

Accommodating Austerity

How women fill the gaps left by the state



A near-decade of austerity

Austerity is commonly seen as starting in 2010. This is when the Conservative-led coalition government decided to reduce the national debt and deficit by decreasing government spending.

2010

While 'austerity' entered the popular vocabulary only nine years ago, it is part of a longer-term growth and reform agenda with impact on many areas of the welfare state.

2019

The effects of austerity measures

Dramatic spending cuts

There have been dramatic cuts to public services. Many benefits have been capped or reduced. Wage increases for many public sector workers have been held below inflation so that the real value of earnings has declined.



Women replacing welfare

Research also suggests that women are accommodating the spending cuts by modifying their actions and behaviours to reduce the impact of austerity on their families, communities and workplaces.

This may include:

A

going without food or basic necessities to provide for their children and partners



B

volunteering to help with local efforts by establishing food and baby banks, running community libraries or fundraising for schools

C

thinking about early retirement or voluntary reductions in hours to minimise the risk of colleagues being made redundant



Disproportionately larger effect on women

Overwhelming evidence shows that women have been hit twice as hard as men, and that women from black and minority ethnic backgrounds are particularly disadvantaged. White women and those from minority ethnic groups tend to be more reliant on the state whether through benefits, tax credits or public sector employment.

Unmasking how austerity impacts women

To address the disproportionate impacts of austerity on women, it is necessary to recognise the gendered impacts of changes to welfare support and cuts to services and public sector jobs.

We also need to acknowledge how austerity increases reliance upon women's unpaid labour and the knock on effects of women's unacknowledged work in keeping society functioning.

What austerity means for women

1
Redundancy brought about by cuts in public spending

2
Reduced real value of earnings owing to the pay freeze in the public sector (where women were over-represented)

3
Disincentives to work as a result of changes to in-work welfare support (e.g. the move from individual to household income based calculations)

4
Increased reliance on a partner's income as a result of time and skills related underemployment and changes to welfare support

5
Expectations to compensate for the gaps in public services that arise from reduced state investment in social programmes

Women's daily and future lives are affected owing to:

Lack of sufficient resources to meet their basic health, food and social needs

Physical and emotional depletion resulting from excessive family demands and/or community requirements

From 2006 to 2019: Women counted on, but still not counted



The Equality Act of 2006 imposed a legal duty to consider the impact on women when deciding spending plans. Yet, there is an ongoing failure to recognise how austerity affects women or acknowledge women's role in filling the gaps left by the state.



Research indicates that austerity measures have made women the support of last resort in providing a safety net to those in need. However, with changes to benefits and cuts to council budgets, this support is being stretched to breaking point, putting pressure on women's health and wellbeing.



Awareness of this situation should inform future conversations around government spending. Measures should be put in place to address how women have been accommodating austerity over the last near-decade at great personal cost.