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# **Feminist Anti-Violence Activism in Austerity Britain: A North East of England Case Study**

Clare Wiper

PhD

2018

# **Feminist Anti-Violence Activism in Austerity Britain: A North East of England Case Study**

Clare Wiper

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements of the University of  
Northumbria at Newcastle for the degree  
of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Research undertaken in the  
Faculty of Arts, Design and Social  
Sciences

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# Abstract

Feminist scholars in the global North have become increasingly vocal about the material implications of austerity for women's lived experiences of violence and inequality, and they have highlighted the challenges facing organisations attempting to respond to the recent eruption of violence against women and girls (VAWG) with fewer resources than were available in previous decades. However, much less time has been spent trying to understand the lived contours of the neoliberal financial crisis for anti-VAWG activists at the local level or its impact on their political mobilisations and efforts for social change and social justice. In particular, there has been very little consideration of how the financial crisis and its ideology of austerity is changing the ways anti-VAWG activists feel and think about the structural landscape of VAWG and the possibilities and limitations of their activism in these changing times.

Situating austerity within the global ascendancy of neoliberal policies and discourses, this thesis examines how anti-VAWG activists in North East England are conceptualising and responding to this environment, with a focus on the political imaginaries, agendas, strategies and discourses emerging under these conditions. Drawing on intersectional readings of data obtained from 28 semi-structured interviews and participant observations at women's sector meetings and activist events, this research reveals the double-sided effects of neoliberal structural adjustment and dispossession in austerity Britain. In many ways, anti-VAWG activists are experiencing acute processes of depoliticisation and polarisation as feminist agendas for social change are derailed by neoliberal economic reforms. Yet this

context has also presented opportunities for anti-VAWG activists to develop new forms of collective struggle against the violence of austerity politics. The thesis argues that, as the poorest and most vulnerable women continue to bear the brunt of austerity, anti-VAWG activists are reimagining new, potentially radically transformative ways of challenging this structural and state-sanctioned violence.

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# Declaration

I declare that the work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for any other award and that it is all my own work. I also confirm that this work fully acknowledges opinions, ideas and contributions from the work of others.

Any ethical clearance for the research presented in this thesis has been approved. Approval was sought and granted by the Faculty Ethics Committee in April 2013.

**I declare that the Word Count of this thesis is 86,117**

Name: Clare Wiper

Signature:

Date: 24/04/2019



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# 1

## **Introduction: Crisis, Austerity and Violence Against Women**

### **1.0 Introduction**

This thesis explores how anti-violence against women and girls (VAWG) activists working in women's sector organisations across North East England are conceptualising and responding to VAWG at a time when both women – and women's movements – are under attack by the intensifying austerity of neoliberal capitalism. In recent years, feminist scholars have become increasingly vocal about the material implications of austerity for women's lived experiences of violence and inequality (Siddiqui 2018; Weissman 2017; Emejulu & Bassel 2015) and have highlighted the challenges facing those organisations responding to the recent eruption of VAWG with fewer resources than were available in previous decades (Walby et al. 2016; Ishkanian 2014). However, much less time has been spent trying to understand the lived contours of the neoliberal financial crisis for anti-VAWG activists at the local

level, or its impact on their political mobilisations and efforts for social change and social justice. In particular, there has been very little consideration of how the financial crisis and its ideology of austerity is changing the ways anti-VAWG activists feel and think about the structural landscape of VAWG and the possibilities and limitations of their activism in these changing times.

This chapter introduces the changing political-economic-cultural landscape in which anti-VAWG activists are providing services for survivors of domestic and sexual violence, and negotiating their demands with the British state. The first section describes the contradictory and incoherent policy landscape that emerged after the UK Coalition government (2010-2015) launched its *Call to End Violence Against Women and Girls* action plan alongside an austerity programme that made significant cuts to VAWG services and prevention efforts across the country. This section outlines my interest in examining how anti-VAWG activists are negotiating this policy environment and the challenges it presents to their service delivery and social change agendas. The second section of the chapter moves on to explore the changing landscape of VAWG in Britain with specific reference to the material and symbolic violence that neoliberal austerity policies have engendered. Evidence of a rise in VAWG is produced and questions are raised about how anti-VAWG activists in North East England are making sense of this in relation to causality and the new “conductive contexts” (Kelly 2016) in which violence against women is flourishing. The third section discusses the restructuring of the women’s sector in the context of “austerity localism” (Featherstone et al. 2012) and asks how anti-VAWG activists are developing and implementing social change strategies within this restrictive environment. The chapter concludes with a final section outlining the structure of this thesis and its main research questions.

## 2.0 The VAWG Policy Landscape

In 2009 – three years prior to the commencement of this research – the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) committee voiced concern about the potential implications of the global financial crisis for women’s social and economic disempowerment and the subsequent potential for a rise in violence against women and girls (Erturk 2009). The financial crisis began in 2008 with the bursting of the US housing bubble and the subsequent collapse of the Lehman Brothers bank, sending shockwaves throughout the financial sector and, consequently, the Western world. However, inequalities between men and women across the globe mean that women are amongst the most vulnerable people to economic shocks, and policymakers are aware that violence against women has a tendency to rise during times of economic downturn and austerity (Warner 2010; O’Hara 2010; True 2012). It was thus positively received by British feminist scholars and activists when the UK Coalition government announced their *Call to End Violence Against Women and Girls* action plan, which outlined a comprehensive, cross-government strategy for tackling VAWG and pledged £40 million to reduce this violence between 2010-2015 (Home Office 2010).

However, cracks were already beginning to appear by the time I began this research in January 2012. While the government had stated it was making violence against women a policy priority (Home Office 2010) its VAWG action plan was being significantly undermined by its austerity programme, which was presented as the only response capable of pulling the country back onto the path toward economic growth. Rather than making any critical attempt to confront the problems of unregulated global capital and selfish, high-risk decision making by those in charge of the financial sector,

the UK Coalition government mostly blamed New Labour's "excessive expenditure" on welfare provision as one of the main causes of the crisis and recommended significant cutbacks to state welfare provision as the primary solution (Bone 2012: 6-7). In order to achieve this we were all "equally" required to reduce our personal spending and to accept less financial and social support from the state.

Skeggs (2015) describes how this pretence of "togetherness" played a crucial role in the ideological making of austerity, creating a false sense of solidarity with which to disguise the power and exploitation lurking behind the scenes. In reality, neoliberal austerity policies have always been implemented in ways that target the most marginalised and vulnerable groups in society, and have been a hallmark of neoliberal policymaking since the 1980s (see below). To be sure, before beginning this research it was already clear that women more so than men were bearing the brunt of the cuts in public spending outlined in the Coalition government's 2010 budget, and that women with intersecting disadvantages of poverty, ethnicity, nationality, disability and age were disproportionately affected (Fawcett Society 2013). It was also clear that women's organisations were some of the first casualties of the Coalition government's cuts to "unnecessary public expenditure" (Women's Resource Centre 2013) – though many had not anticipated that this would extend to life-saving VAWG services, including refuges and rape crisis centres (Walby and Towers 2012). Overall, more than £5.6 million in cuts were made to women's services across England between 2010 and the commencement of this research in 2012, which resulted in a 31% reduction in funding for the VAWG sector, from £7.8 million in 2010 to £5.4 million in 2012 (Bennhold 2012). These cuts continued over the course of my fieldwork, disproportionately affecting the North East region (NEWN 2013). The anti-VAWG activists I studied were thus not only contending with far less funding than in

previous decades, but with a contradictory and incoherent policy approach to VAWG. This was especially problematic given that levels of VAWG were increasing rapidly across the country, as discussed further below.

## *2.1 Policy Contradictions*

It is interesting to note that, while the Coalition government was attempting to demonstrate its commitment to “fixing” the broken economy, the connections between neoliberal economic policies of growth – of which austerity is one – and the persistence of violence against women made no appearance in the government’s VAWG action plan or its political speeches about VAWG prevention. The focus was instead placed on criminal justice responses to this violence and on improving victim report rates (Home Office 2010). The irony that cuts to VAWG services and police budgets make it more difficult for women to report abuse and seek state support was, however, seemingly lost on central government. Between 2010 and 2015, funding for the police was cut by 20% with serious consequences for victims of domestic and sexual violence, including cases dropped due to problems collecting evidence and a reduction in police funding for specialist support services (Agerholm 2017). The Coalition government also failed to acknowledge the limitations of the criminal justice system in tackling the structural causes of this violence, especially with regards to the economic upheavals that many women believe pose the greatest threat to their safety (Renzetti 2009; True 2012; Weissman 2016). In fact, national and legal policy provisions to address VAWG in Britain have not, for the most part, extended to the economic sphere or explored the political-economic causes and impacts of this violence.

It is for this reason that Weldon and Htun (2013) encourage feminist scholars and activists to look beyond the surface level of government policies in order to better explain such contradictions. They demonstrate that on closer inspection it becomes clear that many governments' responsiveness to VAWG is usually contradicted by problems of political will and political intent alongside a range of institutional barriers, ineffectual policy designs and policy silences, which must also be considered policy outcomes. For instance, Ishkanian (2013) demonstrates how the Coalition government's implementation of a centralised cross-government VAWG strategy was undermined by its commitment to devolution and privatisation of public services. She shows how the government's willingness to cut funding for women's refuges and VAWG services not only exacerbates women's vulnerability to male violence but also reveals that the government's real priority is monetary gain (via privatisation of state services) rather than ending violence against women. Likewise, Walker (2017) highlights that the £40 million pledged to reduce VAWG was not ring-fenced and there were no structures put in place to ensure that the newly appointed Police and Crime Commissioners, the Health and Well-Being boards and Clinical Commissioning groups – all of which were now involved in the commissioning and planning of local services – would deliver this promise at the local level. As a consequence, many local commissioners have chosen to fund larger generic organisations that can provide cheaper services, rather than smaller specialist organisations that provide the best services for women (see Chapter Four).

Scholars have also demonstrated how the Coalition government's seeming commitment to VAWG prevention was contradicted by its implementation of a broadly anti-feminist political agenda (Durbin et al. 2017). The closure of the Women's National Commission in 2010 and the replacement of the Gender Equality

Duty with the Public Sector Equality Duty have both had detrimental implications for feminists attempting to make gender-specific social justice claims, reducing the scope of institutional mechanisms that promote gender equality and diversity (see Chapter Five). Likewise, the Coalition government's preference for gender-neutral responses to domestic and sexual violence has undermined feminist analyses of this violence and compromised the financial security of women-only VAWG services (see Chapter Four). Other issues, such as the Coalition government's reluctance to ratify the Istanbul Convention and decision to ignore many of the recommendations made by the UN CEDAW committee – including the need to conduct a Gender Impact Assessment of austerity measures – have signified to feminist scholars that the government is committed to overlooking structural inequalities in favour of depoliticised, individual-level analyses of VAWG.

Newman (2017) considers the widespread silence around women's disproportionate shouldering of the burdens of austerity to be one of the most debilitating policy contradictions to have emerged since 2010. She argues that instead of acknowledging the structural inequalities that uphold women's disproportionate reliance on the welfare state, women have instead been depicted as the main agents in and recipients of a now redundant system, and "one that furthermore has helped create the 'problem' of an overgrown welfare state and an unsustainable public sector, both of which were implicated in the generation of public debt and thus 'causes' of the financial crisis itself" (Newman 2017: 34). With the wider population concerned about rising levels of poverty and unemployment, Newman believes it is those perceived to have benefitted most from feminism's demand for equality policies – "especially women, public sector workers and ethnic minorities" – who are regarded as having unfair privileges and security (2017: 34). Enloe has expressed concern that this



dangerous depiction of the crisis not only fails to take women's economic realities seriously but also provides "a potent rationale ... [for] either ignoring women's economic plight or actually punishing women for the lives they were allegedly living" (2013: 103). This situation inevitably raises a number of challenges for feminist activists attempting to substantiate the disproportionate impact of the financial crisis on women – and poor, Black and minority ethnic (BME) women in particular (Emejulu & Bassel 2015). How can anti-VAWG activists effectively challenge the rising levels of violence and inequality generated by austerity measures if at the same time their activism is deemed inappropriate to times of austerity? How can they demonstrate the economic and social setbacks that austerity has created for VAWG prevention if women are seen to have created the need for austerity measures in the first place?

## *2.2 Navigating the VAWG Policy Landscape*

This thesis examines how anti-VAWG activists are navigating this policy environment and the challenges it presents to their service delivery and social change efforts. This is a particularly pertinent focus in light of growing concern that feminist responses to VAWG are becoming depoliticised in a policy environment characterised by criminal justice solutions and individualistic analyses of this violence. Studies have found that some movement members are no longer extending their analyses beyond the criminal justice paradigm to interrogate the structural determinants of domestic and sexual violence (Weissman 2007; Bumiller 2009; Stark 2007; INCITE! 2006). This problem is often associated with the rise of post-feminism and its disinterest in the structural causes of violence and inequality (McRobbie 2009). Existing literature also documents the ways in which feminism has proven compatible with neoliberalism in

its privileging of identity politics and cultural critique over political-economic analysis (Fraser 2013; Eisenstein 2009; Weissman 2017). It is argued that this has limited the transformative potential of the anti-VAWG movement as “the more systemic critiques of patriarchal capitalism that characterised earlier generations of socialist feminism have been cast to the margins” (Maignashca et al. 2016: 40). Such issues are of central importance to this thesis and are discussed in further detail in Chapter Two.

However, there is also evidence to suggest that the austerity context has generated new forms of feminist organising that are extending the scope of gender politics toward anti-capitalist and anti-austerity critique. For instance, national women’s organisations such as Southall Black Sisters (SBS), the Fawcett Society and the Women’s Resource Centre (WRC) have engaged in protests against austerity policies while highlighting their disproportionate impact on women; and poor, BME and immigrant survivors of domestic and sexual violence in particular. They have also demonstrated how austerity policies promote and exacerbate the social inequalities that foster VAWG, which is why they continue to denounce state repression and economic suffocation. However, little attention has been given to how this is playing out in particular contexts or among activists operating locally and outside of the capital city of London. If there has been an absence in previous decades of a strong and unified feminist opposition to the political-economic dimensions of VAWG and to neoliberalism more generally, might this be changing now, and could it be happening among anti-VAWG activists in North East England where my empirical case study is set? If so, what might this have to do with the changing landscape of VAWG in Britain?

### **3.0 The Changing Landscape of VAWG in Britain**

Overall, the UK Coalition government (2010-2015) executed over £21 billion in social security cuts during their time in power (Emmerson 2017) and these cuts brought about significant disinvestment in policies on gender equality and resources for preventing violence against women. While the Coalition government was certainly keen to avoid any association of their austerity programme with the neoliberal policy environment that emerged during the Thatcher administration, appealing instead to the communitarian values of the Big Society (see below), its VAWG action plan was nevertheless implemented against a backdrop of neoliberal economic policies and processes that have significantly altered the landscape of VAWG in Britain and beyond. This section briefly outlines the development of neoliberalism as a policy framework and its implications for gender inequality and violence against women. As Brah et al. (2015) explain, the problem with austerity “is not only that women, and particular categories of women such as minority ethnic women, are disproportionately affected by the cuts, but rather that the economy is a gendered structure” (2015: 2). Griffin (2015) is concerned that if feminists become distracted from the continuity of the neoliberal project and its long history of structural violence, this will pave the way for a depoliticised “crisis-governance feminism” that reinforces the power of neoliberal economics and constrains the possibilities, and space, for contestation and critique. The empirical data examined in this thesis both validate and challenge scholarly concerns about the depoliticisation of feminist anti-VAWG activism in the current austerity context.

### *3.1 Neoliberalism, Gender Inequality and Violence Against Women*

Neoliberalism emerged as a policy framework during the Thatcher and Reagan governments in the UK and US at the beginning of the 1980s. In Britain, welfare and full employment were condemned by Thatcher as obstacles to economic growth and so a shift towards a neoliberal paradigm of competitiveness in the global market was presented as key to reducing unemployment, inflation and government deficits (Hayek 1994; Friedman 2002). Supported by powerful international institutions, including the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, the competitive expansion of the free market was achieved through several policy methods, including the deregulation of the economy, the privatisation of public assets, the liberalisation of industry and trade, the creation of low paid flexible labour, the reduction of trade union power, and the dismantling of the welfare state (Harvey 2005). Thatcher's emphasis on individual choice and personal responsibility helped remove the social and structural from identity construction, instead conceiving of the individual as an isolated and entirely autonomous agent. At the same time, neoliberalism's market-based solutions restricted the action of the state in social policy and transferred welfare actions to civil society and private contractors.

Although this policy framework originated during the Thatcher administration, it continued during the years of New Labour (1997-2010). Tony Blair promoted the neoliberal philosophy of the free market and was committed to minimal government intervention, but his Third Way policies located the "community and civil society as the interface between people and the state" (Ledwith 2005: 15). While at first this appeared to link with Labour's socialist traditions, it did so without disturbing neoliberal economics and without involving class politics (see Chapter Two).

According to Ledwith, this approach also acted as a “powerful force of state coercion” whereby the dominant views of the ruling class infiltrated the community and civil society in ways never before realised (2005: 22). In world politics, the Blair and Bush administrations in the UK and US presented neoliberal policies as the pinnacle of private freedoms and individual wealth, but Harvey (2005) argues that in reality, both were using neoliberal solutions to solve global problems in ways that benefitted the Western world. Structural adjustment policies (SAPs) were rolled out across the global South as the conditions for receiving loans from the IMF and World Bank. These policies demanded that recipient countries adopted free market principles of deregulation, privatisation and welfare retrenchment in order to boost their economies, but many of these countries did not have the social or political conditions required to successfully deregulate the economy without generating extensive poverty and deprivation (Harvey 2005). It is for this reason that developing countries tend to be most detrimentally affected by neoliberal policymaking.

However, while much has been written about neoliberalism’s links with rising levels of poverty and social inequality, the gendered dimensions of neoliberalism are frequently glossed over by mainstream political economists. Feminist theorists Catherine Eschle (2005) and Nancy Hartsock (2006) have both criticised the discipline for ignoring the complex network of patriarchies produced by neoliberal capitalism to facilitate the accumulation of capital and to maintain social control. To be sure, research shows that since the emergence of neoliberalism as a policy framework in the late 1970s, women have suffered from “increased poverty and unemployment, deteriorating working conditions and social insecurity, while relatively few women enjoy the benefits of global neoliberalism in high skilled jobs in trade and investment markets” (Itzn 2016: 5). Rather, capitalist competition has driven the search for cheap

sources of women's labour and largely undermined women's political and economic liberation (Erturk 2009). In fact, Itzn (2016) argues that the global liberalisation of trade since the 1980s has relied so heavily on women's underpaid and unpaid labour, that governments have consciously failed to design economic policies that do not disproportionately and adversely impact upon women's positions, responsibilities and possibilities in societies across the globe (see also True 2012; Federici 2017). This is especially the case regarding economic policies and welfare reforms that in both rich and poor nations "have aggravated the feminisation of poverty, leaving women more vulnerable to abuser entrapment and with fewer options to support themselves outside an abusive relationship" (Itzn 2016: 8).

In the UK, the the neoliberal attack on working-class living standards and the reduction of social protections since the 1980s has had a disproportionate impact on women both in the workplace and at home. Rakowski (2000) describes how women became "shock-absorbers" of neoliberal restructuring as they intensified their productive and reproductive workloads to cover the expanding needs of their families. She also explains how the outsourcing of social reproduction and welfare costs from the state to individual households reinforced the gendered division of labour between men and women, while simultaneously undermining the social welfare and citizenship agendas on which women disproportionately depend. Generations of women have consequently faced deepening poverty and financial dependence as a result of neoliberal policymaking which in turn has increased their vulnerability to domestic and sexual violence (True 2012; Federici 2004). At the same time, these conditions have also disempowered many men, some of whom have responded to their loss of employment or increase in financial hardship by reaffirming their power and control over women through violence (Connell 1998). Connell describes how the emergence

of a “hegemonic business masculinity” has encouraged men to measure their masculinity based on their accumulation of wealth in liberal trade and finance. Yet not all men can be winners, and True argues that “it is in this context – of globalised material relations in which some men fail to achieve the hegemonic business masculinity (Connell 1998) – that violence against women becomes the norm” (2012: 56; see also Gamlin and Hawkes 2018).

In the global South, the effects of neoliberal restructuring for women have been most acute and are now well documented in transnational feminist scholarship. Much of this literature focuses on women employed in highly exploitative export processing zones, where they work excruciatingly long hours in poor conditions, are paid far less than men and are commonly subject to verbal abuse, sexual harassment, and physical and sexual violence by male employers and employees (Bhattacharya 2015; Pyle 2001). Scholars have also drawn attention to women’s disproportionate employment in the informal economy (e.g., as street vendors, traders, sex workers) where they receive no social benefits or statutory entitlements and work such long hours that they are often unable to care for their children, trapping generations in a cycle of poverty, poor health and vulnerability to more violence (Federici 2017; Bannerji 2016). The growth of the sex trade in these poorer regions has been made possible via the trafficking of women seeking alternative employment in safer and more prosperous sectors of the economy. Chastain (2006) explains that these women are often initially deceived about the nature of the work for which they are being hired and later forced against their will to engage in sex work (see also Pyle 2001). Consequently, women’s cheap labour has not only been used to guarantee maximum profitability for the corporate elite but has also rendered poor women more vulnerable to violence in the

workplace and made it more difficult for them to meet their responsibilities as homemakers and care providers, increasing their risk of violence at home.

Bannerji (2016) contends that in this changing global landscape, violence against women “has taken both a quantitative and qualitative leap” and that it is “not only a matter of numbers but of the modalities of their accomplishment” (2016: no pagination). To be sure, while the roots of VAWG are well established in society’s attitudes towards and treatment of women during peacetime, the proliferation of armed conflicts – often caused by struggles to access/protect the raw materials and resources required for the production process (Escobar 2004) – has undoubtedly set back efforts to protect and prevent this violence. Sexual violence and the use of rape as a weapon of war are common features of conflict designed to terrify, humiliate and subdue entire populations (Kelly 2016) and the abduction of women by combatants for forced sex, forced marriage and slave labour demonstrates how the male demand for female domestic labour persists violently during times of armed conflict (Jefferson 2004). Once again, criminal trafficking networks have flourished and profited from mass displacements of women whose means of subsistence have been dispossessed by war, pollution, deforestation, land foreclosures and the extraction of local minerals by national and transnational corporations (Federici 2017). Women from the global South have thus been forced to migrate to countries such as Britain and the US both in order to escape violence and persecution, and because they have lost ownership and control over their local resources, such as fertile land, water and energy.

However, while global imbalances in power have certainly exacerbated levels of VAWG in developing nations, the mechanisms accentuating this violence in developed countries such as the UK and the US are not dissimilar. Neoliberal



economic growth is frequently destructive for women worldwide yet neoliberal responses to VAWG continue to ignore this reality and instead prioritise the ideals of individualism and minimal social support from the state – a policy framework that consistently fails to provide for disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. According to neoliberal logic, women suffering violence should be self-reliant and seek economic and social support by their own means. This way, the neoliberal project can intensify inequalities and erode services and resources for the most vulnerable while simultaneously remaining indifferent to the widening disparities this creates. In fact, many of the VAWG policy contradictions outlined earlier in this chapter are better understood when contextualised in relation to this neoliberal logic. It has been argued, for example, that in order to draw attention away from the structural inequalities that fuel economic growth and exacerbate women's vulnerability to violence, governments deliberately prioritise criminal justice responses that are capable only of responding to the consequences of this violence at the individual (psycho-social) level (see Bumiller 2013; Weissman 2016). Likewise, gender-neutral framings of domestic and sexual violence, and the erosion of policies that address gender and racial inequalities, not only stifle proper engagement with the structural causes of this violence, but also reproduce the unequal relations of power which enable this violence to exist in the first place (Kelly and Humphreys 2000).

It is for these reasons that the concept of structural violence is central to this thesis. In a paper on the difficulties of operationalising structural violence, Galtung and Hoivik (1971) argue that while direct violence kills quickly and is more definitively measured, structural violence kills slowly and undramatically. In this thesis, the term structural violence is thus used to refer to “the processes, policies and politics that systematically produce and reproduce the social and economic inequities

that determine who will be at risk for assaults and who will be shielded from them” (Kelly 2002: 5; see also Hester et al. 1996; Kelly and Humphreys 2000). From this perspective, male violence against women cannot be reduced to the acts of pathological individuals but must be understood as an expression of systemic gender inequalities and injustices and thus reflective of a deeper, structural violence. This analysis is particularly prominent in the work of Black feminist scholars such as bell hooks (1984) and Patricia Hill Collins (2006). They argue that feminists cannot adequately theorise the gendered and racialised discrimination, harassment and violence women experience in public and private spaces without acknowledging how capitalism operates to disproportionately devalue poor and minority women’s labour and depress their income and wealth (see also Carby 2007; Mohanty 2003). In particular, this body of scholarship demonstrates how deeply unequal access to the determinants of health (e.g., housing, good quality health care, welfare services and employment) create conditions where interpersonal violence flourishes and which shape gendered forms of violence for women in vulnerable social positions (Sinha et al. 2017). Without the privilege of imagining VAWG as an expression of patriarchy alone, BME women from both the global North and South have long argued that feminists must approach violence against women through an engagement with structural violence (Hall 2015).

