,

there are policies, practices and discourses which vilify poor women that have also been supported and bolstered by neoliberal articulations of feminism (Dabrowski 2021, p. 91). The impacts and discourses of austerity are thus not just failures of feminism to achieve their goals; they are actually *part of the project* of some individuals and organisations that call themselves feminists (Dabrowski 2021). In other words, the tensions in goals and approaches of *different types of feminists* in Britain should not be underestimated (Butler 2024).

Britain experienced yet more political and economic turbulence in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum and the UK's eventual departure from the European Union. Research indicates political rollback around policy and legislation which protects and guarantees the rights of working women in Britain—a direct result of the shifts towards a more 'masculinised', 'top-down' and 'adversarial' style of policymaking and governance which emerged from the Brexit process, particularly in Westminster (Sanders and Flavell 2023). Moreover, interest groups, including feminist and women's groups, have been losing access to important policy processes in Westminster since Brexit (Richardson and Rittberger 2020). These retrogressions make it even more challenging for feminist organisations to contribute to and intervene in policy processes that protect women's economic interests, with scholars predicting that as a direct result of Brexit, 'the rights that women stand to lose will predominantly be class-based, covering maternity and employment rights' (Sanders and Flavell 2023, p. 2316).

Whilst policymaking processes remain less adversarial and more 'women-friendly' in Holyrood and the Senedd, feminist organisations like the Fawcett Society and the Women's Budget Group (2018a, b) have predicted and warned repeatedly of the harsh economic impacts of Brexit on women across all of Britain. The Scottish Government has also published research indicating several potential impacts of Brexit on women (Scottish Government 2020a, b). But the full scale of the economic (and other) impacts of Brexit, like—and in tandem with—the COVID-19 pandemic, are yet to be fully seen.

From late 2019/early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic brought on yet more shock for Britain. Once again, the British public were told that 'we are all in this together' (HL Deb 4 November 2020). But the pandemic exposed women to disproportionate risk of unemployment and loss of income compared to men (PWC 2021). And as a direct result of the pandemic, women have been unevenly affected by worsening working conditions whilst oftentimes taking on up to 40 extra hours of unpaid domestic labour in their homes per week (WHO 2021). In this dire situation, almost half (46%) of mothers who were made redundant because of the pandemic reported that childcare was the cause (House of Lords 2021). Challenging the gendered manifestations of the self-employed income support scheme (SEISS), women's charity Pregnant Then Screwed took the UK Government to the Court of Appeal to submit that SEISS indirectly discriminated against new mothers. Whilst the Court agreed with the submission, they 'maintained that the urgency with which hard-pressed civil servants acted at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic justified the discrimination'—a win in letter, but not in practice.

It is also important to understand the simultaneous unfolding of this pandemic in the context of rising global attention towards the Black Lives Matter movement

as a response to the killing of George Floyd in May 2020 by a police officer in Minnesota, Minneapolis. In the British context, the simultaneously gendered and racialised economic inequities of the pandemic's harsh impacts were put into stark relief: between 2019 and 2020, the number of ethnic minority women in paid employment fell by 17% compared to 1% for White women (House of Lords 2021). In post/pandemic Britain, then, any legislative gains that may have been made by feminists before 2020 meant little materially. It is in this context—and the twin epidemics of structural racism and violence against women—that we witnessed women and ethnic minorities protesting on the streets of Britain, even in the midst of pandemic lockdowns.

In and amongst these moments and continuities of economic shock over the last two decades, women and feminists have been organising and theorising to resist the kinds of harms and inequalities faced by women in Britain. Following Gender Pay Gap campaigns from various organisations, such as Women in Advertising and Communications, Leadership (WACL) and the Fawcett Society, new regulations were introduced in 2017 to require annual reporting from some organisations with 250 + employees on their own institutional gender pay gaps. Such regulations build on the Equality Act 2010 which protect 'equal pay for equal work' (Acas 2024), alongside the earlier Equal Pay Act 1970, which was the first piece of UK legislation enforcing equal pay along the lines of gender. We can consider this a legislative gain for feminists—who have struggled to make significant policy gains within masculinised models of governance and policymaking (Annesley and Gains 2013). But the extent to which feminists and women have really been able to make any material gains, even when legislation is passed, remains to be questioned. We know, for example, that the gender pay gap has not improved in five years of reporting between 2017 and 2023 (CIPD 2024).

