

Cuts are a feminist issue

Feminist fightback collective

The government's cutbacks in social provision
are privatising work that is crucial to the
sustenance of life.

Since the Coalition government was 'elected' in the United Kingdom in May 2010, we have opened our newspapers each day to litanies of cuts to services - in health care; domestic violence services; universal child benefit; disability benefit; lone parent benefit; pensions; carer's allowance; housing benefit; education; free school meals; and early-years provision, to name only some. Such services constitute the means by which a people are kept healthy, fed, clothed, housed, educated and made into productive workers able to support the nation's economy. And the destruction of such public and common goods is not unique to the United Kingdom; over the last thirty years, despite their being essential to human life, neoliberal restructuring across the world has privatised, eroded and demolished our shared resources, and ushered in a 'crisis of social reproduction'.¹

The term social reproduction encompasses all the means by which society reproduces its families, citizens and workers. It includes all the labour that is necessary for a society to reproduce itself: the biological production of people and workers, and all the social practices that sustain the population - bearing children, raising children, performing emotional work, providing clothing and food, and cooking and cleaning. As a concept social reproduction has been key to feminist social theory, because it challenges the usual distinctions that are made between productive and reproductive labour, or between the labour market and the home.

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Labour in this sphere is often devalued and privatised, and is typically performed by women in their 'double day' or 'second shift', alongside paid wage labour. But reproductive labour of this kind is just as central to capitalist accumulation as are other forms of labour, which means that struggles over its structure and distribution are fundamental to any understanding of issues of power and the relationships between labour and capital, as well as the potential for their transformation.

The austerity measures of the Coalition government will affect every facet of human life and relations; they are attempting to undermine the welfare state and to create a profoundly unequal society, and this will hit women particularly hard, as well as other marginalised and vulnerable groups. Such a disproportionate impact is not an unintended or unforeseen effect of the cuts. Rather, it is endemic to this government's drive to destroy the welfare state, and in particular to restructure existing forms of social reproduction. Exploring the focus, distribution and likely effects of this austerity programme through the lens of social reproduction allows us to better understand not only the uneven impacts it will have on different sectors of society, but also the ways in which it supports the production and accumulation of wealth, and its concentration into the hands of the few. And it may also point to sites of resistance and transformation.

As an anti-capitalist feminist collective based in East London, we have been organising around some of the immediate manifestations of such cuts - in the National Health Service and public services more broadly, and in their effects on nursery provision in the London boroughs of Hackney and Tower Hamlets in particular. Despite our practical emphasis on the local situation, we believe that our struggle to defend local provision can only be understood in a wider context: that of a crisis in care. In writing this article, our aim is not to simply to make an inventory of the effects of the cuts, but to think about the wider assault on social reproduction that they represent, and to try to find some pathways in contesting this. We use 'the home' as a lens for understanding the constellation of social, economic and political processes at work in this programme of austerity - and the faultlines that may emerge to open a space for challenging them.

First we look at the specific nature of the current round of austerity and adjustment in the UK, arguing that - much like other instances of neoliberal structural adjustment - it has the effect of privatising survival and social reproduction, with the burden of labour falling on women. We focus on this not

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because we think this is the only feminist issue, or is only an issue for feminists, but because we see it as a productive way into thinking about how to build a movement that can mount a much broader challenge to the austerity drive. We outline the multiple insidious effects of this culture and economics of austerity on women themselves, and on divisions of labour, communities and social justice. We end by seeking to highlight many of the contradictions of the cuts, which we suggest might become the 'cracks' out of which can emerge a movement that fights for an alternative way of organising our lives, outlining what a 'feminist' movement against the cuts might look like.

The Big Society: coming soon to a home near you

The home occupies a pivotal site in the flows and processes of austerity measures. State retrenchment and privatisation force the labour of social reproduction back into the home. Women, however, are being pulled in two directions at once, with cuts to benefits and mounting pressure on single parents to seek waged work forcing some women out of the home into the market place, while others are pushed back into the home through job losses and unemployment.

The Coalition government claims that cuts to public services - rather than tax increases - are the only answer to reducing the £156 billion fiscal deficit. These threatened public services can be seen as the state's contribution to the much wider category of social reproduction, particularly in the areas of care (child, social and health). All over the UK local authorities have begun to announce significant reductions of funding to social services, from libraries and healthcare to playgrounds and art groups, from rape crisis centres to domestic violence services. Of particular relevance to women are the profound effects that will be felt in children's services, both in council and community nurseries and in New Labour's flagship Sure Start Centres, which provide a variety of services to parents on a 'one-stop' basis. In Tower Hamlets, one of the poorest boroughs in Europe, £3m worth of cuts are being introduced to children's services alone in the financial year of 2011-2012, to be followed by a further £70m across the council in the next three years.²