### *3.2 The Material and Symbolic Violence of Austerity*

As a key element of the latest phase of neoliberalism, austerity politics have facilitated the continuation of the neoliberal project via reductions in wages and pensions, unemployment, dismantling public services and social security, increasing VAT and privatising public goods. However, while such policies certainly represent a

continuation of neoliberalism, austerity also presents new issues and challenges, which is likely why there has been such a clear resurgence in feminist scholarly attention on inequitable economic policies and their links to rising levels of violence and inequality (True 2012; Walby et al. 2016; Federici 2017; Weissman 2017). This literature describes austerity as involving a new degradation of women's positions in social and political life which in turn exacerbates their exposure and vulnerability to violence. To be sure, women in Britain are currently bearing the brunt of the public spending cuts and are subject to the "triple jeopardy" of losing not only public services and jobs, but being left to fill the newly created service gap, unpaid (Fawcett Society 2013). Cuts in prevention and in programmes for awareness on VAWG, including education, empowerment of women, training of professionals involved in attention to victims (i.e. doctors, nurses, police officers, judges, and lawyers) are all expected to lead to increasing VAWG as they contribute to the social degradation of women's lives. The empirical data analysed in Chapter Four demonstrates that this impact is worse for women in situations of further vulnerability like migrants, women living in poverty, minority ethnic women and women with disabilities. Their exposure to violence is even higher as the politics of austerity does not take into consideration that normally vulnerabilities intersect (Emejulu and Bassell 2018). Challenging and contesting the neoliberal projects latest attempt to "remake the terrain of the social in such a manner that previous agreements about equality and the reach of mutuality are under threat" (Bhattacharyya 2015: 12) is thus of central importance to many feminist activists, including the anti-VAWG activists who participated in this research, as this thesis will demonstrate.

However, it is also important to acknowledge that the gendered violence of austerity does not just emanate from its policies. These policies have required

significant ideological backing that has produced potent forms of symbolic violence. As will become clear while reading this thesis, anti-VAWG activists are currently operating in an environment where neoliberal and neoconservative ideologies have forged a highly compatible symbiotic relationship, “finding common ground in the recasting and reinforcing of patriarchies” (Cornwall 2008: 5). As a project of capital accumulation, austerity requires that women submit to neoliberal policies on production (in which they are expected to perform their role as cheap labourers) and neoconservative policies on reproduction (in which they are expected to carry out the care work abandoned by the state and increase their domestic labour at home). To facilitate this the UK Coalition government, and its Conservative successor (2015-2020) deployed a ‘moral economy’ (Thompson 1961) in which women’s labour was presented as a solution to “rescue” global capitalism from economic crisis (Calkin 2015). In particular, neoconservative ideologies that valorise feminised forms of work no longer provided by the government have been used to pressure women into spending more time meeting needs in their homes and communities; an expectation that Federici believes “fosters more violent familial relations as women are expected to bring home money, but are abused if they fall short on their domestic duties” (2017: no pagination).

Some scholars have also noted how this appeal to neoconservative traditions and gender roles has been accompanied by a strengthening of highly misogynistic and reactionary ideas about women, including the normalisation and routinisation of violence against them. For instance, Gotell and Dutton (2016) argue that the proliferation of Men’s Rights Activism is not a coincidence but rather a means by which men can act upon their anxieties about changing gender norms – and usually in ways that erase women’s experiences of gender violence and inequality (e.g. by

claiming that domestic and sexual violence is gender neutral, or that false allegations of this violence are widespread). This activism is often highly misogynistic, is known to promote and encourage male violence against women, and contributors regularly organise campaigns of harassment against feminists (see Coston and Kimmel 2013). Bhattacharya (2014) likewise believes it is no coincidence that Western countries are witnessing a “rising tide of rape defence from figures of social standing ... [a] spate of bills attacking reproductive and LGBTQ rights ... [and] slut shaming and victim blaming” because these things provide “various ways to reorder femininity and re-invoke the mythic breadwinner-homemaker family” while concealing the fault lines of class power and oppression (2014: no pagination). Such an analysis demands that we do not separate the economic and cultural spheres but rather view them as co-constitutive.

The recent work of Anna Carastathis (2015) is particularly instructive in helping us think about the economy as culturally embedded. Her paper on the financial meltdown in Greece demonstrates how austerity politics operate *through* gendered and racialised forms of hostility, producing “scapegoats” onto whom our political-economic-cultural fears are projected. While it has been previously shown that economic recessions frequently generate heightened levels of racism and xenophobia among citizens (EUFRA 2010), Carastathis’ argument is that austerity actually *relies upon* this symbolic violence in order to generate an “affective economy of hostility” that degrades the social position of specific marginalised social groups. To be sure, since beginning this research, the relentless bombardment of headlines about migrant scroungers, exploiting the welfare state and stealing jobs, have become a normalised aspect of mainstream culture in Britain, reducing migrant men and women to objects of contempt and bolstering anti-immigrant sentiment (Burnett 2017). This nationalism

has helped garner widespread support for a range of restrictive immigration policies and public spending cuts that deny access to social rights and welfare support for the most vulnerable in our communities. At the same time, it has also helped redirect attention away from the reasons why men and women are migrating to Britain in the first place, which is increasingly a result of the conflicts, violence, poverty and displacement caused by Western neoliberal imperialism. Both of these outcomes help sustain the neoliberal project.

For anti-VAWG activists, this racist and xenophobic policy environment presents complex challenges, especially for those supporting immigrant women who have experienced violence. Many of these women have migrated to Britain for purposes of survival – fleeing violence at home and risking further violence in transit only to experience more violence on arrival. By creating fewer avenues for legal immigration, the Coalition government made women from poorer countries more vulnerable to trafficking. Furthermore, once in Britain, immigrant women are now increasingly vulnerable to domestic, sexual and other forms of violence because they are unable to access the public funds that would enable them to escape abusive situations and hold their abusers accountable (see Chapter Four). Nevertheless, dominant narratives continue to depict BME and immigrant communities as inherently patriarchal and violent, and these narratives are now frequently used to justify restrictive immigration policies. In some instances the British government's own approaches have conflated violence against BME women – particularly honour based violence, forced marriage and FGM – with counter extremism strategies (Imkaan 2017). The recent shift from state multiculturalism to debates about assimilation is a prime example of this desire to blame minority communities for failing to integrate and to present them as responsible for their own plight (see Chapter Two). This shift

has widespread implications for the funding and resources made available to these communities, including for BME survivors of violence and the specialist organisations that advocate on their behalf (see Chapter Four).

While physical violence and racial harassment and intimidation of migrant women certainly appears to be on the rise in Britain (Agerholm 2017) it is the socio-symbolic nature of this violence and its ability to generate “apathy and indifference to the horrific conditions in which most migrants live, are detained and are deported” that Carastathis (2015: 109) finds most disturbing. Rather than acknowledging the complex and intersecting vulnerabilities faced by poor and immigrant women in Britain, Carastathis believes this apathy and widespread complacency enables the systematic debasement of immigrant women and a general acceptance of violence against them as deserved. It is therefore clear that the implications of austerity go far beyond the cuts. Neoliberal austerity policies and their supporting ideologies work in tandem with key power structures – including patriarchy, racism, nationalism and imperialism – in ways that modify how these structures function in material and political life. The intensifying violent public discourses around gender, race, ethnicity, disability, migration and poverty, some of which are outlined above, must be understood in this context, because it is through these discourses (and the divisions and hierarchies they create) that money, political power, cultural resources and social organisation flow (Duggan 2003). This thesis therefore explores how anti-VAWG activists in North East England are conceptualising and responding to these complex forms of socio-symbolic violence and their real life implications for women in austerity Britain.

### *3.3 A Rise in VAWG in Britain*

In light of the discussions above, it is sadly unsurprising that levels of VAWG have been rising in Britain since 2009 (see Walby et al. 2016). However, the true extent of this rise in violence against women is hard to quantify because the available statistics do not reflect the extensiveness of this problem. For instance, in 2016/17 the police recorded over 138,000 sexual offences – the highest figure recorded since 2002 when the National Crime Recording Standard was introduced and a 23 percent increase on the previous year (ONS 2017). Police records show that instances of domestic violence, stalking and harassment have also increased by double figures over the last three years (ONS 2017). Yet while such findings certainly support claims that VAWG is on the rise in Britain, these statistics are also likely to be substantial undercounts due to a whole range of cultural, economic and social reasons that stop women from reporting VAWG in the first place, including shame, fear of victim-blaming and lack of faith in the criminal justice system (Goulding 2017). Indeed, studies have found that only around 15 to 20 percent of women who experience sexual assault report to the police (Beckford 2012; Ministry of Justice 2013) and in the current context of austerity, this situation is expected to worsen. Scholars have predicted that as a result of rising levels of impoverishment and financial insecurity, reporting to the police will actually decrease while levels of VAWG increase (Renzetti 2009) – particularly for the most marginalised and vulnerable women (i.e. those who are at risk of deportation, who cannot afford to lose their partners income, who do not have the resources to obtain a lawyer). Given that women in marginalised and financially dependent positions are usually at highest risk of experiencing domestic and sexual violence (Sokoloff & Dupont 2005) we can comfortably predict that police statistics will



continue to represent only the tip of the iceberg of women's experiences of violence in austerity Britain.

While population-based surveys such as the Crime Survey of England and Wales (CSEW) are usually the most reliable method for collecting data on the extent of crime in the population, evidence suggests that this reliability does not extend to statistics on violence against women. With regards to the CSEW, some of the most abused women in the population are excluded from the sampling frame, including homeless women, women living in refuges or temporary accommodation, women in prison, women detained in immigration removal centres and women living in student accommodation (see Hutchinson et al. 2014; Jewkes et al. 2010; Girma et al. 2014; Bulman 2017; Phipps 2012). The CSEW also omits data collection on a range of highly gendered forms of violence (including forced marriage, honour based violence, female genital mutilation, acid attacks, dowry abuse, trafficking and forced prostitution); overlooks forms of violence perpetrated by state actors; and excludes misogynistic hate crimes from the broader hate crime category, despite mounting evidence of high levels of misogynistic abuse both online and offline (see Lewis et al. 2016; Hardaker & McGalshan 2016; Buchan 2018). For a survey attempting wide-ranging coverage and accurate statistics, these omissions are very problematic – and new issues continue to arise. For instance, until recently the CSEW's decision to cap the number of repeat victimisations at five was considered an effective way of ensuring that crime estimates were not affected by “a very small number of respondents who report an extremely high number of incidents” (ONS 2013: 15). However, Walby et al. (2015: 1204) found that “when all reported crimes in 2011/12 were counted rather than capped, the amount of violent crimes against women and the amount of violent crimes by domestic perpetrators both increased by 70 percent”. This is because, unlike

men, women survivors of domestic violence rarely reported one incident, or even several, but rather “a systematic and sustained campaign of repression that can last years” (Gayle 2016: no pagination). Removing the cap thus helped capture the highly gendered nature of domestic violence as a form of *coercive control* – a series of related rather than one-off events (Stark 2007).

Walby et al. (2016) have since applied this new uncapped methodology to all CSEW data between 1994 and 2014 and their findings offer statistical evidence to confirm what anti-VAWG activists have known all along: that providing resources and accessible services for victims helps reduce overall levels of VAWG in society by decreasing the likelihood of repeat victimisation. While the original CSEW methodology indicates a drop in violent crime against women from 1994 onwards, this new methodology reveals a significant increase in this violence between 2009 and 2014 – an increase that directly coincides with the global financial crisis and the introduction of austerity measures in Britain. As Walby et al. have themselves remarked: “the turning point in the rate of these violent crimes is consistent with an explanation focused on the reduced economic independence of women and the impact of the cuts to services on which women disproportionately depend” (2016: 1220). That women are now *less* able to leave violent relationships underlines the significance of the government’s decision to cut funding for key services used by women who experience domestic and sexual violence – a concern shared by the majority of activists interviewed for this study (see Chapter Four). That this increase in repeat victimisation is so high that it has fuelled an overall rise in violent crime is a major finding, especially as violent crime against men continues to fall (Walby 2016: 1221).

This finding is undoubtedly valuable for activists attempting to push the government to act on VAWG, and it has certainly been useful to have quantitative evidence to substantiate the theoretical framework informing my thesis and to provide a foundation for my empirical enquiry. However, it is unlikely that VAWG statistics will ever provide a comprehensive picture of the pervasiveness or nature of this violence or about the intersections between different forms of violence and structural processes. Many of the women least likely to report violence and most likely to be excluded from national crime surveys are the same women that research participants expressed most concern about (see Chapter Four). Complex structural forces of gender/sexism, race/racism, class/classism and nationality/xenophobia intersect in their lives in ways that render them more vulnerable to violence and less able to access help and support. It is for this reason that this thesis is interested in how anti-VAWG activists are making sense of the *qualitative* dimensions of VAWG in relation to causality and the role of context, history and culture in creating new “conductive contexts” in which VAWG flourishes (Kelly 2016).

#### **4.0 Conceptualising and Responding to VAWG during times of Crisis**

As outlined earlier in the chapter, Griffin (2015) has recently expressed concern about the development of a “crisis governance feminism” which is markedly silent about the gendered underpinnings of global neoliberal governance, focusing instead on supporting institutional measures that tackle injustices at the individual rather than the structural level. However, other scholars have conceptualised the crisis as having the potential to open up new spaces of feminist possibility and radical critique (Fraser 2013; Khasnabish and Havien 2014). Keen to identify the impact of the crisis on feminist conceptualisations of violence against women, this thesis examines the

different analyses currently circulating among anti-VAWG activists in North East England as they attempt to make sense of rising levels of gender violence and inequality in Britain and globally (see Chapter Five). In particular, it explores which inequalities are being considered by anti-VAWG activists in the current social, political and economic context, and how these inequalities and their interrelations are being conceptualised and related to VAWG at structural and cultural levels. Have there been any recent transformations in the activists' interpretations of VAWG following the global financial crisis and government responses to it?

This line of inquiry does not presume that VAWG can be “subsumed under a single definition or relegated to a certain epoch or a symbolic moment in time” (Bahun & Rajan 2015: 32). Rather, it is informed by an understanding of VAWG as causally linked to cultural and structural oppressions that interact in complex and dynamic ways across the social ecology of a given historical context (Heise 1998). Feminist scholars and activists have always encountered the challenge of rethinking and updating their theoretical commitments as times change and conditions alter. The once powerful and persuasive analyses of the patriarchal causes of male violence during the 1960s and 1970s have since been adapted and expanded to include multiple dimensions of inequality and their intersections (Crenshaw 1991; Collins 1990). This scholarship demonstrates that the causes of VAWG cannot be comprehended in terms of universal, foreseeable patterns of gender, race and class oppression but rather as contextual and constantly evolving in ever changing societies.

Yet while there has evidently been much discussion among feminist scholars about the material and symbolic implications of austerity for women's lived experiences of violence and inequality, as outlined above, the voices of feminist

activists from outside of the academy are often missing from these conversations, despite the centrality of their work to social change efforts. This absence is especially problematic at a time when established theoretical commitments within academic feminism are being questioned in light of rising levels of structural and state-sanctioned VAWG (Mohanty 2013; Fraser 2012). As discussed further in Chapter Two, the postmodernist turn in feminist theory – with its emphasis on discourse and distrust of grand narratives and systemic critique – has been accused by some scholars of nurturing the logics and practices of the political-economic-cultural framework of neoliberalism. Given that this framework is now viewed by many scholars as responsible for the rise in gender violence and inequality we are witnessing today (see True 2012; Weissman 2013; McRobbie 2009; Newman 2012; Eisenstein 2009; Bumiller 2008) it seems reasonable to assume that scholars have much to learn from women's experiences on the ground. As Deborah Weismann points out, “theories developed in the context of one set of objective conditions at a discrete historical moment must possess the capacity to adapt to different conditions at later historical moments” (Weissman 2007: 387). Thinking about how we might develop theory that is useful for movement activists is a particularly worthwhile endeavour, especially now that many of the spaces that anti-VAWG activists have relied on for consciousness-raising and critical reflection are being restructured and eroded by austerity policies, as discussed further below.

#### *4.1 The Restructuring of the Women's Sector under Austerity*

As well as affecting the material basis of VAWG and ensuring that services for survivors of this violence are reduced to the minimum, neoliberalism also erodes

Leftist social movements, including feminist movements, with hostile policies and low funding that curtail collective action. In Britain, feminists have historically relied on the political spaces opened up by the welfare state in order to transform responses to and services for survivors of domestic and sexual violence (see Chapter Two). The ongoing encroachment of neoliberal policies into these political spaces – especially since the implementation of austerity measures in 2010 – has therefore had a significant impact on feminist anti-VAWG organising in Britain, restricting the space for community-based organising and political participation (Ishkanian 2013).

During the earlier stages of this research, it was David Cameron’s notion of the Big Society that provided the moral and social justification required to legitimise welfare state retrenchment. Cameron asserted that by “shifting power and decision making away from central government towards voluntary organisations, communities and individuals” (Home Office 2011: 18) service providers would be given greater control over the ways in which they deliver their services. In particular, the women’s sector was frequently referenced in political speeches as an exemplary model of the Big Society and of women’s nurturing presence in society (Women’s Grid 2010). However, while some feminists were initially drawn in by this rhetoric, most saw it as a smokescreen for systematically undermining citizens’ (and especially women’s) social rights (Wiggan 2012). In particular, the Coalition government’s Localism agenda, which devolved decision making power from central government to local authorities, occurred alongside significant cuts to local authority spending and, by extension, spending on local VAWG services. Featherstone et al. (2012) coined the term “austerity localism” to highlight that state devolution does not guarantee sufficient resources for long-term programmes, or support for the most marginalised and vulnerable. To be sure, a report documenting the impact of austerity measures on

women's organisations in the North East England, published shortly after I began this research, revealed that local government spending on VAWG services between 2010 and 2012 had decreased by an average of 9.2% despite demand for these services increasing significantly during this same period (NEWN 2013: 20).

We see in Chapter Four that these organisations are absorbed in responding not only to the direct violence experienced by women survivors but also the effects of austerity measures and welfare reforms upon their lives. At the same time, the activists themselves are suffering the effects of the cuts due to organisation closures, high levels of staff turnover and high levels of stress and burn out. The increasing use of competition rather than democratic accountability as a principle mechanism for organising public services continues to change the environment in which public and third sector organisations are working (Clarke and Newman 1997). Existing research has documented how state funding for women's organisations has been used to "monitor and control social justice movements ... and redirect activist energies into career-based modes of organizing instead of mass-based organizing capable of actually transforming society" (INCITE! 2007: 134). This thesis shows that anti-VAWG activists must now scramble and compete for this funding, twisting their mandates through feats of grant writing acrobatics in order to stay afloat. Organisations that are partially or fully state funded are often restricted by state funding regulations that demand limited or no political content or advocacy. This austerity is divisive and serves to erode the solidarities and alliances built between women's organisations. However, there is also much evidence of resilience and resistance in the face of these depoliticising forces. This is why it is important to pay attention to the ways in which activists work the spaces of neoliberalism (Laurie and Bondi 2012; Newman 2012).

## *4.2 Working the Spaces of Neoliberalism*

Several scholars have drawn inspiration from Foucault's concept of 'governmentality' to examine the ways in which neoliberalism operates as a regulatory and disciplinary form of self-governance (see Ong 2006; Rose 1993). Broadly, this concept draws attention to the "messy actualities" of neoliberalism's invasion of society's institutions and organisations as it calls for profit generation, cost effectiveness and business models of practice (Rose 1993; Crouch 2011). This is evident, for example, in processes of bureaucratisation which emphasise "budget disciplines, accountability and audit" (Larner 2000: 13) and in neoliberalism's operation as a "technology of the self" (Rose 1993: 74) whereby self-responsibility and self-reliance are promoted as a means of reducing citizens' claims on the state. Importantly, it is also evident in our conceptions of politics and political action. As demonstrated further in the data analysis chapters, anti-VAWG activists encounter a variety of the neoliberal project's rationalising schemes (competitiveness, professionalism, entrepreneurialism efficiency, flexibility, instant gratification) on a daily basis, and this shapes their ways of understanding and enacting their politics. Yet as will become apparent, these rationalities are not simply accepted but are simultaneously embraced, negotiated, contested and reproduced by anti-VAWG activists. Understanding the many ways anti-VAWG activists are living and handling these tensions is key to understanding neoliberal subject formation in the context of restructured VAWG services, which is why I explore how activists both internalise and subvert neoliberal ideologies and forms of governance, as well as the subtle ways that neoliberalism infiltrates and impacts on their activist identities and strategies for social change (see Chapter Seven).



I appreciate that this is not necessarily an easy environment in which to ask feminists to analyse the strengths and limitations of their activism and of the movement as a whole. To be sure, it appears that some feminists have resisted public discussion of the perceived weaknesses of their anti-VAWG organising out of concern that it might provide the Right with anti-feminist ammunition. This preservative measure is sometimes presented as an attempt to prevent in-fighting and maintain a united front against some of the most powerful backlash forces that feminists have encountered in decades. However, while the Right have undoubtedly played a role in harming feminist projects and undoing many of the gains made by feminists since the 1960s (see Chapter Two) this is not a legitimate reason to avoid examining problems within the movement. Such a defensive approach would not only prevent critical discussions about the movement's ability to rise to face new challenges, including new forms of sexism, racism, austerity, conservatism and xenophobia, but would also serve to uphold structures of privilege and oppression *within* the movement – diverting blame and attention towards external power relations while glossing over the feminist projects own links with non-emancipatory agendas. The intersectional methodological approach to this research, outlined in Chapter Three, seeks to draw out some of these tensions.

## **5.0 Research Questions and Structure of Thesis**

The effects of neoliberal austerity politics on feminist anti-VAWG activism are yet to be fully explored in Britain and this thesis seeks to fill this gap in knowledge. The following research questions were used to guide my theoretical and empirical enquiries:

- What are the main challenges facing anti-VAWG activists in the current austerity context (2012-2015) and how are these challenges affecting their service delivery and social change agendas?
- How are anti-VAWG activists conceptualising and making sense of the rising levels of VAWG in Britain and how is this informing their strategies to tackle VAWG in their communities?
- Where are anti-VAWG directing their demands for social justice (i.e. central government, local government, criminal justice system) and in what ways do these demands target the underlying structures, norms and ideologies perpetuating VAWG today?
- What does the above tell us about the dominant logics guiding anti-VAWG activism in North East England and the possibilities and limitations of this activism in the second decade of the twenty-first century?

Chapter Two explores the diverse trajectories of the anti-VAWG movement as it has unfolded in Britain, tracing its historical roots and contemporary forms. Questions about the depoliticisation of anti-VAWG activism are addressed in relation to the shifting political economy of neoliberal capitalism. Chapter Three outlines the methodological approach of this research and argues that intersectionality theory and feminist ethnographic research methods can operate as important methodological counterpoints to neoliberalism and to the inroads made by its austerity politics in recent decades. Chapters Four, Five and Six present an analysis of the empirical data.

Chapter Four explores the impact of austerity measures on women's experiences of VAWG service provision in the women's sector and outlines how activists are attempting to overcome some of the challenges associated with the highly competitive commissioning climate brought about by austerity. Chapter Five examines how anti-VAWG activists are conceptualising and making sense of the causes and consequences of VAWG in the current historical moment and demonstrates that many anti-VAWG activists are adopting feminist analyses of VAWG that draw upon anti-capitalist and anti-austerity critique. Chapter Six outlines a range of different strategies that are being employed by anti-VAWG activists in their efforts to prevent VAWG and hold the national government to account for its failures to protect victims of this violence. Their participation in efforts to guide and inform the Police and Crime Commissioners' regional VAWG strategy, and their lobbying efforts at the UN CEDAW examination are both explored in detail. Finally, Chapter Seven discusses the main findings that have emerged from this study and outlines the main conclusions that can be made.

# 2

## Understanding Feminist Anti-Violence Activism

### 1.0 Introduction

Levels of violence against women remain exponentially high around the globe, despite the half-a-century long existence of women's movements working towards preventing this violence. Since the 1960s, feminists have arguably succeeded in bringing about a cultural revolution that has changed societal outlooks, approaches and legal responses to violence against women (Weldon and Htun 2013) yet this has not fully translated into structural or institutional change. This chapter maps out some of the complexities and challenges that feminists have faced and continue to face in their struggles to end VAWG in Britain and globally. The chapter pays particularly close attention to the unfolding of anti-VAWG activism and the ways in which neoliberalism and feminism have become antagonistically aligned in particular ways, in particular places, at particular historical moments. The literature examined suggests that the emergence and development of neoliberalism alongside the anti-VAWG movement has had significant implications for VAWG prevention efforts in Britain.