Many feminist organisations and advocates have thus painted a stark picture for women's experiences of a sagging economy in Britain which benefits a small elite. As such, many grassroots feminist organisations (often led by ethnically minoritised women) practice and advocate for less policy-centric approaches to their work (such as Sisters Uncut, Southall Black Sisters, the Triple Cripples and Latin American Women's Aid). As we have seen, at the sharpest end of ongoing crises are women who are disabled, ethnically minoritised and/or carers. These material impacts cannot be disentangled from the very real ways in which women have been daily exposed to disproportionate levels of violence in Britain over the past two decades.

Violence against women and girls

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) encapsulate multiple forms of violence, including physical, psychological and economic. Because VAWG is based on someone's societal status, intersecting with other structures of power, such as 'race', class and disability (Strid et al. 2013: p. 561; Thiara 2011), it also includes epistemic and symbolic forms of violence (Frazer & Hutchings 2020: pp. 200–201). As a policy framework, VAWG tends to refer to femicide, rape, sexual abuse, domestic violence (which can include other forms of VAWG), honour-based violence,

female genital mutilation (FGM), coercive control and, more recently, online abuse (Hearn et al 2016; Lewis et. al. 2017). Measuring the impact of feminist struggles to eliminate VAWG over the past two decades is difficult, not least because of the often-unquantifiable manifestations of everyday violence. A strict focus on official 'criminal' categorisations of violence, such as domestic abuse, risks demarking the private and public and "obscuring dynamic, fluid interactions between" relations of power (Hearn et. al. 2016: p. 553). Accordingly, we review four areas: available data on levels of VAWG; feminist campaigns; Government responses; and wider social attitudes.

There is limited reliable data on the different forms of VAWG across the nations of Great Britain. Indeed, the lack of coordinated data sourcing affects our understanding of variations that occur regionally and locally (Schmid et. al., 2024: 5, 7). Moreover, different definitions of similar forms of violence can make comparisons difficult; for example, in Scotland domestic abuse data only includes violence between partners or ex-partners, whilst in England and Wales the data also includes violence between family members of 16 years and above. Children can be victims of domestic abuse in England and Wales, but they are not included in the data in Scotland. These definitional differences shape both our understanding of what domestic abuse is, as well as the number of victims. Meanwhile, feminist scholars have critiqued the reformed Domestic Abuse Acts (both Scotland and the UK wide) due to the reformulation of domestic violence as domestic abuse, for example Aldrige (2021) argues that the change in wording absents 'gender' from domestic violence. This de-gendering affects how we can mobilise resources to address the issue of domestic violence. Indeed, the Online Safety Act was, in the first instance, de-gendered by excluding the extensive issue of misogynistic abuse online.

With those caveats regarding data in mind, statistics produced by the official Crime Survey for England and Wales, reports an estimated 1.6 million women (between 16 and 74 years of age) who have experienced domestic abuse. This is 7% of the female population of England and Wales (ONS 2020). Although this percentage is high, there has been a small decrease over the last two decades in England and Wales, a pattern that is also evident in Scotland (Scottish Government 2024: p. 2). If we take a further look at the last decade and include other forms of VAWG, such as sexual assault and stalking, we cannot see any significant difference in the number of cases in England and Wales. There is no consistent downward trajectory in England and Wales for sexual assault, and cases of stalking have remained pretty much the same (ONS 2021).

In Scotland the picture is mixed: there is a slight increase in serious sexual assault since 2008 (Scottish Government 2021: p. 21) and a decrease in the proportion of partner abuse from 4.2% to 3.2%. Of course, official statistics on sexual abuse and domestic violence only illustrate a minority of actual instances: the Scottish government estimates that only 16% of domestic abuse cases are reported (2024: p. 5) and that only 22% of serious sexual assault cases are reported (Scottish Government 2021: p. 21).