Though services are withdrawn, the need for them remains, meaning that they must be provided elsewhere. The Coalition claims that they will be provided by the 'Big Society'. This is the government's fantasy that such services can be provided

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by the 'community' on an entirely voluntary basis. But behind this appropriated language of communalism and collectivity, the reality is that the withdrawal of state or publicly provided services means the privatisation of responsibility for social reproduction, away from the collective and 'the public' back onto to the individual. It is not speculative to assert that it will not be 'the community' - an amorphous, collective and undifferentiated common body - that will step in to provide these services. Evidence has shown repeatedly that in places where neoliberal projects of austerity have been rolled out, the bulk of the displaced responsibility falls on women.³ Of course there is no single representative embodiment of 'woman': and women's varied experiences, and the contradictory intersections of constructions of 'womanhood' with those of 'race' and class, among others, mean that the cuts will not affect all women in the same way. We are not, as the government has claimed, 'all in this together'. Yet it remains true that women of all classes and ethnicities perform a disproportionately large part of unwaged reproductive labour in the home.⁴ As such, it is women's burden of labour that is increased significantly through the withdrawal of state public services.

A second consequence of the austerity regime is to force women into the home by jeopardising their participation in the workplace outside the domestic sphere. Over a third of working women in the UK work in the public sector, from which 143,000 posts have disappeared in the year since the Coalition came to power.⁵ Female - particularly youth - unemployment has reached the highest level in almost two decades, with almost half a million women currently claiming jobseekers allowance.⁶ Meanwhile cuts to childcare, Disability Living Allowance, pensions and elder-care provision combine to make it increasingly difficult for women to balance waged work outside the home with the day-to-day work of caring for a house and the people who live in it.

There is, however, a contradiction here: as a result of cuts to benefits and the social wage, women are also being forced out of the home and into (predominantly low paid) waged work, as families increasingly require more income to cover the basic cost of living. Proposed benefit reform (closely resembling the 'workfare' programmes of the US) brutally promises to 'encourage' mothers back to work through compulsory labour programmes; lone parents will be expected to be actively seeking work when their children are as young as five years old.⁷ The combined effects for working women of the removal of socially provided childcare (which

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should be seen as part of the social wage), the diminishing availability of work that pays an adequate wage, and the increase in their responsibilities for unpaid care work, tend to push women into informal labour markets, including sex work, that are unregulated, and in which workers face high levels of exploitation and, often, violence.⁸

The effects of all this are not only material; they also have an impact on our affective lives, and affect all the psycho-social elements of society; they make people less able to care for the emotional and intimate aspects of each other's lives - because of lack of time, energy and money - at the very moment in which they are in need of greater care. Again, it is typically women who are left to pick up the pieces. And on top of all this, these pressures are increasing at the exact moment in which mental health care provision is being demolished.

The current attack on social reproduction is only possible because of a long history of devaluing reproductive labour, constructing it as 'women's work', and accordingly rendering it invisible, and frequently unwaged or low-waged. It is this that allows the Con-Dem government to present services such as nurseries as 'non-statutory' luxury extras, which must simply be set aside when the time comes to tighten our belts. Shifting work into the home, where it is done 'for free', is a convenient way of hiding the hard realities of austerity behind closed doors.

Yet, though the government may hope that women will quietly mop up all the mess, the attack on social reproduction constitutes a serious economic, social and reproductive problem. *Someone* is still required to do the care work. In short, we are at risk of a widespread and potentially absolute crisis of care.

Feminist struggle: transformations of work and home

Feminists have long sought to claim the home as a politicised space, and the reproductive labour performed within it as real work. In the 1970s, the Women's Liberation Movement demanded state provision of '24 hour nurseries', to free mothers and carers from the home, and transform childcare outside the home into properly recognised waged-work. At the same time feminists organised *within* their homes, turning the domestic sphere into a terrain of struggle. Campaigns such as the National Childcare Campaign were an important impetus in institutionalising community nurseries, controlled by parents and workers and funded by the state.

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Much has changed since those early days of organisation. In the case of nurseries, for example, state support, whilst still grossly inadequate, has improved. But with increasing provision there has been an attendant increase in state regulation, and attempts to control ad hoc and informal childcare arrangements between women. And at the same time issues of childcare have become increasingly marginal to feminism, at both a theoretical and practical level. In this country at least, feminism has had a historically ambiguous and troubled relationship with the work of the home, and has at times been complicit in its devaluation. In particular, a liberal feminist focus on careerism and getting women into the upper echelons of management positions has involved an implicit debasement of non-market based female labour. Prominent public feminist campaigns of late, such as the Fawcett Society's 'Sexism and the City' 2008 manifesto, have focused on the gender 'pay gap', the workplace 'glass ceiling', and the fact that 'only 11% of FTSE 100 company directors are women', as the main signifiers of gender inequality.⁹ Of course alternative visions have been fought for, especially by working-class and/or women of colour; one of the most prominent and controversial of these has been the Wages for Housework campaign. Yet, at the moment it appears that a liberal individualist form of feminism, easily appropriated by and absorbed into capitalism, has won out, leaving the gendered division of labour in the home fundamentally unchallenged within dominant feminist discourses and movements.