## 2.0 The Emergence of the anti-VAWG Movement in Britain

The feminist anti-VAWG movement surfaced in Britain only a short while before the economic prosperity and utopianism of the 1960s counterculture yielded to an era of expansive economic downturn and conservative political backlash. During the social democratic years of state organised capitalism following World War Two, progressive Left movements in Britain were concerned with a variety of different social issues – from poverty to gay liberation, from anti-racism to gender equality – but Duggan asserts that unlike the social movements of the mid-1980s onwards, these movements were connected by “the pressure to level hierarchies and redistribute *down* – redistribute money, political power, cultural capital, pleasure, and freedom” (Duggan 2003: XVII). In Britain, the development of the modern welfare state fundamentally transformed the nature of social movements in the decades that followed, from their prior efforts “primarily concerned with the provision of social services” to a “longstanding interest in shaping the broader socio-political agenda” (Crowson et al. 2009: 4-5). Viewing the welfare state as a reformist obstacle to socialism, Wainwright (2010) explains that many movements began to make key distinctions between public resources, which they defended and wished to see expand, and how these resources were administered, which they tried to transform and to democratise. To be sure, it was during this period that many socialist feminist groups began developing networks of support and care outside of the paternalist welfare state, not necessarily with the intension of dismantling the welfare state so much as transforming it into a force that could expose and challenge the androcentrism of the capitalist system (Mitchell 1966; Rowbotham 1972; Smith 1977; Wilson 1978; Kuhn & Wolpe 1978; Barrett 1980). In particular, they sought to demonstrate that the Keynesian welfarism tools being implemented to soften the boom-bust cycles endemic to capitalism were inherently

patriarchal. The family wage was especially controversial, accused of naturalising gender injustices by increasing most women's financial dependence on the male breadwinner whilst undermining the importance of their own unpaid domestic labour (Wilson 1977; Eisenstein 2009). Feminists challenged this bias and in doing so achieved some degree of financial autonomy for women, including single mothers, and they devised a range of strategies that permitted women to be both wage earners and carers. This included the expansion of support for childcare costs, maternity pay and leave, and more direct entitlements to social security; though women continued to be disproportionately concentrated in part-time and low-paying jobs.

Many feminists, inspired by Marxism and socialism as well as radical variants of feminism, began adopting a 'dual systems' analysis of women's oppression as an effect of intertwining capitalist and patriarchal relations (Hartmann 1979; Eisenstein 1978). Women's disproportionate responsibility for domestic labour and childcare and their consequent financial dependence on men was often central to this critique and so a transformation of women's position in the home and workplace drove socialist feminist efforts during this era. Importantly, it was within this context that the feminist anti-VAWG movement emerged in Britain in the 1960s. Dobash and Dobash (1992) explain that the early anti-VAWG movement was heavily informed by many of these earlier feminist critiques of the family, the capitalist economy, the class system, welfare dependency and the need for structural change and redistribution of power and resources. However, the anti-VAWG movement also sought to extend and transform these analyses by establishing men's violence against women as the fundamental site of women's oppression (Dobash and Dobash 1979; Barry 1979; Martin 1976; Russell 1975; Brownmiller 1975). This approach was no longer just about redistributing

money and power but also about challenging the dominant cultural attitudes and societal norms sustaining patriarchy and VAWG in Britain.

The anti-VAWG movement was met with resistance by many on the Left, including feminists pursuing a socialist political agenda. Sell explains that at this point in history, most socialist feminists were concerned with the emancipation of the working classes following decades of Marxist influence and were frequently told “that raising male violence against women in the trade unions was divisive” (Sell 2013: no page number). In particular, Sell recalls how feminists were scolded by members of the Socialist Workers Party for focusing “consistently on areas where men and women are at odds – rape, battered women, wages for housework – while ignoring or playing down the important struggles in which women are more likely to win the support of men: strikes, opposition to welfare cuts, equal pay, unionisation, abortion” (Sell 2013: no pagination). This is a prime example of the “unhappy marriage” between feminism and Marxism that Heidi Hartmann wrote about in 1979. Socialist feminists were criticised by anti-VAWG movement members for insufficiently disentangling themselves from the male dominated politics and language structures that the movement was attempting to resist.

It was thus predominantly radical feminists that organised the campaigns, protests and refuges for victims of domestic and sexual violence during this period. Through consciousness raising methods and various grassroots campaigns and public protests, they called attention to the often hidden reality of male violence in women’s lives. Moreover, by situating gender inequality as the sole determining factor of domestic violence, they were able to demonstrate that *all* women, irrespective of their class, race, ethnicity, sexuality or age, were its potential victims (Itzin 2000). Kelly

(1988) explains this political message was strategically employed to convince the state to intervene in what had for centuries been considered a private issue; and in many ways this attempt to make the personal political was very successful. By the late 1970s, the newly-formed Women's Aid Federation England (WAFE) had developed the first refuges for women fleeing domestic violence; Rape Crisis Centres (RCCs) were opening across the country; and a national domestic violence helpline was established, confirming that instances of domestic and sexual abuse were more prevalent than previously anticipated (Dobash and Dobash 1992).

The efforts of the anti-VAWG movement to politicise VAWG and demand state action merged with liberal feminists' attempts to facilitate equality between men and women through legal reform. While radical feminists maintained that the patriarchy could not be eradicated without restructuring society, they saw the benefits of gaining short-term protection for women by harnessing the power of the state and law. By 1976 the Domestic Violence and Matrimonial Proceedings Act provided access to civil protection orders for women experiencing domestic violence, the 1977 Homeless Person's Act gave abused women priority in obtaining housing, and the 1985 Prohibition of Female Circumcision Act made female genital mutilation (FGM) a criminal offence. During this period law enforcement behaviour was also reformed: the police were encouraged to intervene in this violence and the courts were encouraged to prosecute its perpetrators.

However, as time passed it became clear that the approaches taken by radical and liberal feminists were inherently flawed because the analyses and strategies they were adopting to politicise VAWG were largely conceived from the standpoints of predominantly white, middleclass, heterosexual women (Mama 1989). In the process,



its interconnections with other oppressions in women's lives aside from patriarchy – including racism, classism and heterosexism – were often overlooked (Sokoloff & Dupont 2005). While many radical feminists attempted to defend their approach as strategic, often highlighting the need to avoid individualising domestic violence or having it stigmatised as a problem of race and class identity, this approach nevertheless excluded the voices and experiences of BME and immigrant women, rendering them still unsafe. Therefore, while there is certainly no doubt that radical feminists' constructions of VAWG were more sophisticated than prior theoretical perspectives which often blamed women for their own victimisation (see Amir 1971), it was left to Black and postcolonial feminists to show how patriarchy works through race and class in ways that exacerbate violence in the lives of Black and minority ethnic (BME) women.

Black feminist organisations such as the National Black Feminist Organization (1963) and the Combahee River Collective (1977) in the United States, and the Organisation of Women of Asian and African Descent (1978) and Southall Black Sisters (1979) in the United Kingdom, criticised second-wave feminism for its inherent whiteness, class-bias, heteronormativity and liberalism, and its consequent disregard of the experiences and needs of marginalised, diasporic and colonised groups of women. Supported by the work of Black feminists in the academy, their efforts were both analytical and practical: “how to develop an integrated feminist analysis that considers women's multiple oppressions, their differential experiences, and the political implications” while also questioning how the anti-VAWG movement might give “leadership to women who have been marginalised ... and thus equalize power relations among women within these movements” (Barton 2004: no pagination). In particular, Black feminists began to infuse the mainstream anti-VAWG

movement with theories about the inseparability of systems of power in women's lives (Ramazanoglu, 1986; Anthias & Yuval-Davis 1983; Mama 1989; Brah 1996; Gupta 2003). Awaz was the first Black socialist feminist organisations to set up in Britain and its members regarded "the struggle for 'equal rights' ... as useful only if accompanied by a struggle for changes in structures of power" (Wilson 2010: 57). This included those structures frequently overlooked by white radical and liberal feminists during the 1960s and 1970s.

These earlier contributions from Black feminist activists, though often not featuring in mainstream discussions during this period, began to seriously alter the transgressive and transformative potential of the anti-VAWG movement and its radical critique of various forms of oppression. Predating theories of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989, 1991), Black feminist activists connected racism with sexism whilst drawing attention to the class dimensions of patriarchy and white domination, and they related this to Black women's experiences of male violence in Britain and beyond. Amrit Wilson (1978) was one of the first South Asian women in Britain to write about gendered power relations in the South Asian diaspora. She highlighted that South Asian women are often regarded as the 'property' of the men in their family and community (see also Wilson 2006) and that their sexuality tends to be carefully controlled in order to uphold the *izzat* (honour) of their family, community and caste (see also Welchman and Hossain 2005). Extra-marital relationships, refusing an arranged marriage or becoming too "Westernised" or sexualised were identified by Wilson as deeply shameful acts that justified punishment. Today this punishment is often referred to as honour-based violence, which can include physical, emotional, psychological and financial abuse, confinement or imprisonment, being forced into marriage, female genital mutilation and murder (Meetoo and Mirza 2007). Had it not

been for Black feminist activism during the 1970s, the anti-VAWG movement would have failed to incorporate into its early theorising an understanding of the ‘cultural’ practices that many South Asian families had brought with them from their countries of origin, and their connections with violence against women.

Overall, this section has demonstrated that by the end of the 1970s, the anti-VAWG movement had rejected the Marxist emphasis on class oppression as the exemplary social injustice, and the liberal fixation with the state and legislature, and had instead combined these critiques within a broader understanding of the relationship between the sexes (radical feminism), between class and gender (socialist feminism), and between race, class and gender (Black feminism). In short, the anti-VAWG movement had created a broad yet radical understanding of gender justice as encompassing state, economy, culture and politics, and bound by an understanding of women’s oppression as systemic (Fraser 2013). In 1978 the Women’s Liberation Conference named VAWG prevention as one of its main demands, which attracted the attention of the Labour Party and the trade unions (Sell 2013). This was a considerable victory for the movement but as discussed further below, this victory was unfortunately short lived.

### **3.0 The Rise of Neoliberalism in Britain**

The growing interest in VAWG prevention within socialist circles towards the end of the 1970s was severed before it really had the chance to develop. Nancy Fraser (2013: 22) describes how feminist activists had “the ground cut from under their feet” as the newly elected Thatcher government launched its neoliberal attack on the very idea of egalitarian redistribution. This attack represented a new reaction both to the deepening

economic recession that had emerged during the 1970s and the myriad social movements that presented a legitimate challenge to the capitalist system and its uneven distribution of resources, of which the anti-VAWG movement was one among many.

Neoliberal economic policies were presented by the Thatcher government in the UK and the Reagan government in the US as the best solution to the unstable economic conditions that had emerged under Keynesian policies of state interventionism. Whereas Keynesian welfarism prioritised full employment and regarded welfare investment as essential for balancing the economy during times of recession, neoliberal policy frameworks shifted “from providing public services to that of facilitating market solutions” (Whitehead & Crawshaw 2013: 233). This shift relied on a number of new policy commitments, including: the deregulation of the economy, the privatisation of public assets, the liberalisation of industry and trade, the creation of low paid flexible labour, the reduction of trade union power, and the dismantling of the welfare state (Harvey 2005; Birch & Mykhenko 2010). Importantly, this framework extended far beyond the confines of UK and US domestic policy and is now synonymous with the structural adjustment policies (SAPs) rolled out across the global South as the conditions for receiving loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. The loans demanded that recipient countries adopt free market principles of deregulation and privatisation in order to boost their struggling economies and stimulate economic growth (Harvey 2005). However, social policy analysts have demonstrated that expanding social divisions and rising levels of poverty, inequality and injustice are the primary consequences of neoliberal policy reform around the globe (Harvey 2005; Brenner & Theodore 2002).

The feminist political agenda of transforming gender and other oppressive social and economic relations did not sit easily within neoliberal market-led agendas. In

Britain, the Thatcher government successfully co-opted earlier feminist critiques of the family wage and welfare paternalism in order to justify the erosion of the welfare state (Fraser 2012). This reduction in social protections in turn exposed women to deepening levels of inequality and made them more vulnerable to violence in both the workplace and in the home. As discussed in Chapter One, this is because welfare cuts affect the material basis of violence against women, governing the unequal distribution and use of resources, benefits, privileges and authority within the home and society at large. This has consequences for women's poverty and labour exploitation, their socioeconomic inequality with men, and their lack of political representation, trapping many women (and particularly poor, BME, migrant and disabled women) into potentially violent environments. A strong socialist critique of gender inequality was arguably needed more than ever (Fraser 2013).

It appears, however, that this critique did not fully emerge. Several scholars have argued that the wider critique of class and race differences, political economy and the patriarchal state, so evident in the earlier years of the anti-VAWG movement outlined above, was marginalised at precisely the time that it was needed most. This argument is championed by Nancy Fraser (2013) in particular. She maintains that an important shift occurred within feminism during the 1980s whereby political attention transferred almost entirely from the structural to the cultural, resulting in a form of identity politics that overshadowed political-economic concerns. Similarly, scholars such as Hester Eisenstein (2009) and Jodi Dean (2009) have argued that the British Left was slow to recognise the implications of the shift towards neoliberal capitalism in the late 1970s and its role in consolidating the power of the business and political elite. Instead, as this shift was taking place, "increasingly prominent voices on the Left emphasized and fought for personal freedoms: freedoms from parental and state

constraints as well as freedoms for the expression of differences of race, sex, and sexuality” (Dean 2009: 33).

Duggan (2003) articulates this response from the Left as an instinctive reaction to the expanding global inequalities and declining living conditions of the 1980s as neoliberal globalisation was rapidly expanding. In Britain, massive social and economic dislocation characterised the 1980s as deindustrialisation, rapidly soaring levels of under-employment and unemployment, and the growing ‘ethnicisation’ of class divisions, dismantled the industrial working class and intensified racist and xenophobic sentiment. Thatcher launched a conservative “backlash” against the progressive changes of the previous decades, including the progressive gains made by the feminist anti-VAWG movement. Gender income gaps persisted, women did ‘second shifts’ to cover costs of living and childcare, increasing numbers of children grew up in poverty, abortion rights came under renewed attack, and VAWG was generally ignored in political and legal arenas (Weissman 2016). These conditions, Duggan believes, set the conditions for the emergence of an identity politics based on the balkanised claims-making of single-issue identity groups seeking recognition and inclusion within the legal system. Whereas this liberal form of politics had existed as one element of political action alongside its socialist and radical variants prior to this period, Duggan argues that this began to change as social movements became dominated by concerns with lobbying for legislation that would protect the rights of specific social groups.

An analysis of feminist literature does indicate that the landscape of gender politics underwent rigorous theoretical scrutiny from the late 1980s onwards, as difference and diversity became major themes of analysis (Motta et al 2011; Scandrett & Mukherjee 2011; MacKay 2011; Hewitt 2011). The growing popularity of

postmodernist and poststructuralist thought appears to have engendered a wider acceptance that progressive politics cannot be fully achieved by pinpointing a collectively shared identity for mobilisation, because our identities are not stable and unchanging constructs but rather the products of ongoing processes of identification, whereby we identify ourselves with – and thus differentiate ourselves from – other people, social groups and political ideals (Hall 1996). This shift was apparent in the anti-VAWG arena as feminist scholars and activists moved beyond simplistic claims of a universally oppressed sisterhood in order to account for social differentiations and stratifications across axes of gender, race, class, sexuality, ability and age, whereby “a continued process of diversification and multiplication takes over from the frozen pairing of equity (sameness) and difference” (Kroløkke & Sørensen 2006: 15). To be sure, it was during this period that intersectionality theory (Crenshaw 1989, 1991) emerged as a critique of radical feminists’ conceptualisations of gender violence. Crenshaw, like many Black feminists before her, challenged the common assertion that gender was the sole determining factor of violence against women. As Lockhart and Danis explain, intersectionality theory advocates a recognition of “how a woman’s culture of origin, her place within the social, political and economic world, and within the society’s dominant culture, can affect her experience of violence and the options available to her” (2010: xxiii).

During the 1980s and 1990s, London-based Southall Black Sisters (SBS) were particularly influential in demonstrating the need for alternative support structures and culturally sensitive services for survivors. They successfully campaigned for refuges led by and for BME women; advocated for a bi-lingual domestic violence helpline; demanded more funding for language provision to enable BME women to communicate without relying on translation by perpetrators or family members; and

demonstrated how poverty, racism, language barriers, insecure immigration statuses, childcare responsibilities, fear of the police, of shaming their families, and of further violence, intersect in ways that create numerous barriers for BME women attempting to escape violent men and situations (see Gupta 2003). Such demands demonstrate that the socialist and redistributive elements of feminist activism did not disappear completed during the 1980s as is sometimes implied (see Fraser 2013; Eisenstein 2009; McRobbie 2009). Rather, it appears that there was a continued commitment to downward redistribution and systemic analyses, especially among Black and postcolonial feminists, but one that was being increasingly overshadowed by the single-issue claims of liberal and postmodernist feminists seeking recognition within society, education, law and media of women's diverse and deepening oppressions. As discussed further below, much of this had to do with the institutionalisation of the VAWG movement as feminist agendas were increasingly assimilated into neoliberal priorities – namely, the advancement of formal equality within the existing capitalist economic order.

However, this critique is also often directed at the more radical variants of postmodernism that emerged during the 1980s and 1990s – influenced by the work of Derrida (1991) and Foucault (1980) in particular – in which postmodern subjects are viewed as entirely determined by language because no objective reality is believed to exist, meaning that social change can only occur through the transformative power of discourse. It is through this rejection of ontological realism that some postmodernist feminists have promoted the deconstruction and eventual erasure of all social categories (i.e. gender, class, race, ethnicity, caste) – including the social category 'woman' (see Butler 1990) – which has in turn led to assertions that solidarity between women, based on similar positions in relation to social structures, is an untenable



notion that must be contested. This line of thinking is a prime example of what McCall (2005) refers to as the ‘anticategorical’ approach to examining social relations. McCall effectively breaks down this argument as follows: “since symbolic violence and material inequalities are rooted in relationships that are defined by race, class, sexuality, and gender, the project of deconstructing the normative assumptions of these categories contributes to the possibility of social change” (2005: 1777). This is because “language (in the broader social or discursive sense) creates categorical reality rather than the other way around” (2005: 1777). However, other scholars have argued that this is an ultimately depoliticised analysis that reinforces the neoliberal project, primarily because it hides the unjust and inequitable systems which structure inequality and oppression, and prevents the emergence of group solidarity and collective resistance (Mohanty 2013; Fraser 2013). Is it the case that postmodernist feminism has surrendered its transformative potential to the neoliberal project by modelling its critique in line with a neoliberal vision of politics? This line of argument is discussed further below, and encourages us to consider the ways in which anti-VAWG activists attempting to resist or challenge elements of neoliberal capitalism may sometimes unknowingly reinforce and reproduce it.

### *3.1 The Institutionalisation of the Anti-VAWG Movement*

Feminists’ relationship with the state and legislature has always been fraught with contradiction. The history is one in which feminists have been reverently tied to the liberal project whilst simultaneously seeking to escape it (Charles 2000; Howe 2006; Brown 1992). At once, feminists make claims upon the state to deliver women’s rights and broader societal demands while also criticising the state as enforcer of patriarchal relations, often as they intersect with various other forms of power and oppression. In

the case of VAWG, feminists have walked a particularly precarious tightrope. On the one hand, states can play an integral role in promoting accountability for tackling VAWG, coordinating prevention efforts, developing policies and legal reforms, establishing funding commitments for refuges and crisis centres, and directing strategies for social change (Weldon & Htun 2013). On the other hand, feminists have acknowledged “how the Liberal discourse of reform accepts hierarchy and inequality within the overall society and attempts simply to allow each group to compete ‘equally’ for the unequal distribution of resources, power and rewards” (Dobash & Dobash 1992: 23). Unsurprisingly, this dynamic has been ripe for unintended consequences for anti-VAWG activists.

Radical feminists addressing VAWG issues during the 1960s and 1970s had largely chosen to organise themselves outside of the remit of the patriarchal state. They did this in order to challenge and resist traditional masculinist organisational structures, but also so they could run domestic and sexual violence services that were non-hierarchical, led by survivors, staffed and funded by volunteers and independent from the state (Dobash and Dobash 1992). Activists from Southall Black Sisters recall that while resources were always limited during this period, the upside was that they had control over their political agenda (Gupta 2003). However, the challenge for many anti-VAWG collectives during the 1980s was to resist the temptation to register as a charity. Thatcher’s *New Public Management* agenda sought to transform the third sector into an arena of service providers rather than a space for serious democratic politics, and with this transformation came the security of consistent government funding and charitable grants. It was during this period that Women’s Aid and Rape Crisis Centres began receiving core funding from the government to provide services for survivors of domestic and sexual violence, and they were soon followed by a range

of other VAWG organisations that sought long-term economic security. Amrit Wilson recalls the increasing pressure that her own organisation felt to register as a charity and that once registered, they were immediately required to “keep clear of anything which could be considered political” (Wilson 2006: 164). Her organisation was one of the first South Asian women’s refuges in Britain but was “soon taken over by South Asian social workers for whom both feminism and anti-racism were anathema” (2010: 59).

It is now widely accepted that the shift towards neoliberal capitalism which occurred during the era of Thatcher “remained at the very least largely unchallenged during the period of New Labour government” (Bone 2012: 3; see also Hall 2003; Whitehead & Crawshaw 2013; Cowling 2013). Arestis and Sawyer have characterised New Labour’s policies, and their Third Way policies in particular, as “neo-liberalism with a human face” (2005: 275) to reflect Blair’s on-going commitment to deregulation and privatisation alongside his attempt to tap into the perceived social capital of civil society by “shifting the nature of the relationship between the statutory and voluntary sectors from co-production to ‘co-governance’ and ‘networked partnerships’” (Zimmeck et al. 2011: 4; see also Fyfe 2005). Although New Labour significantly increased public expenditure in comparison to their Conservative predecessors (Cowling 2013: 33), their ‘modernisation’ agenda involved the outsourcing of public services to the private sector as well as the introduction of targets, performance indicators and quality controls for service delivery, which Whitehead and Crawshaw (2013) argue served only to heighten competition between and among the public and private sectors and increase the government’s competitive control over civil society. Whereas the previous Conservative government had pursued a policy of *Compulsory Competitive Tendering* which largely overlooked

service quality in favour of cost effectiveness, New Labour's *Best Value* framework aimed to introduce "healthier competition" as organisations were encouraged to compare the quality, efficiency and cost of their practice with other public and private sector providers, and to make improvements where necessary. In short, those organisations capable of offering high-quality services for a low cost were often rewarded with consistent funding and those unsuccessful (usually smaller grassroots and community-based organisations unable to compete with national charities and infrastructure organisations) were not (Alcock 2010).

These processes became more engrained in the VAWG sector after the publication of New Labour's *Domestic Violence National Action Plan* in 2005, which Matczak et al. (2011: 6) argue "marked a shift in central government policy" as New Labour declared it would become a "full member" of the partnership between the voluntary and statutory sectors (see Home Office 2005). Whereas the approach since 1999 had generally been to support and add value to the voluntary sectors independent work around VAWG (see Home Office 1999), the Blair government intervened with a *National Domestic Violence Delivery Plan* in 2005 which outlined their centralised objectives for reducing the prevalence of domestic and sexual violence in the UK. As discussed further below, these objectives were preoccupied with protection and prosecution through the CJS rather than with feminist concerns for prevention, and to ensure compliance with this law and order agenda at local levels, targets and performance indicators were introduced in 2006 to measure the progress being made by agencies and organisations addressing VAWG issues. This progress was monitored in annual reviews and reports until New Labour's defeat in the 2010 elections.

### *3.3 The Professionalisation of the Anti-VAWG Movement*

For anti-VAWG organisations, the quantifiable outputs demanded by New Labour – usually measured by the number of women *successfully* supported by a women’s organisation – often compromised their capacity to address both the structural causes of VAWG and the complex needs of survivors of violence. Turley et al. (2014) explain that such outputs might “appear to show faster, concrete results, but . . . are often not sustainable, nor do they tend to address the causes of gender discrimination in the first place” (2014: 4). These processes intensified as anti-VAWG organisations were put under increasing pressure to professionalise: to abandon their anti-hierarchal principles, develop managerial and accountability structures, and acquire skills and experience in procurement processes and contract negotiation. Gaddis (2001) describes a process whereby the women who initially founded and developed the refuges were increasingly undervalued and pushed into submission by newly qualified healthcare professionals and social workers who were less concerned about identifying and eradicating the root causes of VAWG and more interested in ‘making it better’ for abused women (see also Meyer 2001). Similarly, Dobash and Dobash (2003) note that many of these professionals were preoccupied with assessing survivors for ‘treatment’ rather than empowering them to understand and challenge the structures that facilitated their abuse. It was also becoming increasingly common for refuges to be taken over by private housing associations with no political commitment or desire to engage in advocacy. All of these changes helped steer community-based organisations away from more radical social change agendas.