Feminist activism has motivated many of the legislative changes on VAWG over the last two decades, whilst the #MeToo movement has increased societal

awareness of sexual violence. Although there are debates within British feminism regarding the problems of working with and within the criminal justice system—given the racism and misogyny that has been identified as endemic within many key institutions (Olufemi 2020)—feminist activists seeking to reform legislation and enact criminalisation of VAWG have experienced significant success. Feminist campaigning has been crucial to the enactment of 'upskirting' and 'intimate image abuse' crimes (Bottomley & Bruckmayer 2023) and for the recognition of how online abuse specifically affects and targets women in the Online Safety Act (Glitch, n.d). The vigils arranged by #ReclaimTheseStreets after a policeman's murder of Sarah Everard in March 2021 (Lowerson 2022), and discussions surrounding the racism of the police and media in the handling of the murders of Black women Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman in May 2020, re-energised feminist organisations, such as Southhall Black Sisters, Latin American Women's Rights Service and End Violence Against Women and Girls (Kilby 2024).

Despite the introduction of policies which have been designed to be more intersectional, research has found that some, such as domestic abuse policies in Scotland, have mostly been surface level (Christoffersen and McCabe 2024). Indeed, Strid et al. (2013) state that the implementation of intersectionality in the UK VAWG policies is not evenly applied; intersectionality was least implemented in policies on sexual violence and more extensively implemented in those policies targeting forced marriage. The difference was judged according to the visibility and voice of victim-survivors and may reflect the extent to which some forms of violence are imagined as culturally 'external' to British society, e.g. forced marriage and FGM (Hearn et. al. 2016: p. 561). Despite attempts to make VAWG policies more intersectional, reported cases of sexual violence suggest that victim-survivors who seek a criminal justice response are disproportionately White cis-heterosexual women (Walker et. al. 2019).

In the UK's Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy, they report that since 2010 there have been a range of criminalising measures enforced and enacted for perpetrators of VAWG. For example, they have increased the maximum penalties for harassment and stalking and introduced new offences for controlling and coercive behaviour, intimate-image abuse ('revenge porn') and 'upskirting' (UK Home Office 2021). The UK's current strategy is informed by two phases of calls for evidence: phase 1 was between 10 December 2020 and 19 February 2021 and phase 2 was between 12 March 2021 and 26 March 2021, 28 as a result of the rape and murder of Sarah Everard. The context of this strategy should thus be seen in regard to visible institutional sexist and racist violence which further arose from the murders of Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman and the subsequent sexist and racist mishandling by the police of their deaths (Farmer 2022). This strategy is also informed by challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns, particularly the increase in domestic violence cases (BBC News 2021).

The measures emphasised in this strategy include more policing of VAWG, increasing the number of reports on VAWG to the police and increasing the conviction rates, however, to do this they also state that they need to implement measures that will increase public support for the (policing) system. Scotland's nation-specific strategy for preventing and eliminating violence against women

and girls, 'Equally Safe' (Scottish Government 2023), echoes similar priorities. The strategy aims to improve public safety and strengthen the law to better protect victims and hold perpetrators accountable. Some emphasis on misogyny as intrinsic in our culture is mentioned in the Scottish and UK strategies, but it is more pronouncedly mentioned by Jane Hutt MS, Minister for Social Justice in Wales, in the Welsh strategy 'Violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence strategy' (2022–2026): '…we must change the culture of misogyny and harassment that feeds the abuse' (Welsh Government 2022). The UK-wide legislation has been enacted, including the Forced Marriage Act 2007 and the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, meanwhile there have been several criminal offences enacted at the devolved level, including the Violence Against Women Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015 and Abusive Behaviour and Sexual Harm (Scotland) Act 2016. The Online Safety Act 2023 included stalking and harassment whilst Controlling and Coercive Behaviour (CCB) was identified as a crime.

Despite Government strategies stating that there will be increased funding for tackling VAWG, reports have emphasised how support for victims is decreasing, leaving survivors on waiting lists for women's refuges and sexual- and domestic violence services whilst demand continues to rise (Livingston 2023). Funding crises, because of austerity, have forced many local councils to cut their budgets in this area (Dhami 2024). The lack of funds to tackle VAWG is deeply troubling, particularly, as the current 'cost-of-living' crisis makes it even harder for women to leave an abusive partner whom they might depend on financially (Murray 2024). Therefore, whilst (some) feminists welcome the passage of new legislation, prosecutions against an abuser can only happen if the survivor has a safe place to live in the process. In other words, if VAWG strategies are not met with sufficient resources, then they end up being virtue signalling.