Any feminist response to the austerity measures and their deeply gendered implications will, however, necessitate a re-focus on the home and the socially reproductive labour that takes place within it. One first step would be an assessment of what kind of political terrain 'the home' constitutes. And here - in the context of the increasing out-sourcing of reproductive labour, so that it becomes part of paid work, a commodity provided by poorer and often migrant women to higher-income women - we need to understand the power dynamics of the home in terms of race and class as well as gender. This analysis needs to locate the home within the matrix of waged and unwaged work that takes place both within and outside it.

Interestingly, despite the overlapping nature of their gendered roles as mothers, nursery workers, childminders or waged workers, women are frequently defined in highly oppositional terms. 'Successful career woman' versus 'stay at home mum' has become a tediously familiar motif of the mainstream media for at least the last forty years; and high levels of antagonism also exist at a more individual level between

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‘working mothers’ and the women they pay to look after their children. The austerity measures may raise new issues about the perceived and real divisions that exist between women located within different constellations of class, labour market and home, but they are also likely to intensify and compound hostilities and existing inequalities.

The challenges of movement building: socialising care and the Big Society

It is clear that the sites and spaces of social reproduction - and the home in particular - are ones of struggle. The pressures of austerity may usher in an intensification of divisions between people, but they may also offer the possibilities of new and necessary alliances. The need to build links between workers and service users has resounded across the anti-cuts campaigns as they have begun to emerge in the UK, though thus far little attention has been paid to the processes by which this could come about.

An alliance between working mothers and childcare workers has radical potential. It would require - and therefore constitute - a significant shift in mentalities, thereby pushing against one of the key divisions from which capitalism has benefited. Bridging the distinction between waged/unwaged, productive/reproductive workers rejects the artificial distinctions between the two, while also confronting the very real issues which produce the divisions. This would not be an alliance to defend the current system, but to call for its transformation; for something better. Such alliances would also make visible the labour and economic impact of care work, confronting the logic at the heart of the government’s representation of public services as a luxury extra.

But a feminist perspective on, and resistance to, the cuts should not be limited to overtly gendered issues such as childcare. Since the Con-Dem Coalition’s spending review of October 2010, a number of new and important anti-cuts initiatives have emerged. Local anti-cuts campaigns across the UK acquired new energy and hope from the explosion of student protests in November and December, which also surely helped to make the TUC demonstration in March 2011 one of the biggest trade union marches in decades. Yet feminism remains somewhat marginal to such campaigns, with a disjuncture between all the proclamations about the sexist

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impact of the cuts and the grassroots forms of organisation that have emerged. A feminist approach to the cuts has to go further than simply asking for a more equitable distribution of the impacts of the cuts. For one of the problems with a liberal emphasis on the 'disproportionate' effects of the cuts on women (evidenced by the Fawcett Society's otherwise very interesting bid for a judicial review of the government's 2010 Emergency Budget) is that it implies that if only cuts were shared more equally between men and women, they would no longer be responsible for instituting further inequality. A few local anti-cuts campaigns are indeed beginning to highlight the cuts to children's services, and this is an important beginning. We need to move from here, however, to think about how to develop an approach that can account for the social stratifications that divide - as much as unite - women, and integrate it more fully into our grass roots organising, rather than simply ticking the box of gender equality.

Organising across these lines is complex and requires considerable amounts of work. Further complications lie in the fact that increasing women's unwaged working day often leaves them with little time for other activities, including political participation in collective organising. Feminist Fightback is currently at the very early stages of building links with other parents and service workers in the area of childcare, and of thinking about how to struggle collectively not only to defend existing children's services but also to create better ones. Such campaigns around childcare might be used as a starting point for building a much broader 'anti-cuts' movement that places at its centre questions of care, and the plurality yet connectedness of feminist demands.

Our thinking about the immediate problem of cuts to childcare has led us to more fully recognise the importance of care more broadly to the functioning and re-creation of communities. Our own movements for resistance and transformation also require significant amounts of reproductive labour, which is also often rendered invisible. As anti-capitalist feminists operating in the broader contexts of the left we have become increasingly alert to the amount of *work* done by activists in creating the bonds of trust and belonging that are so essential to building campaigns and collectives. While we do not wish to over-determine or essentialise the gender politics of this, our own experience has shown us that all too often - still - 'the boys' do the theory and 'the girls' do the practice (being friendly, organising social events, structuring participatory workshops). Both

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forms of political work are crucial and need to be recognised as such: our task as feminists is to turn the revaluing of care inwards as well as outwards - to assert its importance within the social relations of our movement, as well as in the demands we make, and the battles we pick. How we look after each other becomes a question of even greater urgency as we face being evicted from homes and deprived of the resources required to maintain even a basic standard of living. If our movement is to sustain itself, it must be one that recognises the fragilities and dependencies that are being intensified by capitalism and the dramatic cuts; these should be seen not as weaknesses to be dismissed or overcome, but as suggestive of possibilities for new alliances and relations.