Overall, these processes have been highly problematic for the movement because, as Sokoloff and Dupont highlight, providing services for women survivors

of male violence “without providing for changes in the underlying and intersecting structural conditions of poverty, isolation, racism, sexism, and homophobia will not provide battered women with the means to significantly change their own situation and that of their battered sisters” (2005: 52). Lehrner and Allen (2009) believe that this problem reflects the increasing difficulty for advocates to “maintain a macro-level movement analysis of the problem in the face of concrete pressures to intervene (and thus conceptualize) at the individual level” (2009:12). As resources are directed toward individual services for victims, and professional standards dictate individual-level analyses, a myopic analysis of the issue as “that individual’s problem” becomes possible. Anti-VAWG activists at Southall Black Sisters have described the 1990s as a “largely apolitical period” of professionalisation, during which time “political campaigning focused on individual cases as a way of raising awareness of wider political issues – as if individual pain was the only point of entry into an understanding of a systemic disorder” (2003: 3).

### *3.4 The Criminalisation of VAWG*

From the 1980s onwards, feminist activists and scholars expended much energy trying to hold the state and the criminal justice system to account for their failure to protect and provide justice for women experiencing violence (see, for example, Dobash and Dobash, 1992). Achieving recognition that VAWG constituted criminal behaviour was seen as an important break from the long history in which VAWG had been ignored, minimised, and conceived as a personal trouble rather than a criminal offence. In terms of police practice, strict enforcement of the law and pro-arrest policies around domestic violence began to emerge in the late 1980s and early 1990s, yet evidence

gathered in the period following these developments shows that domestic violence assaults continued to be ‘downgraded’ by the police (Hester and Radford 1996). Evidence also suggests that this increase in police powers to intervene in cases of VAWG were rarely actually used for policing this violence. Indeed, Southall Black Sisters (see Gupta 2003) pointed out that increasing police powers to tackle domestic violence actually had a related effect of increasing surveillance of the black community and exacerbating the violence that Black women experienced at the hands of state actors. Thus, while there have undoubtedly been some improvements in police responses to VAWG in more recent years, it is clear that police interventions do not and cannot protect the vast majority of women from male violence. This is because the police are incapable of tackling and transforming the social inequalities that create the conditions for this violence in the first place (Stanko et al. 1998). Nevertheless, the police and criminal justice system has been, and continues to be, at the forefront of government responses to VAWG.

During the 1980s, community safety emerged as a new approach to tackling and preventing local crime and disorder, and was adopted into mainstream policy by New Labour in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. Unlike previous crime prevention strategies that sought to deal with domestic violence by urging strict enforcement of the law by police forces (e.g. the pro-arrest policies of the late 1980s), the community safety agenda acknowledged the wider social and physical impact of crime and the anxieties associated with potential victimisation (Crawford 1998). At the heart of this agenda was the formalisation of partnership arrangements as the principle mechanism for dealing with crime and community safety problems, including domestic and sexual violence. For Sandra Walklate, the Crime and Disorder Act centred “the notion of partnership as the mechanism for addressing local crime problems, and community

safety as the conceptual framework in which such partnerships need to be formed” (2000: 7). However, it is now clear that dominant constructions of community safety during this period reinforced the primacy of the police’s role in crime control. In the process, the expert knowledge of non-statutory women’s organisations (e.g. refuges, domestic violence organisations) was marginalised despite the emphasis on multi-agency responses.

One effect of this renewed emphasis on the police as a solution to domestic and sexual violence was that it enabled the police to assert their role further as expert definers of and responders to the problem. For example, the Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) was created in 2003 to facilitate more effective multi-agency responses to violence against women, yet Wilson (2013: 2) argues that the MARAC has since become “inseparable from disempowerment” as it subjects women to heightened state surveillance and discusses details of their lives without them present and without their overall involvement in the decision-making process. Moreover, due to its preoccupation with policing risk, the MARAC tends to prioritise the most “serious” forms of VAWG, overlooking the continuum of VAWG and minimising women’s routine everyday experiences of violence in the process. This is a profoundly anti-feminist approach to policing and preventing violence against women.

Despite the vast limitations of police and criminal justice responses to VAWG, many feminists continue to pursue this agenda in their prevention efforts. Weissman (2013) believes that this preoccupation with criminalisation was initially a result of feminist responses to the political and discursive opportunity structures presented by New Labour, as this appeared to be the best way of ensuring VAWG was established as central to policy development. Weissman also believes that this process offered



feminists a way of providing safety to women and punishing the perpetrator whilst avoiding the “daunting long-term process” required for addressing and tackling systemic inequalities (2013: 223). However, this process is considered by many to inhibit grassroots organizing and creative community thinking about real structural solutions to domestic and sexual violence. For instance, Sudbury (2006) argues that feminists calling for domestic violence and rape to be criminalised have been unwittingly “complicit in the “law and order” agenda that emerged as a response to globalization in Britain” and which has helped government shift resources away from social welfare programs and toward prisons (Sudbury 2014: 19; see also Bumiller 2008). At the same time she also believes it has caused feminists to become reliant on a response to VAWG that is often disempowering for victims, does not address the causes of their oppression and will not protect them from further violence in the future. This is perhaps why minority women are most ardently opposed to criminalisation, because they know that BME, immigrant, disabled and poor women are often more likely to be harmed by the police than helped (INCITE! 2007).

These shortcomings raise questions about the value of adopting a criminal justice approach to VAWG. What do anti-VAWG activists think about the Coalition government’s commitment to strengthening criminal justice responses to domestic and sexual violence? Is it the case, as Weissman (2013: 224) suggests, that “feminism’s essentialist preoccupations with matters of identity, together with the domestic violence movement’s inattention to poverty and economic inequality” has facilitated the ascendancy of the domestic violence/criminal justice paradigm? What might this paradigm have to do with an increase in gender-neutral analyses of VAWG and to the rise of post-feminism? This is discussed further below.

### 3.5 Gender Neutral Analyses of VAWG

At the heart of a feminist victimology of VAWG, both in the UK and internationally, is a recognition of the gendered nature of such violence; it is perpetrated predominantly by men against women, and it constitutes both a cause and a consequence of patriarchal oppression, and a violation of women's human rights. By contrast, competing approaches that frame this violence as 'gender-neutral' claim that the focus on women as victims of men's violence is misguided because men are also, or equally, victims of violence, and conceive of it instead as a form of 'bullying' or problematic relationships. The feminist proposition that VAWG is a gendered problem to be prevented and treated largely by improved education and changes to attitudes, dovetailed with neoliberal characterisations of social problems in terms of individual maladjustment and 'bad' family and community cultures (Salter 2015).

Howe (2006) notes that the Blair governments 1999 *Living without fear* policy document promised an "integrated approach to tackling VAW" (Home Office 1999: 6) and acknowledged that domestic violence, rape and sexual assault are crimes disproportionately experienced by women. However, by 2003 its *Safety and Justice* consultation paper referred only to domestic violence – overlooking rape and sexual assault as previously identified forms of VAWG – and introduced new evidence that one-in-six men will also experience domestic violence in their lifetime. Other important statistics which would have demonstrated gender asymmetry were glossed over. Collier (2008) explains that this gender-neutral reframing of domestic violence sat much more easily with the crime reduction programme of New Labour. At the same time, it also helped obscure the systemic issues that lead to gross inequalities in society. Dragiewicz (2012) argues that gender-neutral approaches to VAWG must be

understood in this broader context, because it is favourable to those who benefit from patriarchy that the systemic causes of VAWG as embedded in patriarchal capitalist structures are less visible, less understood by society at large and thus rarely discussed in ways that threaten the status quo.

Gender-neutral analyses of VAWG must therefore be understood in the broader context of a “backlash” against (perceived) feminist advances. Sylvia Walby (1993: 79) sees the anti-feminist backlash as “a recurring feature in the history of feminism” which tends to manifest most acutely when the powerful perceive a threat to existing hierarchies of power and privilege. Considered through this historical approach, it becomes clear why an anti-feminist backlash has become more forceful as VAW has been mainstreamed and accepted as a legitimate public policy issue; Collier (2008) argues that ‘gender symmetry’ arguments started out as a marginally relevant form of anti-feminist backlash, but have become increasingly threatening as efforts to prevent VAW have been taken more seriously by governments and international institutions. Laidler and Mann (2008) demonstrate how gender neutral framings of domestic violence have been a powerful force for the reshaping of domestic violence and family law policies in the West to the detriment of women, and for the erosion of funding for specialist women-only domestic violence services.

That gender-neutral and victim-blaming approaches to VAWG are now increasingly adopted by people working in the VAWG sector is highly problematic for feminist practice. For example, in a US study of VAWG movement activists, Nichols (2013) found some VAWG service providers did not identify as feminist or recognise gender inequality as both a cause and consequence of this violence, which is reflected in one participant’s assertion “that domestic violence services should not focus more on women than on men” (2013: 186). Lehrner and Allen (2009) reported

similar findings in their study of the domestic violence sector in a US state. They found “a deflated movement, lacking urgency and fervor that has become unmoored from initial visions of a changed society” (Lehrner and Allen, 2009: 6). They attribute this to an increase in gender-neutral and individual-level (non-structural) analyses of VAWG among service providers.

### *3.6 Culturalising Violence Against Minority Ethnic Women*

For several feminist scholars it is indisputable that the neo-colonialist and race-focused interests of British society post 9/11 have facilitated a dangerous amount of political, societal and media attraction to violence against “ethnicised” women. In particular, it seems that issues of honour-based violence and forced marriage are currently the “flavour of the day” in Britain and are associated predominantly with the South Asian diaspora and Muslim women in particular, despite the occurrence of these crimes in the Middle East, in Africa, Europe and the UK, and throughout different cultures and religions (Welchman and Hossain 2005). Charting South Asian women’s anti-VAWG activism from the late 1970s, Wilson elaborates how this journey against VAWG collided with the “neoliberal policies and concerns with national security” of the present era (2010: 56) and how the British state, “having until then colluded with South Asian patriarchy, began to posture as confronting it, acting with shock and horror as though patriarchy was a monster unknown to it, which had suddenly appeared from an ‘alien’ and ‘backward’ land” (Wilson 2010: 63).

Sen (2012) likewise highlights that violence against women is now frequently drawn upon “as a signifier of Western civility and Eastern barbarism in the liberal democratic imaginary” (2012: 2). She notes how VAWG is being used to establish a

hierarchy of cultural development that distinguishes between the “backward” patriarchal cultures of the developing world and the “progressive” equal rights cultures of Western civilisation (see also Thiara & Gill 2010; Gupta 2003; Volpp 2003; Meetoo & Mirza 2007; Gill 2006; Khan 2010; Welchman & Hossain 2005). Similarly, Warrier (2008) observes how the Western world frequently uses its colonial encounters with “other” violent cultural practices – such as FGM, forced marriage, dowry murders and honour killings – as a way of cementing the “assumed moral superiority of the West over the rest” and of reinforcing negative stereotypes and misconceptions of non-Western cultures as being “in need to changing their gender relations to become modern and enlightened” (2005: 43). In particular, it appears that Muslim women have become a central affective component of these powerful Western saviour narratives, frequently presented in Western media and politics as submissive victims of the inherently violent and barbaric practices of their culture and faith (Scharff 2011).

In line with these essentialist and imperialist VAWG narratives, discourses around culture and immigration have also changed drastically over the last two decades, from New Labour’s acceptance of ‘multiculturalism’, the notion that many diverse cultures can amicably co-exist within one nation state, to the Coalition government’s emphasis on ‘community cohesion’ which has been interpreted by many as indicating a drive towards national consensus on one hegemonic cultural model. To be sure, anti-immigration policies have intensified since the outbreak of the financial crisis in 2008, with detrimental implications for immigrant women experiencing violence in the UK. Economic impoverishment and heightened experiences of racism and xenophobia have become added constraints for immigrant survivors as employment opportunities have deteriorated, work conditions have become more exploitative, and immigration controls have strengthened. What is more, immigrant

women are not only confronted with empowered abusers who, due to recent changes in immigration law, can legitimately threaten their victims with deportation, but are also being failed by police officers and social workers who are under pressure to team up with UKBA in order to detect victims' immigration statuses rather than protect them from further harm. Immigrant women are thus disproportionately isolated and fearful of reporting their abuse.

### *3.7 The Co-optation of the Diversity Agenda*

Some scholars have argued that identity politics and feminists' mounting analyses of diverse oppressions and power relations could be viewed as a threat to neoliberal hegemony, namely because New Labour appeared "fearful of any politics of class, race or gender that could be construed as giving recognition to differences, preferring a universalism that could be more easily framed through a neoliberal discourse of individual rights and responsibilities" (Scharff 2013: 111). For example, Robson (2016: 295) argues that New Labour appeared to lack trust in community development processes grounded in personal and identity politics, and that attempts to contain the possibilities for divergence and conflict could have been precisely what led to a tightening of systems of management and accountability. However, Newman (2013) alternatively suggests that "these emergent forces helped reconfigure the dominant orthodoxies of policy, management and business, such that 'diversity' was ideologically and discursively valorized as a source of innovation and a drive to enhanced 'performance'" (2013: 213). This, she believes, enabled New Labour to "smooth increasingly problematic antagonisms" as they quickly sought to reframe diversity "around notions of individualism and choice" (2013: 213). For Newman, this is a prime example of the neoliberal project adapting and flexing in response to an

unanticipated challenge. She points to the ways in which New Labour skilfully consolidated this individualistic focus by compartmentalising women's diversity issues into issue silos, which impeded feminist efforts to build coalitions across diversity strands and develop strong intersectional analyses. In a similar vein, Heath and Potter argue that New Labour's emphasis on diverse modes of living "enabled an easy coexistence with consumer capitalism insofar as choices of fashion and entertainment could be quickly read as politically significant. Antiracist? Wear a Malcolm X t-shirt. Gay-friendly? Fly a rainbow flag" (2005: 34). This offered the thrill of transgression but without any real political threat.

In this context, and often with the excuse of equality of opportunity, feminist anti-VAWG organisations faced withdrawal of funding "unless they could demonstrate that their services reached other groups as well" (Woods 2009: 1). Providing VAWG services thus became about accommodating *all* women's needs rather than developing responses based on specific political needs. As a result, specialist VAWG services catering specifically to the needs of LGBT, BME and immigrant women were threatened with funding cuts. There is evidence to show that this logic was used to cut Local Authority funding to Southall Black Sisters (SBS) to the detriment of specialist services provided to BME women. However, Gupta (2003) shows that there have also been some contradictory approaches to the feminist diversity agenda. She highlights how the Labour government began funding some BME women's organisations on the premise that they would help tackle and challenge violent extremism within their communities, but this was often at the expense of well-established women's organisations attempting to procure funding to address women's rights issues in their communities. These concerns have continued to grow as feminists unite against religious fundamentalisms. Demands for separate faith-based schools

and religious laws for marriage and divorce have been associated with the right to practice religion, but activists at SBS are concerned that “in the process, the State is unable to distinguish between valid or legitimate demands for equality and those that simply mask inequality, promote other forms of intolerance and uniformity of religious identity” (Patel 2013: 45).

Finally, the co-optation of the feminist diversity agenda also appears to be occurring from *within*. Mohanty (2013) argues that privileged, predominantly white feminists appear to be intentionally misinterpreting the purpose of intersectionality as a response to women’s experiences of VAWG. In particular, she believes that these feminists are deploying intersectionality in ways that enable them to *avoid* questioning their own relationships with power by focusing on the endlessness of differences among women. Cho et al. (2013) agree. They argue that this focus (re)marginalises Black feminist thought through its piecemeal focus on women’s different experiences of oppression (often constructed in essentialist terms) while ignoring that intersectionality was formulated as a critique of white solipsism in feminist theory. It is for this reason that several Black feminist scholars have recently reminded us that analyses of intersecting and interlocking systems of power are not only about making visible oppression but also privilege and power (see Cho et al. 2013). The denial of the need for a specialist BME sector needs to be understood in this context, because this denial implies a negation of the significance of difference, and hence of intersectionality as a lens for understanding experience and informing practice. This negation is also at the heart of post-feminist understandings of inequality, as discussed in the next section.



### *3.8 The Emergence of Post-Feminism*

It has been argued that a new ‘gender aware governmentality’ emerged in the final decades of the twentieth century, further marginalising critiques of class and race differences, political economy and the state amidst promises of individual empowerment and economic independence for women (McRobbie 2009). Bashevkin argues that Third Way governments, including the one led by Blair in Britain, were highly successful in deploying this governmentality, skilfully appropriating feminist discourse by using the “same terms for very different purposes” (Bashevkin 2002: 141). McRobbie explains that although women appeared to stand at the centre of Third Way politics, this was nevertheless “a politics for women without feminism” (2000: 99). Genz converges with this interpretation, explaining that although feminism appears to have achieved the status of Gramscian common sense in contemporary culture and politics, it has actually deployed “through an acknowledgement/repudiation dynamic that simultaneously includes and excludes, accepts and refutes feminism” (Genz 2006: 335). In other words, neoliberalism has succeeded in producing a spectral version of feminism discourse which it uses to its own ends.

McRobbie (2009) demonstrates how feminism has gradually been “taken into account” in ways that have adjudicated it unnecessary and inappropriate, especially to the lives of young women who are instead represented as liberated and independent individuals, free to make their own consumer choices and invent their own successful lifestyles irrespective of the persisting and deepening gender inequities being generated by the patriarchal capitalist system they have grown up with (see also Braidotti 2005; Meeto and Mirza 2007). She maintains that many young women’s ignorance of enduring gender inequities (see, for example, Scharff 2011) has been safeguarded by inaccurate claims that the feminist struggles of past generations have

been successfully achieved: apparently, women are now equal to men because (liberal) gender perspectives have been incorporated into most policies and practices, and because more women are present in the higher echelons of business and politics, reproducing and reinforcing the discourses of the powerful (see also Tasker & Negra 2007). That this often renders women complicit in reinforcing the patriarchal, racist, classist and heteronormative structures that continue to oppress them is seemingly insignificant and so their disproportionate experiences of inequality and marginalisation continue to go overlooked (Fauldi 1991; Braidotti 2005). McRobbie constructs this ‘disarticulation’ of the feminist imaginary as pivotal to the development of postfeminist thought. Not only has it encouraged young women to reject feminism as outdated and embittered, but also to replace it with a new, ultimately fake “fluffy and marketable” version constituted through neoliberal ideologies and late-capitalist values and represented in iconic postfeminist texts such as *Bridget Jones Diary* and *Sex and the City* (see Penny 2013).

For decades, an emphasis on personal risk management has accompanied discussions of sexual violence in politics and media (see, for example, Home Office 1994) and feminists continue to express concern that this risk-based framing is “erasing sexual violence as a systemic problem and transforming it into something that individual women should try to avoid” (Gotell 2011: 2). A particularly interesting example is Baker’s (2008) examination of self-management and responsibility in the night-time economy, which documents how women manage their risk of sexual assault by conforming to appropriate notions of femininity and respectability while simultaneously representing themselves as sexually desirable. Baker discovered that some women preferred to establish themselves as personally responsible for the sexual violence they experienced in order to disassociate themselves from notions of

weakness, vulnerability or the reviled ‘victim’ status. Interpreting such findings, Stringer believes that the intensification of gender inequality under neoliberalism “is accompanied by discourses that derogate and pathologise complaints against inequality” and that the “rejection of ‘victimhood’ as a worthy place from which to forge personal identity and wage political struggle has been essential to this process” (2014: 7). Thus, while some postfeminists have claimed that women should “choose to refuse to be a victim” (Talbot 2005: 167) and embrace their recent liberation and emancipation (Romkens 2013), opponents of this approach have argued that this form of ‘anti-victimism’ is not progressive but neo-conservative, reflecting neoliberal values of personal responsibility and creating a “profoundly depoliticizing” situation whereby young women are encouraged to guard against their risk of victimisation “instead of focusing on their right not to be victimized” (Stringer 2014: 7; see also Cole 2007).

Gill and Scharff have thus concluded that postfeminism is “not simply a response to feminism but also a sensibility partly constituted through the pervasiveness of neo-liberal thoughts” (2011: 10) and they identify this synergy between neoliberal and postfeminist values on three levels (see also Gill 2008). First, both appear to be shaped by an upsurge of compulsory individuality that refuses to acknowledge the broader structural forces that condition women’s lives (see also Cronin 2000). Instead, it is ‘other’ women from “backward” nations that are constructed as oppressed. Second, both articulate women as rational, independent and self-governing subjects who are free to design their own futures and experiment with their sexual power. Women’s involvement in sex work or pornography is constructed as a choice, and a potential form of empowerment, without consideration of its impact on women and on society as a whole. Third, both call upon women to exercise stricter

self-discipline and self-management in order to uphold appropriate notions of femininity and respectability and to reduce their risk of victimisation (see also Stringer 2014). Women who fail to do so are often blamed for their own victimisation. Combined, these features of postfeminist thought provide a clear insight into neoliberalism's operation as a "technology of the self" (Rose 1999: 74), promoting self-responsibility and self-reliance both as a means of reducing women's claims on the state (Duggan 2003) and altering the nature of their political action so as to contain radicalism and ensure minimal reforms of the capitalist system (Fraser 2013). This thesis is interested in how postfeminist ideology is evolving in the contemporary austerity context, where women's rights and feminist gains are under considerable threat. What implications does this ideology have for political agency, resistance and counter-hegemonic struggle within feminist theory and anti-VAWG practice today?

#### **4.0 Preventing VAWG on the Global Stage**

Neoliberal globalisation has undoubtedly changed the political opportunity structures and resources available to feminists, altering the nature of feminist anti-VAWG politics in various and complex ways. As Walby explains, globalisation "is not simply an economic process involving the development of global financial and capital markets" but is also a political process "which has involved the restructuring of the political environment, re-positioning the nation-state in a web of trans-national networks and institutions" (Walby 2002: 551). While this new global world order continues to present new threats to women's rights and equality as outlined in Chapter One, it has also enabled the development of new forms and sites of feminist activism which are no longer confined to the grassroots level or the nation state. In particular,

the UN Conference for Women (Mexico 1975, Copenhagen 1980, Nairobi 1985, Beijing 1995) has served as a catalyst for forms of transnational feminist organising amongst activists from both the global North and South, bringing women together on a scale never before imagined.

Research demonstrates that feminist activists have been able to deploy UN machinery and international law to build coalitions transnationally in order to hold their governments responsible for substantively tackling VAWG in the name of human rights and democracy. In an increasingly globalised world, instances of women being trafficked into Britain for the purposes of domestic servitude or taken back to their countries of origin for FGM procedures or forced marriages are no longer rare and so the work of British organisations such as Southall Black Sisters (see Gupta 2003) and Karma Nirvana (see Sanghera 2009) involves addressing violence that spans the home, the diasporic community, the host country and the country of origin in order to tackle VAWG occurring in transnational social spaces. In these instances, tapping into transnational networks has been essential in strengthening their local efficiency as they call upon the British government to tackle both “local and transnational regimes of control” (Kelly 2013: 6).

In recent years, the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) has enabled activist groups to frame violence against women “as a human rights issue in order to hold the government accountable for failing to protect abused women, thereby denying them full enjoyment of their human rights” (Howe 2006). CEDAW develops on the UK Human Rights Act 1998 as it covers social and economic rights as well as civil and political rights, and also addresses the discrimination inherent in cultural practices, making it very useful for activists campaigning against diverse forms of VAWG, including honour-based

violence, forced marriages and FGM. Southall Black Sisters have been particularly successful in utilising CEDAW to hold the UK government to account for tackling violence against women, influencing the government to provide Human Rights information and emergency contact details to all immigrants on arrival in the UK (Siddiqui 2010). However, feminist ventures into this international political arena have not always been straightforward.

During the 1970s and 1980s, feminists in the UK and US focused largely on the state as their entry point for VAWG intervention, while feminist movements in the global South had been analysing global processes of exploitation and violence, making important links between Western imperialism, state militarisation and violence against women in the home. However, these efforts were frequently glossed over or ignored by Western feminists. For example, VAWG was raised as a major concern at the first UN Conference for Women held in Mexico City in 1975 but Mason (2013) explains that the voices and ideas of women from developing countries were often undermined or excluded from consideration. She believes this is because the conference “followed structures of development, rather than redistribution, by calling for extended education in the Third World, the modernization of agriculture, and women’s involvement in development as solutions to women’s issues” (2013: 200). Thus while several Third World women’s groups attempted to demonstrate the importance of recognising racism, colonialism, imperialism and apartheid as dominant structures underpinning VAWG and subsequently the need for a “New International Economic Order” that would diffuse the unequal political and economic conditions between the global North and South and between men and women, they were largely silenced by an overarching emphasis on the very neo-colonialist and patriarchal development interventions they were attempting to critique (Mason 2013). Although the UN’s Official Report of this

conference does reference discussions about fighting colonialism, imperialism and racial discrimination in order to eradicate the root causes of VAWG, Mason points out that “much of this history of the UN conferences is obscured or forgotten, especially since executive summaries and action plans from the UN conferences do not include such revolutionary discourse” (2013: 200).