Finally, it is worth examining social attitudes towards VAWG to evaluate progress. In Scotland, they have distributed a social attitudes survey that includes questions on VAWG since 2014. In the latest from 2019, they show that a significant majority believes that a man raping a stranger is 'very seriously wrong' (91%) and that there has been an increase in people believing that a man raping his wife is 'very seriously wrong' (from 74% in 2014 to 84% in 2019) (Scottish Government 2020a, b). However, this number decreases depending on whether the respondent thought the woman's behaviour up until the sexual abuse was 'innocent'—for instance, if they thought the woman had taken the man into the bedroom and kissed him beforehand, the number fell to 67% if the man was a 'stranger' and to 55% if it happened in a marriage (though these numbers are an improvement on the previous survey). Two common rape myths that women lie about rape and that men rape because they cannot control their sexual urges, declined from 23 to 8% and 37% to 28%, respectively. Hence, we have seen a significant change in Scottish social attitudes towards VAWG that could be as a result of more high-profile feminist activism in this area over the past decade.

A 2018 survey conducted by YouGov found that 33% of respondents thought that sex which happened without consent, but where there was no physical violence, wasn't 'really rape' (End Violence Against Women Coalition 2018: p. 3). Whilst this is a jarring number, there are indications that the younger generations are

adopting a more progressive, and knowledgeable, understanding of what constitutes sexual abuse. Older people (particularly 65+) tended to have a higher percentage of participants believing that non-consensual sex cannot happen in long-term relationships (35%) in comparison to younger people in the age bracket of 16–24 where only 16% believed so. However, despite changing attitudes especially amongst younger women, their views on consent might not be shared by those serving on juries in sexual assault and rape trials (ibid). Overall, the data from the YouGov survey suggest that the younger generation is more aware of forms of VAWG although there are notable gendered gaps here with young women being more knowledgeable and concerned about VAWG than young men. Our analysis of VAWG in Britain over the past two decades shows that there is still a long way to go to improve the situation for women and girls. New forms, or ways to conduct VAWG, have gained ground to extend VAWG further, particularly forms of technology-facilitated violence (Dragiewicz et. al. 2018). Although, feminist groups have been able to raise awareness and prompt legislative responses to the issue and there is an increased awareness of what constitutes domestic violence and sexual assault, particularly amongst the younger generations. However, the pervasive nature of VAWG highlights the scale of the challenge facing feminists in the UK over the next two decades.

Conclusion

The question of whether Britain has become a more gender-equal society over the past two decades reveals a story with a few distinct trajectories: If we look at the number of women occupying positions of power, we can see an increase in representational politics. However, in exploring the impact feminism has had on British politics over the past 20 years, our analysis of women and the economy and VAWG reveals a decidedly less gender-equal society. Certainly, progress has been made but only in relation to what we might think of as liberal feminist demands. Yet, even there, as we saw with the daily abuse that MPs such as Diane Abbott are faced with, these representational gains are undermined by threats and actual articulations of violence. Furthermore, our aim has been to provide an intersectional feminist analysis that moves beyond the understanding of feminist gain as that of the 'universal woman'—thus we have sought to emphasise that any gains which only benefit certain groups of women whilst leaving others, such as migrant women or disabled women, to occupy marginalised positions should not be considered as meaningful feminist gains. We recall the words of Audre Lorde, here, who once wrote that 'I am not free whilst any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own. And I am not free as long as on Color remains chained. Nor is any of you' (1997, p. 285).

Whilst current antifeminist and anti-gender political forces try to stall the feminist movement (Hemmings & Madhok 2024), we believe that the feminist movement can be a crucial force in tackling intersecting inequalities if it allows the centring of marginalised voices and issues. Indeed, as we have illustrated in this paper, feminism plays an influential role in (some) political decisions. British

feminism itself has, of course, always contained within it multiple strands, different ideological histories and movement traditions. Over the past 20 years feminism in Britain has continued to flourish with older groups, such as the Fawcett Society joined by newer groups, some borne out of necessity, such as the Women's Budget Group, and others dedicated to specific groups of marginalised women, such as the disabled women's collective Sisters of Frida. There have been and continued to be many challenges and priorities facing the feminist movement—three of which we have examined in this article. The extent to which the feminist movement can help transform Britain for the better in part relies on their ability to access those with the levers of power as well as to influence wider societal attitudes and norms. Moreover, an increasingly intersectional feminist movement must focus on those who are multiply marginalised, in which previous solutions to existing problems may need to be rethought.

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