We have some idea what such a movement might look like - communal childcare, unemployed workers unions, food co-ops and housing collectives are only some of its more obvious manifestations. Many of these ways of organising are tools we are proud to have inherited from earlier generations of feminists; from Sylvia Pankhurst's East End nurseries at the turn of the twentieth century to the work of the WLM in the 1970s and the collective kitchens of Latin America. We are drawing on a feminist tradition of politicising questions of care and turning weaknesses and vulnerabilities into weapons and sources of power. But our aim is not simply to reproduce old patterns of resistance; we want to use previous insights to find our way through the present crisis. The 'home' is not the same place as it was thirty or forty years ago. The numbers of women with children in work are much higher, and the quantity of pre-school and nursery care has greatly increased. We have more single-parent families and more parents in gay relationships.

We are also responding to a different set of political circumstances, not least a different relationship between the family and the state. Our aim is for provision 'in and against the state'. This raises a core question in the struggle over public goods and shared resources and labour: how are we to ensure that our autonomous efforts to reproduce our own communities do not simply create Cameron's Big Society for him? - thereby endorsing the logic that if the state will no longer provide for us we will have to do it ourselves? This question remains utterly unresolved, both in theory and in practice. The answers, perhaps, will only be able to emerge through struggle, and must involve the possibility of using our unwaged labour not to enable capitalist accumulation but to create shared commons. Such commons may provide, for free, the necessary tasks of social reproduction - social care, child care, health, education -

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not for the production of a new generation of workers to create profits, but to create a sphere within which human life is valued in and of itself - instead of solely for its contribution to the wealth of the few.

Socially reproductive work guarantees the possibility of life in capitalist society - and therefore of capitalism itself. The dramatic and brutal austerity measures introduced by the Con-Dem Coalition have shifted responsibility for this work from the state and public institutions to private individuals and families. Within this, it is largely women who step in as the state retreats at high speed, leaving behind a gaping chasm of care. It is women's unwaged labour that constitute the mythical 'Big Society' - which is one reason why it is such a deeply gendered vision. Structural adjustment puts the simple task of sustaining life in danger.¹⁰ This may be something around which we can organise: refusals to carry out reproductive labour have the power to stop the performance of capitalism itself. On the day of action on 30 June 2011, one of the biggest impacts of the public sector strikes was the 'problem' of how parents and carers would be able to look after their children when the schools were shut. Quite simply, without child care parents cannot work. Capital's accumulative strategies are stopped in their tracks. The cuts may be ideologically driven, but they are also messy and incoherent. And it is within these contradictions - working together across our identities as women, men, workers, public service users - that we may be able to carve out a different vision, instead of simply defending against savage attacks an imperfect liberal welfare state - one that is dependent on the exploitation of unwaged female labour.

This article is the result of ongoing conversations within Feminist Fightback and with other feminists and anti-cuts activists. Thanks are especially due to Camille Barbagallo and Silvia Federici, upon whose work we have drawn, and all those involved in Friends of Hackney Nurseries.

Feminist Fightback is a collective of self-defining women, developed out of conferences in 2006 and 2007. We're inspired by the politics of a range of anti-capitalist feminist struggles, and believe that no single oppression can be challenged in isolation. We are also committed to fighting for a feminist perspective and awareness of gender issues everywhere in our movement - and not marginalising 'women's rights' as a separate issue.

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Notes

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6. H. Stewart, 'More women join dole queue as public sector cuts bite', 18.5.11: www.guardian.co.uk/society/2011/may/18/more-women-join-dole-queue-cuts.
7. From October 2011, parents will be denied income support and required to be actively seeking work in order to receive benefits: www://gingerbread.org.uk/news/127/100000-single-parents-to-be-cast-adrift-if-changes-to-job-seeking-reforms-not-delayed, accessed 16 Oct 2011.
8. Hardy and Sanders (forthcoming), 'The Political Economy of Lap Dancing: intersectional precarities and women's work in the stripping industry', *Work, Employment and Society*.
9. See Fawcett Society: www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/index.asp?PageID=630.
10. B. Young, 'Financial crises and social reproduction', in Bakker and Silvey (eds), *Beyond states and markets: the challenges of social reproduction*, Routledge 2008, p120.

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