Attempts to conceal this more radical and transformative language were seemingly endemic at the UN Conference for Women in Copenhagen in 1980 and Nairobi in 1985. Basu (1995) explains that feminists and government officials from Western countries – including the UK, US and Germany – played a central role in decontextualising VAWG from its historical roots in global structures of political-economic power. According to official reports, the US government in particular refused to accept the inclusion of language referencing imperialism, colonialism, racism and apartheid as requested by Third World feminists, and Mason explains that they “also rejected the claim that Third World poverty stemmed from inequitable economic relations and foreign occupations” and “voted against the inclusion of references to the failings of official development assistance, accumulative debt, and trade protectionism that negatively affected the economies of developing nations” (2013: 202). In other words, key Western government officials refused to identify militarisation and Western imperialism as structural factors exacerbating women’s inequality and experiences of violence and instead emphasised the role of individual factors such as mental illness, alcohol and drug abuse, stress, provocation, and cultural traditions in Third World countries as the causes of VAWG (see Joachim 2007). This violence was subsequently framed by the UN as an interpersonal problem requiring “appropriate methods of conflict resolution between the parties involved” and as a social problem “which should be examined from the perspective of crime prevention

and criminal justice in the context of socio-economic circumstances” (United Nations 1985). This framing of VAWG complimented the demands of anti-VAWG activists in the global North for enhanced legal remedies and more domestic violence treatment facilities to help women recover from the consequences of male violence. Yet at the same time, it effectively glossed over the macro-structural dynamics of VAWG that women from the global South were keen to transform.

We now know that feminist incursions into mainstream transnational institutions during the 1970s and 1980s were taking place in a changing world order that would soon become marked by neoliberal economics. We also know that the liberal strand of feminism pursued mostly by Western feminists became entrenched in place of more expanded ideas of social justice, with human rights law taking centre stage. However, numerous scholars have pointed to the ambivalence inherent in human rights framings of VAWG. Miller (2004) for example, argues that violence against women was pushed to the forefront of the women’s human rights agenda because it straddles the realms of rights and public health, both emerging political frameworks with a great deal of clout in the early 1990s. Miller notes that sexual violence, in particular, seems to have resonated in international political circles, perhaps because it embodied the gendered relations of power manifested in gender-based violence. She also notes that “while the assertion that violence against women as a human rights violation has enormous transformative potential, it also has the potential to be read in regressive terms as a cry for protection” (2004: 99). Similarly, Kapur (2002) notes the potential of this discourse to position women of the global South as perpetual victims. Indeed, at the same time that feminist activists were using human rights tools to illuminate and eradicate particular vulnerabilities to violence in different global spaces, imperial powers have used violence against women to justify



racist policies within their borders and the occupation of lands outside their borders. Imperial violence has been rewritten as the protection of women from the violent, backward cultures of the developing world and Western feminists have been complicit in this construction of the issue.

Of course, these forms of epistemic violence have not gone unnoticed. Over the years, numerous Black, postcolonial and Third World feminists have been highly critical of Western feminism's dismissal of their concerns with regards to Western imperialism, colonialism and culturalised racism, and the harmful effects of speaking for disempowered groups (Burman and Chantler 2005). They have pointed to the impact of neoliberal globalisation on women's inequality, exploitation and experiences of violence in the global South whilst accentuating that any attempts to redistribute wealth and resources are futile within the confines of a neoliberal political economy. They have also established that feminists cannot afford to lose sight of the processes of neoliberal governance facilitated by global institutions such as the UN and World Bank – and often reinforced by Western feminism – if they hope to eradicate the structures that facilitate and exacerbate VAWG across the world. Roberts thus argues that as crucial as it is for feminist activists to engage with these institutions in order to make demands for greater gender equality, it is essential that they do so “within a carefully articulated critique of the patriarchal and colonial capitalist system which is reproduced precisely because of the exploitation of the majority by and for the minority” (Roberts 2013, in Zahirović 2014: 52). This particular argument resonates with Mohanty's assertion that Western feminists would benefit from drawing upon the “potential epistemic privilege” of Third World women who, due to their particular experiences of Western imperialism and colonialism, are in crucial positions to access transformative insights into the contemporary nature of power

relations (Mohanty 2003: 516; see also Collins 1990). For Mohanty, specifying difference among women does not have to be divisive if power is central to these understandings. Instead, acknowledging women's different positions in relation to power will enable feminists "to theorize universal concerns more fully" (Mohanty 2013: 226) in order to avoid dangerous generalisations about difference that thwart the possibilities for solidarity and social change.

It is for this reason that it is important to recognise that the demands formulated by second and third wave feminists in the global North are not necessarily those of the entire feminist movement. While the work of scholars such as Fraser (2013) and Eisenstein (2009) is effective in explaining the absence of a strong and unified feminist opposition to neoliberalism among certain groups of women in the global North, reducing feminism to select discourses and demands voiced in the North means failing to assess the critical potential inherent in feminist logic, in addition to idealising a particular feminist public sphere at the expense of others (Hemmings 2011). Had anti-VAWG activists in the global North spent more time listening to and learning from their sisters in the global South during the 1980s and 1990s, they would likely be in a much stronger position to respond to the challenges wrought by the global financial crisis and the austerity measures being rolled out across Western nations today. This thesis is interested in exploring how feminists in the global North are responding to these emerging challenges and what this can tell us about the future of the movement as a whole.

## **5.0 Anti-VAWG Activism in Austerity Britain**

There appears to be increasing need for anti-VAWG scholars and activists to critically identify why certain forms of violence are being articulated as a priority at any given

time in order to distinguish between those strategies that are likely to be progressive and those that are being used deceitfully to compliment other hegemonic goals, some of which, as Mason points out, will “directly contradict anti-violence strategies” (2013: 256). As this thesis has so far demonstrated, many of the VAWG policies and strategies implemented by global capitalist institutions such as the UN and by British governments of the past and present have too often represented the interests of the neoliberal project, leading to neoliberal and neo-colonialist strategies and outcomes that are disguised by the seemingly moral call to end VAWG (see also Chapter One). These depoliticised and ultimately dangerous responses have been challenged by feminist scholars but much less is known about how activists experience these issues at the local level.

Examined against the set of guidelines and international norms surrounding VAWG in institutions such as the UN and EU, the current British Coalition government would likely score quite highly. On the surface at least, their behaviour and responses to VAWG mostly converge with those codified in international treaties regarding specific legislation commitments and human rights protections (see, for example, Council of Europe 2011). To be sure, they currently have laws against numerous forms of VAWG that occur both domestically and transnationally (Sexual Violence in Conflict); specialist units responding to forced marriage, human trafficking and FGM; a criminal justice system equipped with specialist domestic violence courts, MARACs, perpetrator programmes, and independent sexual violence and domestic violence advocates (Home Office 2014); a VCS that supports victims through state-funded refuges, Rape Crisis Centres, women’s charities and national hotlines; certain welfare provisions for (some) survivors including Legal Aid and housing benefits; and plans to prevent future violence through media campaigns and

public education (e.g. the This Is Abuse campaign). Presently, this is all taking place alongside a nationally coordinated cross-government strategy that encompasses various ministries and departments including education, health, finance, transport and local development, all of which are currently accountable to several international treaties, including CEDAW and the Istanbul Convention. Overall, this is arguably the most comprehensive governmental response to VAWG that Britain has ever seen. Yet as demonstrated in Chapter One, digging beneath the surface of these achievements reveals a very different story. Levels of VAWG are on the rise while cuts are being made to all areas of VAWG prevention, including women's VAWG services.

### *5.1 The Illusion of the Big Society*

It is clear that the Coalition government were keen to distinguish their Big Society agenda from the neoliberal policies of privatisation implemented by governments over the last three decades, appealing instead to communitarian values (Ishkanian 2013; Fyfe 2005). These values were best encapsulated in the Prime Minister's description of the Big Society as "breaking state monopolies, allowing charities, social enterprises and companies to provide public services, devolving power down to neighbourhoods, making government more accountable" (Cameron 2010). Whereas Blair was accused of hollowing out local government, the Coalition government's localism agenda placed more responsibility on local government in the commissioning of local services. However, despite initial claims that the Big Society could "fix broken Britain" (Blond 2010) and provide communities with the opportunities to shape their own futures (Edwards 2012), most people have drawn attention to its destructive impact on the welfare state (Ishkanian 2014) and to various other political contradictions inherent in its philosophy (Bone 2012; Lowndes & Pratchett 2012).

After all, it is now well known that the transfer of state responsibility for welfare delivery to the VCS has been a hallmark of neoliberalism since the 1980s, successfully diminishing public debate and political action whilst covering up the government's abandonment of costly service provision. Wiggan therefore establishes that although appeals to communitarianism may on the surface appear to contradict neoliberal logic, beneath the surface they provide an answer to the current political, social and economic problems facing neoliberal capitalist societies today (Wiggan 2012). This argument is also taken up by Bone (2012: 1) who maintains that the Big Society

. . . can easily be construed as being little more than a convenient vehicle, employed to rehabilitate and further entrench neoliberalism in the aftermath of its self-induced crisis. This view is supported by the observation that a key feature of the Big Society agenda, in practice, appears to be the increasing marketisation of the public realm and, crucially, dismantling the 'Big (Welfare) State', where the latter, in almost Orwellian fashion, is now being indicted for many of the social and economic ills that the 'free market' era has delivered.

Indeed, the Coalition government blamed excessive expenditure on welfare provision as one of the primary causes of the current financial crisis despite considerable statistical evidence to contradict such assertions (Bone 2012: 6-7). Lack of regulation, misguided belief in the market and the increasing domination of the financial and banking sector in the economy are far more accurate explanations (Birch & Mykhenenko 2010). Nevertheless, rolling back the state and cutting welfare spending was presented as the best option available to reduce government deficit, justified on the grounds that current economic and social problems are a direct result of state interference and spending. The global financial crisis has thus been projected and responded to as “a crisis of the debt and credit system as opposed to a crisis that pertains to the neoliberal state architecture underpinning contemporary patterns of living and working and which has the effect of eroding community and solidarity

bonds” (MacLeavy 2011: 4). By tactfully accusing the Labour government of encouraging worklessness and dependency through their “excessive levels of public spending, borrowing and debt” (Conservative Party 2010) and portraying prevalent social problems such as poverty, unemployment and violence as individual issues caused by lack of personal responsibility, Wiggan suggests that the Coalition government managed to divert public attention “from a failing neo-liberal model of political economy whilst long-standing elite preferences for the hallmarks of neo-liberalism . . . are repackaged as bold new policy developments” (2012: 20; see also Davies 2012; Lowndes & Pratchett 2012). Ultimately, this has served to “disconnect power from issues of equity, social justice, and civic responsibility” (Giroux 2005: 6) whilst the media demonises benefit scroungers, reinforcing the notion that these are private issues rather than social problems.

Yet, far from being new developments, Bone recognises that “the current policy framework bears more than a passing resemblance to the Structural Adjustment Programmes . . . imposed by the IMF and the World Bank on developing economies from the 1970s onwards” (2012: 4). Implemented with little regard for their detrimental or disproportionate impact on certain social groups, this criticism is now being reproduced by several women’s organisations to challenge the uneven impact of public spending cuts on the wellbeing and livelihood of women (and particularly poor, BME and disabled women) in Britain today. Smith and Villa (2014: 27) outline the various impacts of the cuts for women:

Firstly, the majority of public-sector workers are women and thus subject to pay freezes, job cuts and reduced pension entitlement. Secondly, women use public services more intensely than men to meet their own needs and to help manage care responsibilities. Thirdly, women are more likely than men to pick up the extra unpaid work resulting from cuts in public services. Finally, women have a higher dependency on benefits due to their higher

participation in unpaid care work and their lower earnings. To sum up, cuts in public spending may have not only direct negative results on the quantity and quality of jobs in female-dominated public sector jobs, but also indirect effects on gender inequalities in the household: austerity measures reduce the availability and affordability of services and have inevitable repercussions on unpaid work.

This is the ultimate contradiction of the Big Society – it has placed more emphasis on the VCS in the delivery of public services yet is simultaneously making monumental cuts to public spending. This has resulted in the closure of services on which women disproportionately depend for both social support and employment. Thus, while the Big Society utilises similar rhetoric to New Labour in calling for the strengthening of the VCS through professional and managerial business skills, it is also weakening the capacity for organisations to comply because many organisations are now struggling to survive. Social movement research has long established the importance of financial stability to the growth, security and success of social movements (Charles 2000). This knowledge underpins resource mobilisation and political process theories, both of which identify stable funding as essential to the development of strong and politically influential organisations. The following section considers the impact that these cuts will likely have on women's VAWG organisations in Britain and raises questions that require further empirical exploration.

## *5.2 Cuts to VAWG Provision*

In order for the Coalition government to successfully cut public expenditure by £20 billion in real terms from 2010 to 2016, the VCS stands to lose an estimated £3.3 billion during this period (Murray 2013). Consequently, between 2010 and 2012 over £5.6 million in cuts were made to women's services across England (Bennhold 2012)

which resulted in a 31% reduction in funding for the women's VAW sector, from £7.8 million in 2010 to £5.4 million in 2012 (Harris 2012). Although the government pledged £40 million to reduce VAW in Britain from 2010 to 2015 in their *Call to End Violence Against Women and Girls* action plan, this funding was not ring-fenced and there were no structures in place to ensure that the newly appointed Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs), the Health and Well-Being boards, and Clinical Commissioning groups – all of which, as part of the Localism agenda, are now involved in commissioning and planning local services – would deliver this promise at the local level.

For specialist BME and immigrant women's organisations, the cuts are expected to have a particularly damaging impact. These organisations have always struggled to access stable funding due to their niche (race/nationality + gender) status within the sector (Craig 2011). However, as funding pots diminish, their multiple-axis concerns are expected to put them at a further disadvantage because commissioners are likely to prefer funding single-axis and generic projects whose applications are simple, straightforward and 'tick all the boxes' (Emejulu and Bassel 2015). Between 2011 and 2012 an Imkaan study found that BME women's services experienced disproportionate cuts within the women's sector, with 47% of these services experiencing a significant loss (Taylor 2013). Considering the vital role that BME women's organisations play in advocating and providing services for women who experience multiple forms of discrimination and oppression, who are hit hardest by welfare restructuring, and whose interests and needs are often unidentified by mainstream VAWG services, the current economic crisis risks neglecting abused BME women and leaving BME women's groups with a much weakened voice. Specialist organisations responding to multiple-axis concerns are likely to be



disadvantaged when competing with other organisations for funding because their needs do not easily fit within single-axis funding criteria.

There is also evidence to suggest that smaller, local VAWG organisations and projects are bearing the brunt of the cuts. On average, VAWG organisations receiving less than £20,000 of local authority funding in 2011/2012 experienced cuts of 70% compared with losses of 41% for organisations receiving between £50,000 to £100,000 (Towers & Walby 2012). Whereas larger organisations have more opportunity to survive and even thrive due to their ability to compete in the competitive tendering process, Murray explains that the impact of the cuts “is being felt most severely on small and medium scale parts of the community based voluntary sector which cannot competitively tender for services and where the effectiveness of new local consortia of voluntary organisations bidding for contracts remains to be seen” (2013: 12). While national charities continue to Hoover up local contracts, local VAWG organisations and projects are being forced into competition with one another, and with private sector companies. The inequalities that prevent activists and organisations from participating in this competitive struggle for resources are fundamentally overlooked by neoliberals. Indeed, it is in the interests of neoliberalism that activists compete with and subdue one another. This thesis is interested in the impact that this highly competitive environment is having on the anti-VAWG movement in North East England. Is it creating “an inhospitable climate for progressive feminist projects” as Newman (2013: 4) suggests?

Although the marketisation of the welfare state is not a new phenomenon, it is clearly taking on new meaning in the current context of austerity as material restraints, coupled with competitive tendering, are expected to make it both “more difficult for activists to find the time or resources for creative political work” (Newman 2013: 217)

and more difficult “to speak up collectively and in a solid cross sector alliance to mobilise public opinion” (Murray 2013: 6). Given the long history of women’s resistance to marketing and business development models of practice within the VCS, Neate (2013) explains that the “capacity to engage with competitive tendering is utterly lacking in the violence against women sector” (in Women’s Aid 2013: 3). In forcing anti-VAWG activists and organisations to compete with each other, feminist scholars are concerned that the strong feminist alliances and solidarities built among VAWG groups over the decades will be destroyed precisely at a time when they are needed most (Gupta 2013). Indeed, in the US, Lehrner and Allen (2009) recently discovered a “fortress mentality” amongst the domestic violence advocates they interviewed which entailed “protecting their turf” during periods of cuts, rather than providing help and support to other women’s organisations struggling to survive. What other tactics and strategies are emerging among anti-VAWG activists and organisations as they struggle against the marketisation of their everyday political terrain?

Although the effects of this politics of austerity on anti-VAWG activism are yet to be fully explored, especially in the British context, it seems reasonable to assume at this point that the reality of welfare entrenchment is not only economic instability, but the closure of spaces that women and other marginalised groups have historically relied on for radical critique and political action. As the neoliberal capitalist project continues to attack and dismantle the welfare state in Britain, how are feminists defending the provision of welfare support for abused women, which has historically included housing, healthcare, legal aid and women-only community-based support services? As political-economic factors continue to shape the political possibilities of feminist activists in Britain, what impact is this having on their abilities to advocate

on behalf of abused women, provide effective support services, and maintain a feminist movement culture? This thesis will explore these questions in order to identify how austerity is informing anti-VAWG activists' politics, their perceptions of inequalities, and their motivations to fight for social and ideological change, and social justice. Oksala explains that while it is "obviously important to empirically show the concrete consequences that the cuts to the public sector have on the lives of women ... it is equally important to engage in a constitutive, philosophical analysis of its impact on the kinds of subjects that we have become" (Oksala 2013: 44). For instance, how are activists responding to the demands of neoliberal capitalism, which emphasise short-term gains, targets, competition and other forms of predatory behaviour that centre on egotism, rivalry and the domination of space? What implications are austerity politics having for feminist collective solidarity within the anti-VAWG movement and what other options might be available to prevent further fragmentation?

These questions are even more pertinent in light of the Coalition government's recent decision to publicly scold organisations for criticising government policies while receiving statutory funding (Ishkanian 2014). In one instance, a women's organisation was prevented from publically launching a report which criticised the Big Society (Ishkanian 2014). In another, a women's VAWG charity working with trafficked women lost their £6 million Poppy Project contract shortly after the chief executive publically denounced the public sector cuts for their detrimental and disproportionate impact on vulnerable women (Gentleman 2011; Gupta 2012). Whether this was a direct result of her criticism or not, it remains that the contract was given to the Salvation Army, a generic organisation, on the basis it could provide more for less. Southall Black Sisters' Rahila Gupta (2012: 2) explains that

...it didn't matter that the women may not have easy access to abortion advice or services, that the service is provided within a strong Christian ethos, that the umbrella body, Churches Against Sex Trafficking in Europe or CHASTE, to which the Salvation Army belongs, also bids for government contracts to lock up trafficked women on their way to being deported in the same safe house where trafficked women are fighting for their right to remain; one building is both prison and refuge.

This example not only demonstrates why numerous women's organisations may feel politically silenced for fear of the repercussions, but also the government's willingness to overlook the gendered nature of violence – its structural causes and effects – in pursuit of cost-effectiveness and simplistic, quick-fix gender-neutral analyses of VAWG. It seems this situation is only likely to worsen with the introduction of the 2013 Transparency of Lobbying, Non-party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Bill – dubbed the 'Gagging Law' by various charities (38 Degrees 2013) – which has provoked debate about freedom of expression and incited concern about the ability of Trade Unions and VCS organisations to campaign and lobby around policy issues. Clearly, the movement faces several new challenges in this era of austerity politics.

## **6.0 Conclusion**

This chapter has explored the history of anti-VAWG activism both in Britain and on the global stage, with specific attention to the implications of the neoliberal project and austerity politics for the movement's social change efforts. It has also examined how anti-VAWG activists have responded to numerous challenges since the 1960s – most of which are associated with the institutionalisation of the movement – and how they have adapted their service provision and political campaigns in response to the

changing political and economic climate. In the remaining chapters of this thesis, data from my empirical study are examined in order to address the following research questions:

- What are the main challenges facing anti-VAWG activists in the current austerity context (2012-2015) and how are these challenges affecting their service delivery and social change agendas?
- How are anti-VAWG activists conceptualising and making sense of the rising levels of VAWG in Britain and how is this informing their strategies to tackle VAWG in their communities?
- Where are anti-VAWG directing their demands for social justice (i.e. central government, local government, criminal justice system) and in what ways do these demands target the underlying structures, norms and ideologies perpetuating VAWG today?
- What does the above tell us about the dominant logics guiding anti-VAWG activism in North East England and the possibilities and limitations of this activism in the second decade of the twenty-first century?

# 3

## **Developing an Intersectional Methodology and Research Design**

### **1.0 Introduction**

Feminist researchers have an important role to play in promoting and influencing the activist roots of anti-VAWG praxis and as such are faced with the challenge of creating feminist methodologies that are not only useful for legitimising and informing empirical enquiry but that are also relevant to women's political struggles against VAWG within specific historical contexts. However, developing a methodology capable of exploring the complex landscape of anti-VAWG activism in North East England whilst simultaneously avoiding reproducing the power relations that I have sought to critique has been an interesting challenge – especially in light of growing evidence that neoliberalism as a “mode of governmentality” has become embedded in the feminist academy and in popular forms of feminist theorising and strategising (see Chapter Two). To be sure, while the challenges posed by neoliberalism have enhanced the need for feminist research committed to alleviating inequality, it is precisely this

type of scholarship that the neoliberal academy has deprioritised and/or actively undermined in its attempt to cultivate a closer relationship with government (Brown 2005). There is also evidence to suggest that the postmodernist turn in feminist theory has nurtured the neoliberal project due to its emphasis on fragmentation, division and diversity (Mohanty 2013). The methodological approach outlined in this chapter is evidence of my attempt to resist these depoliticising forces within the academy in order to produce research in the service of those women resisting inequality and violence in their communities. The chapter is divided into two distinct halves. The first half outlines the theoretical, epistemological and ontological commitments informing this research, all of which centre around the concept of intersectionality and its foundations in Black feminist thought. The second half describes the practical research process, including my intersectional approach to data collection and analysis, and reflexivity. Overall, this chapter demonstrates that intersectionality theory and feminist ethnography can operate as important methodological counterpoints to neoliberalism and to the inroads made by its austerity politics in recent decades.

## **2.0 Intersectionality**

Critical legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw (1989, 1991) introduced the concept of intersectionality to describe how the interaction of racism and sexism in the lives of Black women is obscured when both categories are treated separately in law. Shortly after, sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (1990) justified the need for a distinctive Black women's standpoint epistemology based on the life experiences of marginalised Black women trapped in a "matrix of domination" (1990: 276) due to interlocking systems of gender, race and class oppression. This matrix encompasses the levels of "personal

biography; the group or community level of the cultural context created by race, class, gender; and the systematic level of social institutions” (1990: 227) and is responsible for the ways in which Black women have been historically refused social, economic and political power. Drawing upon Mohanty’s (1984) critique of Western feminist constructions of non-Western women as passive, homogenous, oppressed subjects in comparison to their liberal, empowered, Western counterparts, Collins explores some of the key structural, hegemonic, disciplinary and intersubjective power relations that shape the race-class-gender paradigm (see also Collins 1993). At the same time, Collins’ focus of analysis shifts “from merely describing the similarities and differences distinguishing these systems of oppression” and instead “focuses greater attention on how they interconnect” to create multiple forces of privilege and oppression in women’s lives (1990: 223). Whereas unitary or “additive” approaches to conceptualising women’s oppression uphold one category (i.e. gender) before “adding” others to it, intersectionality theory demands that scholars acknowledge the mutually-constitute nature of multiple categories of oppression and how they interact to condition women’s lived experiences. Such approaches were visible in the work of several Black scholars – such as bell hooks (1981) and the Combahee River Collective (1977) in the US, and Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1983) in the UK – prior to the coining of the term intersectionality. These scholars highlighted how sexism, classism, racism and heterosexism “work through” and reinforce one another, and the need for a feminist coalition politics to unravel these oppressive systems.

### *2.1 Defining Intersectionality*

Crenshaw (1991) grouped intersectionality under three main categories – structural, political and representational. Structural intersectionality explores how women’s



social practices and the categories of identity associated with them are influenced by intersecting social structures. Using VAWG as an example, Crenshaw highlights how states collude with various structures of oppression and with perpetrators to abuse and exploit women. She explains that structural intersectionality refers to “the ways in which the location of women of color at the intersection of race and gender makes our actual experience of domestic violence, rape, and remedial reform qualitatively different than that of white women” (Crenshaw 1991: 1245). Sokoloff and Dupont (2005) have also utilised this framework to study VAWG and found that BME women encounter problems with racism, sexism, xenophobia, poverty, police violence and policy exclusion due to their locations at the intersection of race, ethnicity, class, religion, culture and immigration status. Anthias explains that structural intersectionality must therefore attend to “the operations of inequality and violence through the state and other institutional frameworks in which power and economic interest are exercised, and not just at the categories and practices of gender, race and so on” (Anthias 2013: 13). For the purposes of this research it will be important to examine how anti-VAWG activists, in their articulations and descriptions of their everyday practices, relate to structural power relations and with what effects.

Political intersectionality posits that if women’s experiences of violence are characterised by intersecting gender, race and class oppressions (as the notion of structural intersectionality demonstrates) then women are also likely to experience political struggles against this violence differently, based on their specific locations within the “matrix of domination” that Collins (1990) refers to. Crenshaw (1991) developed the concept of political intersectionality by outlining the ways in which women’s movements have historically framed their analyses and demands on the experiences and needs of women who (aside from their marginalised gender status)

occupy relatively privileged positions within the movement. In contrast, those women who occupy multiple marginalised identities (i.e. poor Black women) are often caught between the sometimes conflicting agendas of the three political constituencies to which they belong or are disregarded by these movements entirely (Cole 2008). Significant challenges are therefore posed by basic questions of representation, which is why political intersectionality implores feminist scholars and activists to engage politically with the diversity of the movement constituency in order to expose the unequal power relations sustaining it. This has encouraged me to consider how aspects of activists' identities affect their ability to access resources and forward their political agendas. In the current context of austerity there are likely a growing number of exclusionary categories that will influence activists' access to political spaces.

Finally, representational intersectionality demonstrates how hegemonic representations of social issues and social identities serve to reproduce the marginalisation of specific social groups (i.e. Black women). This concept is particularly interested in how norms and ideologies affect social practices and at the same time, how social practices reproduce or call into question established norms and values (Yuval-Davis 2006). Winker and Degele (2011) encourage scholars to explore the ways in which symbolic representations are diffused through mainstream culture in ways that permeate the sub-conscious and become invisible. What is the relationship between social structures and symbolic representations and how does this affect agency?

### *2.3 Three Layers of Intersectional Complexity*

Lesley McCall (2005) has outlined three main methodological approaches to

intersectionality. Of the two dominant types of intersectional methodology, which McCall refers to as the ‘anti-categorical’ and ‘intra-categorical’ approaches, the former is heavily informed by a poststructuralist (counter)ontology and is concerned primarily with deconstructing the meaning of social categories and/or rejecting social categories altogether because “social life is considered too irreducibly complex . . . to make fixed categories anything but simplifying social fictions” (McCall 2005: 1773) while the latter is guided by a postmodernist ontology concerned with the mutually constitutive nature of social relations (i.e. how gender relations are inseparable from race and class relations) and thus relies on social categorisation in order to examine intragroup power relations at neglected points of intersection. The third and currently less practiced ‘inter-categorical’ approach also focuses on the relationships and connections between categories but unlike the intra-categorical approach which rejects the ontological separation of social categories, this approach is interested in the changing nature of inequality and therefore advocates the provisional separation of categories in order to avoid conflating different forms of structural inequality. McCall explains that this approach “begins with the observation that there are relationships of inequality among already constituted social groups, as imperfect and ever changing as they are, and takes those relationships as the centre of the analysis” (2005: 1784-1785).

### 2.3.1 Anti-categorical Complexity

The anti-categorical approach is informed by a poststructuralist view of the social world as entirely determined by language (i.e. no objective reality is believed to exist) meaning that social change can only occur through the transformative power of discourse (see Foucault 1997; Derrida 1991; Flax 1990). McCall effectively breaks down this argument as follows: “since symbolic violence and material inequalities are

rooted in relationships that are defined by race, class, sexuality, and gender, the project of deconstructing the normative assumptions of these categories contributes to the possibility of social change” (2005: 1777). This is because “language (in the broader social or discursive sense) creates categorical reality rather than the other way around” (2005: 1777). Those scholars committed to this analysis have been pivotal in informing the foundations of an anti-essentialist feminism that is attentive to the dialectical relationship between language and material power (i.e. the way VAWG is constructed by dominant institutions has a significant impact on how it is tackled). The anti-categorical approach thus recognises the inseparability of knowledge and power (Foucault 1997) and believes that knowledge production can both reproduce and resist dominant structures of oppression.

However, it is the anti-categorical rejection of ontological realism that has led me away from a comprehensive engagement with this approach, as it is through this rejection that scholars have promoted the deconstruction and eventual erasure of all social categories (i.e. gender, class, race, ethnicity) – including the social category ‘woman’ (see Riley 1988) – which has in turn led to assertions that solidarity between women (based on similar positions in relation to social structures) is an untenable notion that must be contested. This overthrow of grand narratives is experienced as depoliticising for those feminists – myself included – who wish to better understand the concrete material effects of male power on women’s lives and who have historically united with other women to tackle common structural oppressions. Although social categories are social constructions, they nevertheless have real social, political and economic effects that can be studied in relation to the intersecting structural conditions that make up the specific context.

### 2.3.2 Intra-categorical Complexity

Diverging from the anti-categorical approach and its rejection of social categorisation, the intra-categorical approach communicates important understandings about the complexity of reality; namely that structures of power and inequality are in mutually constituted relationships with one another from which they cannot be fully unravelled (see Ferree 2009; Walby 2007; Hancock 2007). As a proponent of this approach, Ferree explains that in such a complex system “gender is not a dimension limited to the organization of reproduction or family, class is not a dimension equated with the economy, and race is not a category reduced to the primacy of ethnicities, nations and borders” but rather that “all the processes that systematically organize families, economies and nations are co-constructed along with the meanings of gender, race and class that are presented in and reinforced by these institutions separately and together” (2009: 85). Thus gender cannot be unknotted from other power structures (i.e. race, class, sexuality) because it is always already historically intertwined with these power structures. In this way, although gender may be the most stable regime of inequality in VAWG, or the most consistent identity characteristic in anti-VAWG activism, it is always already cut across by race, class, nationality and so on to produce specific effects that are not the sum of their parts. This approach to intersectionality has provided me with the tools for capturing the simultaneity of privilege and oppression as they are experienced by different women involved in the anti-VAWG arena.

### 2.3.3 Inter-Categorical Complexity

All intersectional analyses are confronted to different extents with the challenge of encapsulating and then unravelling power relations. However, Hancock highlights that

“many scholars stop short of elaborating exactly how they conceptualise these structures at work (sometimes giving structures equal weight, or failing to explain why one social structure is prioritised over others)” (2013: 265). For instance, Eschle and Manguashca question “how socio-economic and cultural axes of oppression, or gender, race and class, can be understood as mutually constitutive within a framework that simultaneously privileges capitalism” (2013: 9). I believe this is where McCall’s inter-categorical approach becomes most useful as it acknowledges that the mutually constitutive nature of social relations does not mean that they are ontologically reducible to one another (i.e. racial domination is *not* a product of gender oppression). Rather, all social categories play out differently as they interact with the various traditions and categories of meaning within our societies. This approach posits that the inevitable inseparability of social categories at the empirical level does not mean that feminist scholars and activists cannot separate them at an analytical level, as this would prevent an understanding of how changing configurations of inequality affect relationships between and among multiple social groups. Thus from this perspective, intersectional scholars can identify which social categories and systems of oppression are the most significant in a given historical context before analysing how they interact and interlock with one another and with what effects (Dhamoon 2011; Yuval Davis 2006; Verloo 2009).

Certainly, the global spread of neoliberal capitalism has been spatially uneven as it has intersected with other political and cultural projects in diverse and contradictory ways (Peck 2002). Intersectional scholars might therefore decide to prioritise neoliberal capitalism in their analyses of women’s oppression in order to assess the ways in which it strategically reinforces existing social hierarchies, often based on interlocking gender, race and class inequalities, in order to maintain its

dominance. Indeed, a central element of the inter-categorical approach is to examine how social relations create interlocking matrices of power that work *with* and *for* each other, which is why this thesis is interested in how gender, race and class oppressions serve one another in ways that exacerbate VAWG and undermine collective resistance – especially in the aftermath of the global financial crisis.

For the purposes of this research a combination of the intra-categorical and inter-categorical approaches has been particularly useful in guiding my intersectional analysis. The mutually constitutive analysis of the intra-categorical approach has encouraged me to look *within* social groups in order to grasp women's qualitatively different experiences of power and oppression, while the macro-structural focus of the inter-categorical approach has drawn my attention to the relationships between different social structures and their effects on social behaviour, social divisions, distribution of resources and so on.

## *2.4 Categories of Difference*

Weldon (2005) has argued that intersectionality is too ambitious in its attempts to analyse multiple intersecting social divisions and their implications for agency while simultaneously paying attention to each individual's unique social location. She believes it is impossible to take into consideration every relevant intersection. However, several intersectionality scholars do not consider this problematic. For instance, Yuval-Davis (2006) highlights that within specific historical contexts certain social relations are likely to be more significant than others and will interact with different systems in historically specific ways. In a similar vein, McCall (2005) explains that perhaps "inequalities were once large but now they are small, or in one

place they are large but in another they are small” (2005: 1792) and thus encourages scholars to attend to those categories of difference that embody these larger inequalities. Both scholars argue that the categories deemed most significant are inevitably and unavoidably a product of the freedom and autonomy of the researcher and their particular knowledge and interests – though decisions can be scrutinised by others if necessary.

It would indeed have been futile for me to attempt to include every relevant intersection that emerged over the course of this research. I instead followed the advice of McCall and Yuval-Davis outlined above. The anti-VAWG sector in North East England comprises women who may share the same (or similar) socio-political goals but this group also consists of multi-groups comprising social actors whose identities cut across the intersections of gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, age, faith and ability. These grouping are not fixed but play “an important role in determining social participation and in fueling claims for social representation and recognition, which act as vehicles for a range of political, cultural and economic struggles” (Anthias 2013: 9). Identifying the social divisions most relevant to the focus of this thesis has therefore relied on elements of deductive and inductive inquiry. As the previous two chapters have demonstrated, I have formulated strong opinions about the gender, race and class inequalities that neoliberal policies, ideologies and austerity measures are producing and enabling in contemporary Britain and the possibilities and limits of feminist resistance that are manifesting as a result. This has not only influenced the dominant structural categories that I examine (race/racism, gender/sexism, class/classism and nationality/xenophobia) but also which women I approached to take part in this research, as discussed further below. At the same time, my grounded theoretical approach to sampling has enabled me to identify which further categories of difference



were emerging as significant during fieldwork (age, sexuality and religion in particular) and build my final sample around the women best positioned to discuss these divisions. Inevitably, some social divisions and their intersections received much more attention than others. Brief discussions about ability/ableism and transsexuality/cisgenderism in the movement context were pertinent when discussing certain topics but were not embedded in my overarching intersectional analysis.

There are likely an immeasurable number of other differences that I have not taken into consideration and like Yuval-Davis (2006) has highlighted, these omissions can be held up to scrutiny with respect to the aims of the investigation. However, Cho et al. (2013) have argued that foundational intersectional scholarship was never about recognizing *every* possible category of difference for the sake of tokenistic inclusivity and representation. Instead, they believe that applications of intersectionality concerned solely with how inequality manifests *differently* in different women's lives help explain why feminism has become so divided since the 1980s. They argue that certain rhetorics of intersectionality – particularly those that reduce women to their embodied identities as in the anti-categorical approach (see above) – are especially disconnected from earlier understandings of intersectionality as linked to analyses of power relations and structural inequalities. The differences and social divisions selected for intersectional analysis are supposed to serve a political purpose (Collins 2002). Mohanty (2013) believes this omission has resulted in the splintering of women's movements rather than the bringing together of women across their differences in order to critique and eventually transform unequal power relations. Furthermore, this contradicts Crenshaw's original vision for intersectionality which recognised identity groups as coalitions, comprised of both differences and commonalities (see Crenshaw 1989, 1991). Like Mohanty, I would argue that this

preoccupation with difference in intersectionality scholarship has rendered it more cooperative with neoliberal governance and its interest in facilitating the divisions of citizens across lines of gender, race and class. Mohanty (2013: 971) argues that this outcome “disallow(s) the salience of collective experience” and subsequently of collective resistance.

Crenshaw (2013) has recently questioned whether this preoccupation with difference and shift away from structural applications of intersectionality has something to do with the strategic deployment of the language of diversity by more privileged women who wish to avoid appearing white/racist, middleclass/classist and so on. Is it the case that more privileged feminists are implementing intersectionality as a diversity agenda whereby its purpose is to tolerate and be sensitive to women’s differences rather than challenge the very power relations that constitute these differences? May (2015) certainly believes so. She argues that this liberal diversity agenda is enabling more privileged women to avoid questioning their own relationships with power by focusing on the endlessness of differences among women. She believes such a focus (re)marginalises Black feminist thought through its piecemeal focus on women’s different experiences of oppression (often constructed in essentialist terms) while ignoring that intersectionality was formulated as a critique of white solipsism in feminist theory. It is for this reason that several Black feminist scholars have recently reminded us that analyses of intersecting and interlocking systems of power are not only about making visible oppression but also privilege and power (see Cho et al. 2013). Indeed, May (2015) highlights that the misuses of power leading to such misapplications of intersectionality are in fact the very focus of intersectionality in the first place: the ways in which “its language and insights are co-opted to shore up bits of privilege and power while seeking redress and rights on other

fronts, thereby retaining the exclusionary logics, unequal life opportunities and partitioned social ontologies that are part of the problem in the first place” (2015: 126).

### **3.0 The Politics of Knowledge Production**

My conversations with anti-VAWG activists over the course of this study are important sources of situated knowledge and have provided me with a detailed insight into how activists are seeing and thinking about the complex power relations and structural forces that are conditioning their localised realities. Given my interest in examining how anti-VAWG activists are making sense of the inequalities and systems of domination they find themselves (and the women they support) subject to and how this is informing their socio-political resistance, it was important to provide participants with an opportunity to relate their own understandings of the issues they deem most pertinent to their activism. However, while each woman’s experiential knowledge is important in showing how they perceive and make sense of particular issues and experiences, intersectionality scholars recognise that women’s locations within structures of privilege and oppression always inform processes of knowledge production (Crenshaw 1991).

#### ***3.1 Feminist Standpoint Epistemology***

Historically, women’s movements have produced highly problematic epistemic exclusions which have served to uphold the interests and agendas of the most privileged (white, middleclass, heterosexual, able bodied) women – as Crenshaw’s analysis of political intersectionality demonstrates. Feminist standpoint theories offer a corrective to these exclusions by highlighting how the standpoints of the most

socially and economically marginalised women “can become sites of epistemic privilege and thus productive starting points for enquiry into questions about not only those who are socially and politically marginalised” but also those with social and political power (Fester 2016: 11; Harding 2004; Collins 1986). As Martinez et al. (2014) have recently highlighted, privilege is something that is not always actualised and recognised by those possessing it and so “it is entirely possible and likely quite common that someone could believe they are not privileged on the basis of their normative race, dominant gender, or higher social class, and for this belief to be incorrect” (2014: 457). It is likewise possible for a feminist organisational culture to operate on racism and classism even if those benefitting from it or perpetuating it are seemingly unaware, as dominant groups often lack an insight into the oppressive characteristics of their own outlooks and practices (Harding 2004).

Given that knowledge rooted in minority women’s experiences and intersectional activism is too often rendered invisible or unintelligible in mainstream feminist scholarship despite its transformatory vantage point, this research has sought to place marginalised women at the centre while identifying and examining the consequences of epistemic inequality among anti-VAWG activists in North East England. At the same time, I am also interested in exploring how women occupying more privileged locations on account of their race and class can “become part of the process of helping reach a shared critical consciousness with respect to the effects of power structures on epistemic production” (Bowell 2016: no pagination). Nira Yuval-Davis’ concept of *transversal politics* was devised with this in mind.

### 3.2 *Transversal Politics*

Converging with the standpoint epistemology outlined above, *transversal politics* attempts to overcome the false universalism inherent in earlier forms of feminist identity politics based on notions of sisterhood. In acknowledging that every woman views and experiences the social world differently, Yuval-Davis explains that “the only way to approach “the truth” is by a dialogue between people of differential positionings, and the wider the better” (Yuval-Davis 2006: 281). In this dialogue, instead of remaining uncompromisingly ‘rooted’ in ones own positioning, it is required that each person ‘shifts’ between their positionings in order to better understand the situations of those they are working with or trying to help (Yuval-Davis 2006). Transversal politics thus attempts to overcome the essentialism inherent in assertions that women must belong to the same constituency (i.e. ethnic background, class background, sexuality) they advocate for. As Yuval-Davis explains, “[p]eople who identify themselves as belonging to the same collectivity or category can be positioned very differently in relation to a whole range of social divisions (e.g. class, gender, ability, sexuality, stage in the life cycle etc.) At the same time, people with similar positioning and/or identity can have very different social and political values” (1999: 95). In acknowledging this unavoidable heterogeneity, feminist activists are encouraged to overcome unequal power relations, essentialist notions of difference and other forms of exclusion by developing a ‘reflexive knowledge’ of their own positionings in relation to social, economic and political power, which involves examining “the possible ways in which they both experience victimization and bear some responsibility for systemic violence targeted at other groups” (Sokoloff & Dupont 2005: 57). Yuval-Davis believes this will help feminists devise resistance

strategies that do not collude with power; though this is often a complex and “messy” process in practice, as discussed later in this chapter.

However, Martinez et al. (2014) argue that the preoccupation of most intersectional scholarship with epistemic (experiential) knowledge risks omitting an understanding of the way hegemonic ideologies operate to misinform and misrepresent reality and the constraints this can place on knowledge production among the privileged *and* oppressed. Given my interest in how anti-VAWG activists are making sense of the structural landscape of VAWG – as well as my interest in the way neoliberalism operates as a form of governmentality in the anti-VAWG arena (see Chapter Two) – it has been important to uphold a critical realist implementation of intersectionality that accounts for unrecognised structural impediments.

### *3.3 Critical Realism*

The critical realist philosophy is perhaps best summarised in the work of critical realist pioneer Roy Bhaskar (1986, 1994). Bhaskar noted that because identification of causation is possible via experiential activity, as in positivism, there must be unobservable causal forces that generate such events to be measured. This led him to observe that the social world must be divided into at least three ontological domains: (1) the *empirical*, which is the observable experiential domain where social events can be witnessed and measured; (2) the *actual*, which is the domain that exists beyond the scope of our experiences where causal structures interact to produce events that occur regardless of whether we have knowledge of them; and (3) the *real*, which is a completely unobservable domain where the emergent potential but unactualised causal mechanisms are located. In short, the real comprises of causal mechanisms which

generate events in the actual domain, which may or may not be observed in the empirical domain (Collier 1994). According to critical realism, the task of social science “is to explore the realm of the real and how it relates to the other two domains ... [What are] the relationships and non-relationships, respectively, between what we experience, what actually happens and the underlying mechanisms that produce the events in the world?” (Danermark et al. 2002: 21).

Critical realist scholars accept the impossibility of obtaining a single factual understanding of causal structures, but unlike some postmodernists they believe that we should nevertheless attempt to determine and theorise the source of this structural complexity. As a result, critical realism retains an important commitment to causal explanation, including of unobservable structures, and so neoliberalism, for example, can be constructed as both an abstraction and an actuality: “it is not simply a political-economy with social structuring effects but has multiple and durable effects on culture and psychology, on how people feel and think about the world, themselves and each other, and on norms, values, habits and practices” (Hall 2014: 184). Feminist scholars such as Angela McRobbie (2009) and Christina Scharff (2009) have demonstrated how the neoliberalisation of feminist consciousness has the ability to transform women’s understandings of their environments – often in ways that promote fitting in with, rather than challenging and transforming, structural inequality (see Chapter Two). Within critical realism this line of argument applies to all social structures (capitalism, patriarchy, racism, imperialism, colonialism) which are conceptualised as having complex implications for how we express ourselves and construct our realities – and often in ways that unwittingly affirm the power relations that work against our own best interests.

Lesley McCall (2005) integrates this critical realist framework within her intersectional analysis and implores scholars to acknowledge that although the social world is not knowable in any real sense, we must nevertheless develop theoretical knowledge about unobservable structures in order to determine which knowledge has the most emancipatory and transformative potential. This is not to say that feminist analyses of women's experiences and related understandings of them are irrelevant to intersectionality but rather that scholars must not (1) underestimate the structural conditions and forms of cultural and symbolic capital required for the production and legitimisation of knowledge as discussed above or (2) ignore the various gaps in knowledge which stem from 'trans-phenomenality' (those unobserved structural and ideological forces that exist beyond our particular experiences and understandings) and 'counter-phenomenality' (contradictions between what we think we see and what is real) (Collier 1994). Given intersectionality's interest in knowledge production and the impact of structural and ideological power on the knowledge we produce, moving beyond a solely empiricist analysis is essential in order to avoid obscuring or omitting the complexities at hand. In doing so my data analysis respects the varied experiences and knowledge claims of participants while critically examining the reliability of these claims and the political uses to which they are put.

At the same time, Lather rightly highlights that researchers adopting this approach are themselves faced with the following challenge: "how to maximize the researcher's mediation between people's self-understandings (in light of the need for ideological critique) and transformative social action *without becoming impositional*" (2017: 23). To become impositional means to lose sight of our own positions in relation to knowledge production and to ignore the ways in which we too might think in ways that serve neither our own emancipation, the emancipation of others, or our



emancipatory research goals. I unpack and reflect on my own positionality and relationship to knowledge and power in further detail below, after outlining how my intersectional methodology has informed the practical research process.

## **4.0 The Practical Research Process**

The discussions above about how intersectionality has been applied methodologically and analytically in this thesis are insufficient without elaborating on the research process, including the selection and recruitment of participants and data collection and analysis. The empirical component of this research was to examine (1) the main challenges facing anti-VAWG activists in the current austerity context and how these challenges affect service delivery and social change agendas; (2) the way the activists are conceptualising and making sense of rising levels of VAWG in Britain and how this is informing their strategies to tackle VAWG; and (3) where the activists are aiming their demands for social justice.

### *4.1 Gaining Access*

As I was interested in gathering data about women's diverse experiences of anti-VAWG activism at the intersections of multiple social divisions and systems of power, it was important that my sample of interview participants enabled this. Before commencing fieldwork I began by outlining the basic requirements for engaging in the study in order to draw some boundaries: all participants had to identify as women over the age of eighteen and work or volunteer in a VAWG organisation or women's organisation based in North East England. Given my intention of conducting an

intersectional analysis of the data, I had a general idea about the specific identity characteristics that needed to be represented in the sample based on my theoretical understanding of the categories of individuals that were likely to provide important and diverse perspectives on violence against women and anti-VAWG politics. This included:

- participants working across various forms of VAWG, including domestic violence, rape, sexual assault, trafficking and sexual exploitation, forced marriage, honour-based violence and female genital mutilation. I anticipated that activists' experiences and understandings would differ depending on the type of violence(s) they specialise in. I also wanted to broaden the existing scholarly focus beyond a preoccupation with domestic violence and domestic violence movements (i.e. Lehrner & Allen 2009; Nichols 2013).
- participants working in different job roles (i.e. advocates, counsellors, refuge workers, managers, outreach workers) and different types of organisations (i.e. women only, specialist BME/LGBT, generic). I anticipated that this would provide an insight into how different activists articulate the problems and challenges that constitute anti-VAWG arena.
- participants working within each of the four main sub-regions that make up the North East, which include Northumberland, County Durham and Darlington, Tyne and Wear and Teesside, in order to get a sense of whether differences in local government and their investment in VAWG services affect women's experiences of activism.

- participants that identify as and/or represent women from one or more of the six diversity strands now recognised nationally, which include young women, older women, black and minority ethnic women, lesbian and bisexual women, women with disabilities, and women of different faith groups. Given my interest in issues of inclusion/exclusion, power/knowledge and representation/appropriation, recruiting participants from a range of social backgrounds was essential.

However, at this point I had no way of identifying or accessing the women corresponding to this criteria given that my target population was a heterogeneous community of anti-VAWG activists spread across a range of different women's organisations in North East England and with whom I was mostly unacquainted. It was therefore necessary to implement a multi-stage design to define my final sample, beginning with a scoping exercise in September 2012 – six months before my fieldwork was due to commence – to identify the approximate size of the sector, the scope of its VAWG provision and advocacy and to pinpoint which organisations might help me access the types of participants required.

A few years prior to commencing this research, Coy, Kelly and Foord (2009) created a *Map of Gaps* in VAWG service provision across Britain and they identified rural areas as dangerously lacking in services and the North East of England as a particularly underserved region. For the purpose of my scoping exercise, I had originally anticipated that *Map of Gaps 2* would afford me an initial estimation of the size and scope of the VAWG sector in the North East as its sample encompassed the diverse range of organisations I was also hoping to make contact with: those that

“enable women to name violence, create safety, seek justice and undo some of the harms . . . [by] listening; [providing] information; advice; advocacy; counselling; shelter; protection; self-help; and access to activism” (Coy, Kelly & Foord 2009: 15). This included services that respond to various forms of VAWG (domestic violence, rape and sexual assault, trafficking, stalking, sexual harassment, FGM, forced marriage and honour-based violence) and support some of the most marginalised social groups (including young women, minority ethnic women, lesbian, bisexual and transgender women, and women with disabilities). Based on this criteria, *Map of Gaps 2* identified 44 specialist VAWG services in North East England, including 25 domestic violence organisations (two of which were specialist BME organisations); 11 organisations specialising in sexual violence; 4 prostitution, trafficking and sexual exploitation services; and 4 specialist domestic violence courts (Coy, Kelly & Foord 2009: PAGE). *Map of Gaps 2* also revealed that there were no FGM services in the North East and no specialist VAWG services for disabled women.

However, when it came to identifying those organisations corresponding to this criteria in the North East via online searches and reviews of available third sector literature, it quickly became apparent that the already bleak picture painted by *Map of Gaps 2* data collected in late 2008 was even bleaker in 2012 as the global financial crisis had since deepened, bringing with it a raft of austerity measures and welfare cuts that several anti-VAWG organisations in the North East did not survive. Whilst I was aware that the women’s sector had been rendered vulnerable in the wake of austerity measures and cuts against “unnecessary” public expenditures (Newcastle CVS 2010, 2011, 2012; Craig 2011; NEWN 2011) like many others I had not anticipated that the British state would come to view violence against women as falling so effortlessly into the “unnecessary expenditure” category. Between 2010 and 2012 over £5.6 million in

cuts were made to women's services across England (Bennhold 2012) which resulted in a 31% reduction in funding for the women's VAWG sector, from £7.8 million in 2010 to £5.4 million in 2012 (False Economy Project 2013). A report documenting the impact of austerity measures on women in the North East of England – published shortly after I began my scoping exercise – revealed that several VAWG services had recently closed in the region, that others had merged with larger generic organisations to survive the cuts, and that more than half of the VCS organisations with decreased funding in the North East were specialising in VAWG issues, meaning that numerous VAWG projects and outreach services were disappearing at a moment's notice (NEWN 2012). A freedom of information request made by North East Women's Network revealed that local government spending on VAWG services across the region had decreased by an average of 9.2% (and in North Tyneside by an astonishing 40.6%) between 2010 and 2012, despite demand for VAWG services increasing significantly during this period (NEWN 2012: 20). Thus what was certainly a bleak picture in 2008/09 was beginning to reach crisis point in late 2012 as the VAWG sector declared its position as most detrimentally effected by austerity than any other area of the women's sector in North East England (NEWN 2012).

Entering the field at this particular moment was both timely and daunting. The destabilisation of the VAWG sector under conditions of “austerity localism” (Featherstone et al. 2012) meant that many of the VAWG organisations identified in *Maps of Gaps 2* were downsizing or had already closed. This subsequently meant that many of the anti-VAWG activists working within surviving organisations were dealing with a frightening situation of funding cuts, staff losses and significantly increased workloads. While my anticipation of this situation was a catalyst for conducting this research in the first place, my initial plan of scoping out relevant

organisations and contacting them via email in order to establish contact and recruit interview participants no longer seemed appropriate or justifiable. I had already learned from previous research undertaken during my Master's degree that first impressions are very important. The specialist BME organisation that I studied was incredibly busy and was frequently approached by students to partake in studies about domestic violence. My decision to volunteer at the organisation on a weekly basis – four months prior to data collection and several months after – was integral for gaining access to participants in a non-exploitative way, especially since welfare cuts were having (and continue to have) a particularly damaging impact on specialist BME-led organisations (Imkaan 2013).

Such commitment to a single organisation was not possible for this research given the number of different organisations I required access to, yet I knew that I needed to be more visible and involved in the activities taking place within the sector. It was at this point that my principle supervisor suggested that North East Women's Network (NEWN) might be worth contacting for advice about access. NEWN was established in 2006 "to strengthen the women's sector and ensure its survival by encouraging and supporting collaboration between women's voluntary and community organisations ... and building partnerships and alliances across other sectors" (NEWN 2013: ii). In 2008 the Network had begun an "intensive and far reaching process to develop and build the network" across the North East (Robson 2015: 311) and by the time I was put in touch with them, had established contact with over 150 women's organisations across the North East.

#### 4.1.1 North East Women's Network

My initial access to NEWN was negotiated by my principle supervisor who after hearing about its new role in informing and shaping the Police and Crime Commissioners strategy to tackle VAWG in the North East, contacted an acquaintance of hers at the Network asking if I could attend their VAWG events as a participant observer whilst helping out in any way possible. Attendance at these events was restricted to members of women's organisations and charities working around VAWG issues but it was agreed that having a second facilitator would enable the Network to capture as much data as possible whilst also benefitting my own research, which was approved as being relevant to the ethos of the Network. Aside from the first VAWG event listed below – which had already taken place before my supervisor contacted the Network – I attended the following events:

- Sexual Violence – (Darlington, 16<sup>th</sup> April 2013)
- Forced Marriage – (Newcastle, 18<sup>th</sup> April 2013)
- Violence and Prostitution – (Newcastle, 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2013)
- Sexual Exploitation of Young Women – (Middlesbrough, 8<sup>th</sup> May 2013)
- Domestic Violence, Harassment and Stalking – (Middlesbrough, 9<sup>th</sup> May 2013)
- Lesbian Women and Bi-sexual Women – (Newcastle, 14<sup>th</sup> May 2013)
- Women seeking Asylum and Refugee Women – (Newcastle, 16<sup>th</sup> May 2013)
- Female Genital Mutilation – (Middlesbrough, 17<sup>th</sup> May 2013)
- BME Women, Domestic Violence & Honour-based Violence – (Newcastle, 21<sup>st</sup> May 2013)

These events brought together members of the VAWG sector on a large scale and provided me with an unanticipated opportunity to recruit interview participants based on the sample criteria outlined above. Of the twelve women I identified as important to interview during these events, eleven agreed to participate after I described my research focus and process in person and later by follow-up email. The opportunity to

build rapport with these women before requesting their involvement in my research was indispensable in aiding the recruitment of interviewees. A few remarks were made during the events about my young age and some women asked questions about my experience as a researcher. I disclosed that this was only my second research project and that I was by no means a highly experienced researcher. It is likely that such factors may have hindered my access given that I was researching specialists in their field – and some participants remarked that they were often approached by undergraduate students for interviews and that it was occasionally irritating. I therefore think it was important that I was able to meet several of my participants in person before requesting an interview. The opportunity to provide appropriate introductions and detailed descriptions of the purpose and process of my research was very beneficial.

My involvement with NEWN did not end with these events. I quickly became integrated in the more strategic side of the Network, attending VAWG Working Group meetings and Steering Group meetings from June 2013 until well after fieldwork ended in December 2014 (the empirical benefits of which are discussed further below). During this period I became much more acquainted with the regions VAWG sector and with the type of organisations and activists working within it. Nine of the nineteen remaining participants I recruited for interviews were from organisations that respond to VAWG issues but do not advertise this publicly, or that provide VAWG services but are not classed as VAWG organisations. I was also made aware of organisations that had just recently opened as well as those about to close and so I approached four women for interviews so that I could learn more about the way austerity was both opening up and closing down spaces for activism. Based on the new insights that I was frequently obtaining from my engagement with the Network it made sense to monitor



my data collection as it progressed and alter the sample size and characteristics to reflect unforeseen recruitment opportunities and to explore unexpected leads.

Perhaps the most prominent unexpected lead came when NEWN announced that they were going to fundraise to send some of their members to lobby the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) Committee during their examination of the UK government in July 2013. When it was made clear that I was welcome to join the North East delegation, my Social Sciences department granted me the funding to attend. This led my research in a new direction which involved exploring how local anti-VAWG activists were utilising the UN to hold their government to account for the disproportionate impact of austerity measures on women across the North East region. I extended my interview sample to include three anti-VAWG activists who were interested in utilising CEDAW and its human rights framework at the local level. These participants were identified during my attendance at the CEDAW Awareness Raising and Lobbying Training Event that NEWN organised in June 2013. I spoke to them about my research in person before sending an email with more detailed information about the research goals and data collection methods. All three agreed to take part in an interview.

Overall, this form of “organic” snowball sampling (Mason 2002) has been important in enabling my access to participants involved in a diverse range of anti-VAWG struggles within their communities. With regards to my intersectional analysis, the categories of difference identified as most significant during my review of existing literature (gender/sexism, race/racism, class/classism, nationality/xenophobia) were also significant in the field and I was able to recruit participants based on this criteria. This sampling strategy also permitted me to make

real-time judgements about gaps in my sample and fill these gaps accordingly in order to enhance my intersectional analysis and the validity of my theoretical claims (Silverman 2010). There is no doubt that my active involvement with NEWN and participation in various VAWG events across the region not only helped me identify relevant participants but also to build sufficient trust and rapport with which to recruit my desired sample. This success is testimony to the strength of NEWN in establishing strong connections with women's organisations across the North East. At the same time, I believe it was beneficial that I was able to meet most participants in person before requesting interviews. It is highly likely that my experience recruiting participants would have differed significantly otherwise – especially given that judgements were often made about my age, my feminist activist credentials and my research experience, before I got to know participants.

#### 4.1.2 The Final Sample

In total I interviewed 28 women over a twelve month period between June 2013 and June 2014. All 28 participants identified as women-born-women, were aged between 25-70 years old and were geographically located within North East England at the time of fieldwork (5 in Northumberland, 4 in County Durham and Darlington, 15 in Tyne and Wear, 4 in Teesside). 21 women identified as white and 7 identified as BME (including Indian, Bangladeshi, Pakistani and African). 18 women identified as heterosexual and 10 as lesbian or bisexual. While demographic questions were not asked about social class, 12 participants identified as working class during their interviews and 5 acknowledged that they were middleclass. Most women identified as having no religion (10) or did not disclose their religion (8) but the remaining

participants identified as either Catholic, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh or Jewish. 3 participants disclosed a disability. The participants work in a variety of different organisations and occupy a range of different job roles (including IDVA, ISVA, counsellor, support worker, outreach worker, manager, CEO, volunteer). There were subsequently differences in terms of status and responsibility between participants.

#### *4.2 Data Collection*

When thinking of the ways in which feminist intersectionality theory might be best incorporated empirically within the research process, Sokoloff and Dupont (2005) highlighted the requirement for research projects which engage with women throughout the different stages of fieldwork. In doing so they argue that this will enable feminist researchers to gather interpretations and draw conclusions that are informed by women's complex realities. Based on this advice, semi-structured interviews and participant observations were selected as data collection methods for this research. This section demonstrates how these qualitative, ethnographic methods are relevant to an intersectional approach. While I recognise the important role that quantitative methods (i.e. statistical analysis) can play in feminist research projects (Oakley 1981) and appreciate that surveys and questionnaires can help establish larger samples of respondents for purposes of representation and generalisation, these methods tend to offer "limited access to accounts of experiences, nuances of meaning, the nature of social relationships, and their shifts and contradictions" (Ramazanoglu & Holland 2006: 155) and were thus unlikely to capture the depth of detail required to answer the research questions.

#### 4.2.1. Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews provided interviewees with an environment in which to explore their thoughts, outline their political orientations, narrate their understandings and knowledge of violence against women and reflect on specific events and situations without much interruption, judgement or contestation. The majority of questions were open ended and designed to uncover how participants experienced their anti-VAWG politics in the context of austerity. The questions I asked during interviews were categorised into six broad themes: (1) background of feminist activism and politics; (2) understandings of VAWG and causality; (3) interpretations of contemporary political challenges and power relations; (4) interpretation of contemporary successes and failures; (5) experiences of belonging to a social movement; and (6) future plans and ambitions for preventing VAWG. Questions were informed by my literature analysis and participant observations, modified depending on the interviewee (i.e. their job role, specialisms, political backgrounds) and open and exploratory in nature. The same core questions were asked to each participant in order to create important points for comparison.

In addition to asking predominantly open questions, a range of different probing questions were asked during individual interviews in order to guide the interview according to what was learnt and elicit more information. Since I was asking for personal information about my participants lives, identities and politics, like Oakley (1981) I found it useful to divulge some personal information about my own life and offer my own perspectives on certain issues in order to enhance dialogue and develop critical thinking. I found that this created a more equal and productive environment for participants to explore the structural and political sources of their problems and oppressions, as they too were able to ask questions and raise issues about

my own positionality. Yet at the same time I often had to be mindful about how much information about myself I disclosed so as not to dominate or influence the direction of the conversation, especially when I sensed that participants had different outlooks and perspectives to my own. Although decisions about what information to disclose and what information to hold back were entirely subjective, my intention was always to enable a better understanding of participants' perspectives and how this might relate to their specific experiences and knowledges.

Transcribing alongside interviewing enabled me to adapt and improve interview designs, questions and questioning styles very early on. Listening to the first few audio files helped me realise that my questions and responses were much more negative and closed than I had intended, focusing disproportionately on the main challenges facing feminists and much less on the more positive aspects of the current climate or the successes that my participants felt they had achieved in recent years. This was perhaps influenced by the topics I was reading and writing about at the time, including literature about depoliticisation, postfeminism and postpolitics. I also found that some questions were too strongly guided by my own personal perceptions of the main challenges facing anti-VAWG activists and so I adjusted these questions to encourage my participants to direct conversations based on their own interests and concerns. The remaining interviews became more exploratory and agential as a result.

Overall, interviews lasted between 1.5 and 2.5 hours. In order to satisfy my ethical obligations as a feminist researcher adhering to the ethics policies of Northumbria University and to a feminist "ethics of care" based on principles of equality and reciprocity (Skinner et al. 2005) I made a number of mandatory ethical commitments throughout data collection. Firstly, I ensured that all research participants were over the age of 18, were informed about the research focus (see

Appendix Two), gave their informed consent to participate, and were given the right to refuse to be voice recorded, to withdraw at any point during the research process and to retract statements or their consent before the submission of my thesis (see Appendix One). Secondly, I agreed to preserve the anonymity of participants to the best of my ability. At the most basic level this required that I store all audio files and interview transcriptions in a secure, password-protected word document folder, and that I used pseudonyms for the names of all participants and their organisations. Additionally, I've also had to engage in a more complex process of thinking about how my participants might be identifiable in the way I present and discuss my empirical findings, which has proven very difficult in numerous instances. For example, I've had to decide when to omit certain information provided by participants, usually because this information is well-known public or professional knowledge associated with this participant or their organisation, even when this information has been integral to my argument and analysis. Moreover, as I developed closer relationships with members of this relatively small community of activists, I began to hear individuals recounting in front of different groups of people the personal stories they'd told me in interviews. It is thus significant that I made it clear to participants my likely inability to protect their anonymity from members of their own communities and social groups. I requested that participants make it clear during interviews when information was "off the record" or when they would like me to disguise or omit information that might compromise their anonymity.

While a few interviews were conducted in quiet cafes or in participants' homes, in most cases interviews had to be conducted at their places of work because their busy schedules prevented them from making the journey elsewhere. This had both advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, participants were able to speak to me

in a space where they felt relaxed and in control and I was able to observe their work environment and learn more about the structure of their organisation and the types of services and projects they run. I was often introduced to other members of staff and to service users and our brief conversations were sometimes very useful for contextualising the interview data. On the other hand, and as expected, the pitfall of conducting interviews in their places of work was namely interruptions. Quite often this was because someone needed last minute access the room we were using which meant stopping the interview, disrupting the flow of conversation and using valuable interview time to locate another available room or space. Interviews were also occasionally interrupted by other members of staff needing help or advice from my interviewee, and on one such occasion the interview was interrupted five times before the interviewee had to leave to deal with a crisis case. The reality of the cuts to specialist VAWG services was never clearer than when I attended organisations for meetings or to conduct interviews.

While I often felt guilty about taking up activists' time, it transpired that the interviews provided some participants with a unique opportunity to critically reflect on their work and activism. I was surprised how many participants described their interviews as 'therapeutic' and how many emails I received from participants thanking me for the opportunity to discuss their grievances, to seek reassurance about certain ideas, and to have their knowledge and experience valued. For example, the following is part of an email I received from an interviewee the day after her interview:

I enjoyed meeting and talking to you very much. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss some of my plans. The interview gave me a chance both to see some of the weaknesses in my ideas for [my organisation] and reinforced my confidence in the essence of the project . . . I found your overall thesis fascinating and relevant. As you said, it is very difficult to find a space for critical thinking in the current climate. The public discourse tends towards polarisation: we find ourselves defending ideas – the idea of

domestic violence services for instance. The austerity agenda has the effect of destabilising the very idea of woman-focussed activities. "The family" reinstates itself as the ideal symbolic space. So the opportunity to "feel" critical and examine fragmentation was very welcome . . . I hope these comments are encouraging. (Email correspondence, July 2013).

These comments were encouraging to the extent that this participant felt the interview had enabled her to exercise her critical imagination and reflect on her anti-VAWG politics in a restrictive socio-political climate. However, her email also reinforced a reoccurring theme emerging from my fieldwork regarding the lack of time and space activists feel they have to come together to critically assess their political practices and strategies. A few other participants affirmed that the opportunity to engage in critical reflection in a non-political and non-competitive space was refreshing. It is important to me that this research helped play a role in facilitating something positive and beneficial for participants.

Finally, although I never directly asked questions about my participants personal experiences of violence, I anticipated that some participants would be active in this area as a result of such experiences and that certain topics of conversation (i.e. how and why participants became involved in anti-VAW activism, or what issues politicised them as feminists) might raise distressing memories, elicit emotional responses and provoke potential disclosures of current or former abuse (Standing 1988). I certainly did not want my participants to feel coerced into revealing deeply personal and emotional information about their encounters with violence, especially since this was not the study's focus, and so in the eight instances when such disclosures occurred I respectfully listened to my participant's accounts and if necessary I suggested that we could take a break from the interview, continue chatting without the Dictaphone recording and/or change the topic of conversation if preferred. All



participants stated that they did not mind sharing this information with me because it was integral to their politicisation, though one participant asked me to turn off the Dictaphone whenever she was uncomfortable being recorded and so we stopped recording six times throughout the interview. Due to the nature of her disclosures, I contacted this participant within 24 hours to thank her for participating, ensure that she was feeling alright and to clarify that she was aware of existing helplines and support services in her area, though I was quite confident that her job role necessitated her awareness of these services. Given that this study is not focused on anti-VAWG activists' personal experiences of violence, and in order to avoid using my participants' narrations of this violence inappropriately to enhance my own research, the personal details of their experiences do not appear in this thesis. Rather, simply knowing that at least one quarter of participants have experienced male violence serves as a stark reminder of the prolific nature of VAWG and the ways in which feminist anti-VAWG activism is intimately bound up with women's own gendered, racialised and classed experiences of violence and oppression.

#### 4.2.2 Participant Observations

Joining NEWN may have helped me overcome several fieldwork hurdles – especially with regards to gaining access to and recruiting interview participants – but it also opened up my research to information and data that I had not previously thought possible. In hindsight it is now difficult to imagine how my intersectional approach to this research would have played out without this level of access to the region's VAWG sector. Engaging in activism alongside the women I was studying meant that I was able to experience many of the more strategic struggles, tensions, joys, challenges and successes that are embedded in the anti-VAWG arena. I believe this made me more

sympathetic to their daily struggles while providing me with a more critical grasp of the strengths and limitations of their praxis. I used my emersion in the sector to extend my knowledge of activism, about the women, groups and organisations involved, the dynamics between organisations, the relationships between activists, and the daily strains and complications.

There has also been an element of luck to this research. Before commencing fieldwork I was not aware that NEWN would be the first organisational body in the country to inform their Police and Crime Commissioners' VAWG strategy. I was also unaware that NEWN would lead a delegation to the UN to challenge the UK government for its violations of the CEDAW Convention. Both of these unique events became part of my data analysis (see Chapter Six). I have had a front row seat to watch the Network as it supported its local VAWG organisations and highlighted the disproportionate impact of austerity measures on women from an already historically deprived region (NEWN 2013). The events that I attended over the course of fieldwork were not all linked with NEWN. I attended the team meetings and annual general meetings of individual organisations and participated in local demonstrations (Slut Walks, One Billion Rising and Durham Women Rising) alongside the various events I attended as a NEWN member, including at the UN. Many of the participants I interviewed were also involved in some of these events.

I consequently had access to different aspects of my participant's lives in different ways. With some it was a quick chat when our paths occasionally crossed and with others it was very social, with emails and text messages frequently sent back and forth alongside various professional and social outings. There are a few participants whom I have not seen or heard from since their interviews which is in sharp contrast with those participants I now call my friends and am in contact with to

this day. The main reason for these differing levels of intimacy is namely that it was not feasible, due to time and funding constraints, to undertake detailed participant observations at all organisations, workshops, conferences and meetings that I attended. I therefore developed more knowledge of some organisations, workshop participants and projects in the North East than others and tended to develop closer relationships with those women I came into contact with most frequently. While I attempted to obtain as much contextual knowledge and supplementary data as possible from those organisations and events I was unable to attend or observe in detail, it is indisputable that these relationships have stimulated different types of information and influenced my analysis in different ways. For example, during periods of intensive ethnography, such as my trip to the UN in Geneva, the boundaries between my personal and research identity were almost completely disbanded. The friendships that I developed during my time in the field have therefore had complex emotional and intellectual implications. On the one hand, I found that it entails levels of commitment, knowledge and trust that are beneficial for data extraction. On the other hand, however, it has on a few occasions posed difficult challenges when presenting and analysing participant data – especially where I anticipate my analysis might be received unfavourably.

It was during these periods of intensive participant observation I was able to acquire a more detailed understanding of *why* some of my participants were thinking in particular ways and in some instances I was even able to anticipate their responses to certain events or ideas due to my growing familiarity with their different outlooks and positionalities. This has been helpful for my intersectional analysis. I have also been able to use my participant observations (recorded in my fieldwork diary) to inform interview questions. For example, in an attempt to unpack some of the epistemic assumptions and dominant explanations I encountered during my participant

observations, I asked some purposely unsettling counterfactual questions during interviews about ideas and practices that often seemed totally unproblematic to many participants. This included asking several interviewees to explain why they place so much emphasis on criminal justice approaches to tackling VAWG; why they conceptualise patriarchy as the overarching system of oppression sustaining VAWG; and why they believe gender needs to be the principle factor uniting feminists in anti-VAWG efforts. In asking these questions I was not looking to contradict their understandings but rather to unsettle some of the logics, expectations, norms and exclusions that participants appeared to be frequently encountering, reproducing and reinforcing in the anti-VAWG arena. Like Verloo (2006) I found this strategy useful for uncovering complex power relations and other potentially harmful practices, especially those aligned with neoliberal imaginaries.

Overall, participant observations enabled me to pinpoint critical insights which I later explored in more detail in interviews and have since contextualised by bringing important background information and ‘situated comparisons’ (Dhamoon 2011) into focus in my data analysis chapters. This approach has been deeply useful for informing and guiding my intersectional analysis.

### *4.3 Ethical Considerations*

To gain ethical approval for this study, I attended two training programmes about researching sensitive topics and conducting interviews with survivors of violence. I also developed a safeguarding plan which detailed how I would reduce distress and unease in the interview setting. In conversation with my principle supervisor, we decided that when responding to signs of distress or other emotional

responses, I would remain calm, listen respectfully and reserve judgement, offer to change the subject or to stop recording the interview (if deemed appropriate) and that I would signpost any relevant services and sources of support. I created a list of services and took this with me to every interview, though this was never needed as all participants, given their occupation, were aware of the relevant services. However, I did make follow-up phone calls to all participants who displayed signs of distress during the interview in order to check on their well-being. I also made sure that I debriefed all participants following the interview. I began by thanking them for their time and input to ensure they feel respected and appreciated. I then outlined the next steps of the research process, including how their interview data would be stored, transcribed, anonymised, presented and published.

I also took specific steps to ensure that I obtained participants' informed consent. Once I had an indication from the potential participant that they were interested in taking part in an interview, I emailed them an information sheet (Appendix 2) which included information about the research aims and objectives; the kinds of topics that would be discussed during the interview; how I would anonymise, store and use the interview data; the possible benefits and risks of taking part; and who the participant should contact if they have any questions or concerns. Researching sensitive topics such as domestic and sexual violence carries an extra level of responsibility which is why I wanted to make clear to participants the potential risks of taking part in the study, particularly for those who are survivors of sexual violence. I believe this is an important part of gaining informed consent because it allows participants to manage their expectations and participation throughout the research process. The information sheet is therefore clear about the sensitivity of the topics discussed during the interview and their potential to cause distress. The information

sheet also explains that all information shared by participants during their interview will remain confidential unless the participant tells the researcher (or the researcher strongly suspects) that they or someone else is in danger. Fortunately, this type of scenario did not manifest.

I emailed participants their consent forms (Appendix 1) one week prior to their interview so that they had time to read and think about the information, ask questions and receive answers. The consent form asked participants to clarify that they had read and understood the information sheet; that they understood their right to stop taking part in the research project at any point and without giving a reason; that they were aware of their right to refuse to answer any interview question; that they agreed to their interview being audio-recorded; that they understood that this recording would be transcribed by the interviewer and that all identifiable information would be omitted from this transcription and from any future publications; that they are aware that their audio-recording would be destroyed at the end of the project and their transcript safely archived; and that they understood that what they said during the interview would remain confidential (unless the researcher has serious concerns about their safety or the safety of another person). On the day of the interview, I asked each participant if they had any final questions about consent before asking the participant to sign a hard copy of the consent form. I also signed the consent form to clarify that I had explained and defined in detail the research procedure in which the respondent had consented to participate.

During participant observations, I tried my hardest to make people aware that I was attending events as a participant observer, but it is possible that some may not have heard me explain this fact, or may over the duration of the event, forgotten about my role as a participant observer. If I ever needed to write an observation down on the

spot (e.g. to ensure I did not forget the intricacies of a particular discussion) I would always ask the person or group involved if it would be okay to make a note of it in my fieldwork diary.

All interviews were audio-recorded and then converted into written transcripts by the researcher. Both the audio-recordings and the transcripts are stored in password protected folders on the researcher's computer. All details and factors that could identify an interviewee (e.g. names, places, and locations) have been removed from the transcripts in order to preserve their anonymity. Interviewee's have been allocated a pseudonym so that their actual name never appears on any correspondence (e.g. emails between researcher and supervisor) or in any outputs (e.g. publications). All written consent forms are stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher's office. All audio-recordings, transcripts, consent forms and contact details will be destroyed within 10 years of the first research output.

#### *4.4 Reflexivity*

Given my commitment to an intersectional analysis of anti-VAWG activism, it has been particularly important that I consider how I am positioned within the larger power structures that this social movement seeks to transform. It is often the case that our academic profession encourages us to distance ourselves from social movements and gloss over power relations between researcher and researched in order to make our research appear ethical and devoid of theoretical and epistemological contradiction. Yet as Smith points out, this serves only as "a source of power for those who prefer the status quo" (2009: 121). After all, one of the key ways neoliberalism reproduces inequality is through its strategic claims of neutrality.

Like most feminist scholars, then, I recognise reflexivity as an important tool not only for purposes of trustworthiness and accountability in data collection and analysis but also for its role in critically examining how power is exercised and controlled during the research process and with what effects (Ramazanoglu & Holland 2002; Haraway 1988; Naples 2003; Barrett 1980). It is the complex interplay of power relations which characterise all research processes that influence the methods we employ, the interpretations we make and the knowledge we produce.

Whilst in the past certain feminist scholars and activists have argued against the ability of white women to interpret and fully understand the experiences of Black women – namely because of Western biases, neo-colonial representations and claims to speak for *all* women – these arguments have since been enhanced by concepts of ‘intracategorical complexity’ (McCall 2005) and ‘translocational positionality’ (Anthias 2010). Both of these concepts are known to inform the epistemological positioning of feminist intersectionality scholars who contend that women’s experiences, social identities and structural positionalities cross boundaries of race, ethnicity, class, culture and sexual orientation, making it impossible to claim that there is such thing as “Black knowledge” or “working-class knowledge” only (Merton 1969). While I certainly cannot claim to share the *same* identity with any of my research participants (given the unavoidable heterogeneity of identity categories as theorised by postmodernists) I would nevertheless argue via Alcoff that certain aspects of our identities can “refer outward to objective and causally significant features of the world, that they are thus non-arbitrary, and that experience provides both an epistemic and political basis for understanding” (Alcoff 2000: 1). This is not to say that there exists an essential truth that can be used to match aspects of identity (e.g. gender, class, ethnicity, age, sexuality) between researcher and researched, nor that



forming solidarities within populations considered “similar” is an easy matter given the complexities of intra-group difference. Rather, most of the factors that united me with research participants were often historically and socially contextualised in our diverse experiences as women and our broader concerns for women’s oppression and social justice. In many of these instances we were able to share affinities across our different social backgrounds and based on our sense of *epistemic community* – a term used by various scholars to signify the shared sets of principled beliefs, rationales and knowledges that tend to characterise professional communities working around similar issues (Meyer & Molyneux-Hodgson 2010). After all, not only was I talking to women about a historical oppression that infuses the fabric of our everyday lives, but to women who are actively involved in theorising and opposing this violence. This sense of epistemic connection meant that we were often able to use our diverse and sometimes conflicting knowledge of women’s oppression as a common ground: “connecting objects and subjects, people and places, production and distribution, individuals and collectives, histories and futures, the virtual and the concrete” (Meyer & Molyneux-Hodgson 2010: 12).

However, this is not to say that the research process has been unproblematic or that power relations have not existed. I am a young, white, British, cisgendered, able bodied, working class, educated woman and these characteristics are inseparable from the interactions and relationships built over the course of this research, affecting how I was perceived and received by those I interacted with. In many ways I was an outsider – an academic rather than an activist – and questions about my authenticity as a researcher were quite common. In some instances I found myself in a less powerful position than the researched due to my young age – between 23 and 24 years old during fieldwork – and relative inexperience as a researcher, though this power

relation is certainly redressed via my capacity to control the research process and data analysis. My age was frequently a focal point in discussions and on a few occasions my researcher identity was downplayed as a result. For instance, when introduced to a large audience of anti-VAWG activists during one of my first fieldwork engagements, the speaker said how happy they were that my supervisor suggested I help out at NEWN meetings because I am clearly an “expert note-taker”. On another occasion an activist asked why the University considered me qualified to conduct this research given my young age. This downplaying of my credentials was not altogether uncommon, though on some occasions I believe this disregard for my professionalism enhanced the quality and truthfulness of the data collected, as participants went to extra effort to help educate me via detailed storytelling and explanations. I often took advantage of my outsider status in these situations, acting slightly more naïve than I actually was. Yet at the same time, my membership of NEWN also provided me with insider status. I spent a lot of time attending meetings and events and was close to inner members of the network, which likely enhanced perceptions of trustworthiness among other members and conveyed that I shared a common ground. I expect that this significantly assisted my attempts to access participants.

I took certain steps throughout the research in an attempt to account for and address my position of power in the research process. Firstly, during interviews I tried to relay back to the interviewee my understanding of their thoughts in order to ensure that I was interpreting their perspectives correctly and not making misinformed assumptions. Secondly, I kept a fieldwork diary to document my thought processes and analyses during fieldwork and I incorporate some of these personal reflections in the data analysis chapters for readers to scrutinise. The fieldwork diary also helped me grapple with the various thoughts and feelings I had throughout fieldwork and the

excess of emotions I experienced: of insecurity when people discussed issues I was unaware of, discomfort when my privileges were called into question, and frustration when my opinions or ideas were not heard. These emotions in themselves expose my power and privilege, and provided me with an opportunity to reflect on my emotional reactions and identify where they were misplaced. Thirdly, I took many of the criticisms I received on board in order to remain accountable to the women I was studying. For example, at a meeting I attended early on in the research, a woman told me she found my use of highly academic language exclusionary and was worried it was confusing some of the other women present, many of whom had not had the privilege of a university education. On reflection I think I had made the mistake of assuming that the women present used the same specialist language that I did. Or perhaps I was using jargon unconsciously to impress my new colleagues? Yet the truth is that this was having an opposite, exclusionary effect. The problem was not with me having this knowledge and using it to inform my politics but rather that I was operationalising it in an exclusionary way. After this experience I began to watch my language to ensure I was communicating in a coherent and meaningful way with those around me.

On a whole it would be impossible for me to fully dissect the impact of my social location and position of power on the process and outcomes of this research, just as it would be impossible to undo my privileges in pursuit of an anti-oppressive research process. However, Haiven & Khasnabish suggest that “solidarity is not the achievement of an anti-oppressive space; it is the ceaseless dedication to confronting oppression that, so long as we live in a society that reproduces itself through oppression and privilege, will necessarily continue to haunt and vex the reproduction of social movements” (2014: 91). This is a particularly pertinent task for

intersectionality scholars and activists who seek to base solidarity “not on a false universalisation of some women’s experiences as relevant for all, but rather on a rejection of essentialising about women and instead learning about each other, examining our experiences as taking place at various intersections of privilege and oppression, and embracing self-evaluation and the opportunity to be self-critical” about our assumptions, prejudices and knowledge production (Haiven & Khasnabish 2014: 92). Over the course of this research I have attempted to build this type of solidarity with my participants, with other activists, with fellow scholars, and with marginalised groups in order to identify and challenge unequal power relations – including those that I myself benefit from on account of my various privileges.

#### *4.5 Data Analysis*

I adopted a grounded theoretical approach to analyse the empirical data. Grounded theory is a method of data collection and analysis that enables data to be analysed and synthesised with theory in order to establish connections and relationships between the data (Goulding 1998). It is a process that requires asking constant questions of the data and allowing this to inform the development of theory. This process of data analysis began in the early stages of fieldwork as I began listening to and transcribing each interview recording as I went along. At first I paid particular attention to the themes emerging from the interviews and to the nuances in participants’ articulations of key issues. This helped inform the questions asked and themes explored in later interviews. Once all the data had been collected and transcribed, the process of coding and categorising the data began. I started by analysing each individual interview, taking note of (1) the different identity constructions (i.e. race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality) that were discussed by or relevant to the participant; (2) the ways they

represented specific issues (i.e. VAWG) and the ideological assumptions informing these representations; and (3) their references to social structures. I then made notes about how these different elements inter-related and which dimensions of power and inequality were acknowledged or reproduced in the process. Once my analysis of each individual interview was complete, I began to look for similarities and differences between the transcripts. This process is often referred to as open coding (Glaser 2016) and its purpose is to break down data into specific themes. At first I used this process to unpack practical elements of the data and group them under codes such as ‘Intra-feminist Tensions’ and ‘Anti-feminist Backlash’. I wanted to enable participants’ understandings and opinions to be brought to the forefront in this early analytical stage. I was able to ask questions about the types of narratives that fell under these codes and began to see emerging patterns in the data. This aided a shift to more focused coding where I identified three overarching thematic categories: ‘Understandings of VAWG’, ‘Challenges of Service Provision’ and ‘Social Change Efforts’. These categories were formulated based on my interpretation of what was happening in the data and what needed to be brought to the forefront. Under these categories I grouped data across a range of different codes and made notes about the structural power relations each category encompassed and the intersectional inter-relations within them.

While I utilised intersectionality to think about the differences and commonalities that were emerging from the interviews, during my grounded theoretical analysis I also remained open to new information and ideas in order to build theory from the data. However, it is important to highlight that by offering participants anonymity in this research, some of the information which would have helped tease out the intersectional dimensions of my analysis has had to be removed from the

remaining chapters of this thesis. I did not always feel able to describe participants' intersectional experiences, positionalities or identity characteristics out of concern that any detailed description might compromise their anonymity. Thus while a thorough grounded, intersectional analysis of the data has been conducted, the richness of this analysis is sometimes lost in my write up.

## **5.0 Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the importance of adopting a nuanced and intersectional approach to uncovering the complexities and impacts of austerity on the VAWG sector and on anti-VAWG activists working within it. This has required an iterative process of data collection and analysis, building theory on the basis of the information analysed, as well as ongoing reflexivity throughout this process in order to address unequal power relations in and beyond the research setting. The methodological approach to this research is underpinned by my broader political commitments to intersectional praxis and to the epistemology of intersectionality scholarship. The following three chapters examine the data that was collected using this methodological approach.

# 4

## Surviving Austerity

### 1.0 Introduction

Providing support services to survivors has been a quintessential political objective for anti-VAWG activists since the beginning of the feminist anti-violence movement. Women who are survivors of domestic and sexual violence are often dependent on state funded organisations and social welfare as they attempt to leave violent partners and re-establish their lives, making these organisations crucial to their survival. However, since 2010 funding has been slashed from vital services such as women's refuges and specialist women-only and BME services, and anti-VAWG organisations across Britain are increasingly expected to do much more for much less. This chapter explores the impact of these cuts on local VAWG organisations across North East England as they too help women survive austerity. This chapter begins by exploring the cumulative impact of the cuts on survivors of VAWG and goes on to highlight the effects of the cuts for VAWG organisations. Determined to continue providing VAWG services with limited resources, participants must negotiate the complexities presented by austerity localism and the often depoliticising implications this has for their activism and service provision. The chapter concludes by highlighting a range of

resilience strategies employed by activists to resist the most unjust dimensions of austerity localism.

## **2.0 The North East Context**

The welfare reforms brought about by austerity measures are part of a much longer historical trajectory. For over three decades, numerous attempts have been made to retrench the state and its welfare capacities whilst enhancing the role of the third sector in delivering public services (see Chapter 2). However, as this section shows, the global financial crisis has not only exacerbated trends generated by these policies since the 1980s but has also paved the way for new challenges and tensions, not least the strategic positioning of local government at the centre of welfare retrenchment.

### *2.1 Austerity Localism in North East England*

As I entered the field in May 2013, reductions in state spending since 2010 had eroded the much more fiscally generous dimensions of New Labour's modernisation agenda (see Chapter Two). The Coalition government announced significant public spending cuts and unlike the audit systems introduced by New Labour to increase surveillance and control over community sector practices, the Coalition's policies reflected a comprehensive withdrawal of national government coordination via a series of localisation measures that relocated responsibility for welfare provision at the local level. The Localism agenda was presented by the Conservative government as a strategy for empowering local government and communities so that they could have "the freedom to spend money on things that matter to local people" (Conservative Party 2010: 3). However, the data examined throughout this chapter suggest that rather



than empowering communities, the localism agenda has radically reduced resources, resulting in relentless cuts to VAWG services, the downsizing of the women's sector, and significant organisational restructuring. Featherstone et al. (2012) refer to this latest alteration of neoliberalism as "austerity localism" and draw attention to how this reduction in local government spending has been transmitted to voluntary and community sector service providers via knock-on funding cuts. While crisis discourses have sought to flatten out perceptions of uneven impact in an attempt to convince the nation that we are all equally "in this together" (see Chapter One), the majority of anti-VAWG activists I spoke to were not taken in by such discourses:

The changes that they have made, they horrify me, the changes to legal aid, the bedroom tax, all the changes in benefits, it's not the so called scroungers that have got us in this mess, I believe the government got us in this shit mess. For the North East, it's already such a deprived region but they're making the rich richer and the poor even poorer which is what the Conservative government always do and I think with all the cuts to welfare, benefits, my main concern is that women and children are going to die. (Zoe)

The number of women [accessing our services] has just shot through the roof [since the introduction of austerity] and this whole postcode lottery malarkey, violence [against women] is exploding but our region has the least services to cope and it's always been like this with the North East where it's just like "oh just let them get on with it". (Stephanie)

These narratives point to specific geographies of deprivation and neglect that have long existed across the region and which many participants believe are intensifying. To be sure, studies have shown that "austerity measures and welfare reforms are impacting disproportionately upon women in the North East amid already unacceptable levels of gender inequality" (NEWN 2013: 4). At the time of interviews, unemployment of North East women was highest since records began and women's reliance on public services among the highest in the UK (NEWN 2013). Given concerns about the implications of cuts for survivors of VAWG, many participants

were initially pleased to see that the Coalition government had committed £40 million to reduce domestic violence between 2010-2015 in their Call to End Violence Against Women and Girls action plan. However, this funding was not ring-fenced and there were no instructions for dissemination at the local level. Consequently, women's impoverishment and increased vulnerability to violence was an issue concerning all participants and many displayed strong emotional reactions to this reality – much like the extracts presented above. In an article about the emotional experiences of austerity among third sector service providers in North East England, Clayton et al. argue that “austerity can be viewed as the construction of a threat and as a means of regulating behaviour” via emotional manipulation and moral canvassing (Clayton et al. 2015: 25). Like Clarke and Newman (2012) they draw attention to the “ritualised language” of the crisis which asks that communities come together and help fill in for costly state services in order to revive the economy. They believe this language is being used to convince women in particular that it is their “virtuous” responsibility to give more and more of their own time and labour to fill gaps in state provision (Clayton et al. 2015).

## *2.2 Filling in for the State*

Penny Griffin argues that “women’s productive work has often been assumed to be more resilient in times of crisis, largely because neoliberalism’s advocates have so successfully articulated the flexibilisation of the work force in positive terms” (2015: 59). Interestingly, this resilience and resourcefulness was something that several participant’s appeared to take pride in and associated with their feminist politics. For instance:

Women's organisations are becoming really good at surviving on next to nothing and I think that goes with the passion and the commitment and the

people that work in them so very often here in this organisation everybody is working 60 hour weeks and they maybe are only getting paid for 18 hours, 24 hours, and people are taking pay cuts or giving up their pay for the month if they can afford to and this is all so that the organisation can survive and this might sound weird but I think that we should have this as sort of the basic criteria for working here, that you should be so passionate about supporting women that it isn't really about the hours or the money. I think what's different about truly working from a women's perspective and working anywhere else is that you don't work for a salary. You work because you're committed to the cause. (Barsha)

I mean I get a good salary now but I am going to take a big cut. You always have this dilemma. I didn't have a good salary for many a long year and it is that dilemma about should women be paid the going rate for the job, just as a man would? Because if we don't do that then what we are saying is that you've got to be a sacrificial lamb. But on the other hand it's like well if I'm getting this then what are we not doing? That is the radical feminism versus the socialism as well and it's kind of a no win all of the time. I think to keep a feminist organisation going you have got to have a hard core of absolutely dedicated feminist women whose politics override everything. (Nina)

Such remarks could perhaps be interpreted as feminist “common sense” reactions to economic and funding crises given the relative precariousness of employment in the women's sector. Participants described how funding priorities frequently change from one year to the next and from one government to the next meaning that jobs and projects in the sector are never fully protected or sustainable. However, Clayton et al. suggest that eagerness to survive such conditions might in fact point to “problems with the dominant mode of dealing with the current funding crisis, which is based upon what the *individual* can do to make a difference or even to sustain services” (2015: 26). They highlight that this willingness to self-regulate may actually comply with the Coalition government's emphasis on the Big Society, leading them to question whether such efforts by women to reproduce their communities “simply endorse the logic that if the state will no longer provide for us we will have to do it ourselves?” (2015: 26). Yet most participants were very aware of this tension, including Nina who identifies it as a fundamental friction between radical and socialist feminist ideologies.

It is also something that Louisa had thought a lot about. She explained that she was “well aware that they’re [austerity measures] basically just a way of protecting the rich” and are almost always based on the presumption of women’s reproductive labour as an “expected but unpaid” substitute for public services – an injustice she has spent her life fighting against. However, she also believes that refusing to fill in for the state is not a justifiable alternative:

I have no doubt that austerity is a choice and it didn’t have to be like this which is why I’m so pissed off that we are basically, by filling in for the state we are basically legitimising it, you know? So like, but then who else would fill in really? It was always going to be women. It always *is* women. But now we don’t have the resources for it and needs are increasing so we are doing a lot of it for free on top of our jobs which is exactly what they [the government] expected. So we’re being exploited really but because we’re talking about women’s lives we can hardly just stand back and do nothing. There’s no room to be, like there’s no room to prioritise an ideological stance [against austerity] if that means women dying as a result. So the crisis need was always going to take precedence over the political need in this kind of situation.

During her interview Louisa frequently grappled with these tensions and contradictions. In helping alleviate the impact of public spending cuts through her own reproductive labour, might she be validating the work of austerity and paving the way for further welfare state retrenchment? How might she balance the “crisis need” to fill gaps in state VAWG provision with the “political need” to delegitimise and dismantle the ideological mechanisms informing austerity and state retrenchment? Is it even possible to challenge the state while simultaneously reproducing the conditions necessary for its retrenchment?

It thus became quickly apparent that most of the anti-VAWG activists I interviewed were not necessarily *embracing* the logic of austerity but rather they appeared to be resigning themselves to ‘disaffected consent’ (Gilbert 2015) whereby they reluctantly and unenthusiastically carry out its work in order to satisfy a much

more pressing objective: that of “keeping women alive” (April). Several participants highlighted that providing women with support and a means of escape is essential at a time when they are being denied control over their own bodies, excluded from decision making about their own lives and deprived of state protection from violence. As discussed further below, their work filling in for the state is not intended to disguise the unequal distribution of welfare benefits but is rather instrumentally focused on responding to the short-term consequences of the cuts due to the state’s failure to provide adequate provisions and protection for women survivors. However, the chapter goes on to show that this is not a straightforward endeavour, as those women’s organisations attempting to “fill in” for the state are themselves casualties of austerity.

### **3.0 The Cost of the Cuts**

This section explores the various ways that women’s rights to safety and freedom from violence are being significantly undermined by neoliberal welfare reforms and public spending cuts. Participants’ descriptions of these cuts and the considerable barriers they create for women trying to leave violent situations help convey the severity and complexity of the issues that anti-VAWG activists are responding to on a daily basis. In particular, participants working in specialist BME organisations or in organisations that serve large BME and immigrant populations are supporting women with some of the most diverse and multifaceted needs – yet their organisations are some of the most underfunded in the sector (Imkaan 2015).

#### ***3.1 Barriers to Safety***

Olivia believes that austerity represents a new degradation of women’s position in

society that increases their vulnerability to violence while removing the support systems that would help them escape:

[Women are] being prevented from getting the support they need to escape [violent situations] in a safe way ... I think it's made worse by the current economic climate and the poverty ... We're seeing domestic violence increasing because of welfare cuts and we're seeing women with no way of escaping because more and more they're becoming financially dependent [on abusive partners and family members] ... [because] they're losing their jobs and benefits, disproportionately I might add and so ... we've got a whole country filled with women who are trapped. I'm supporting some of them ... We're going to see the disastrous impacts of this in years to come.

The majority of participants expressed concern about women's increased financial dependence on their abusers. At the time Carla's interview, Women's Aid had recently released a statement outlining the implications of Universal Credit – a social security benefit that replaces dual benefit payments with one single payment to one claimant in the household – for women survivors of domestic violence. Carla reacted to this statement:

It's actually got me thinking mostly about disabled women because they're already, they've got it really bad [with the cuts] and I'm worried that this Universal Credit, if they've got a carer does it go automatically to them? So I'm thinking for any that are being abused they'll be, there'll be that element of potential financial abuse too if there isn't already and that will that trap them? ... I don't know how [the government] have actually gotten it through [parliament] ... but it doesn't surprise me that they haven't considered disabled women.

Disabled women are some of the very hardest hit by cuts to welfare provision (EHRC 2018) and as Carla went on to point out, they are also discriminated against in terms of refuge provision which is often inaccessible. Reforms to housing benefits were a major area of concern for all participants. The women in Beverley's refuge were already struggling to cover basic living expenses before the housing benefit caps were introduced. The situation has now amplified:

We've got a problem at the moment, the pizzeria down there, they've obviously gotten wind of how [financially] desperate some of the women are so they keep offering them cheap pizzas and kebabs in exchange for blow jobs and sexual favours, like we had one just the other night so we had the police out on it. It's shit.

Beverley is also growing increasingly concerned about women's welfare once they leave the refuge as cuts to the Social Fund and the Supporting People budget mean they will receive less financial support to help them rebuild their lives. However, for most participants the bigger issue was that too many women were struggling to access refuge provision in the first place). Cuts to housing benefits have resulted in the closure of women's refuges across the country – creating a “postcode lottery” in which the North East has emerged as the most underserved region (Towers & Walby 2012). This situation is further compounded by the lack of affordable social housing. Beverley explained that “there's no more room here [for any more women] because they're not building enough social housing” for women in the refuge to move into. She spends a lot of time trying to help women find alternatives – usually safe houses or temporary accommodation – but disclosed that most of the time “you just end up feeling powerless” as women run out of safe spaces to go.

Domestic abuse is one of the main causes of homelessness for women and the cuts are exacerbating this reality (Renzetti 2009). Catherine works for an outreach team that supports a rapidly growing number of “survival sex workers” – women who are trading sex on the streets in return for food, shelter and other basic needs. She explained that many of these women are survivors of domestic violence who were unable to access the benefits they needed to safely escape. In many cases this is because the women were unable to “tick all of the boxes to get their Job Seekers' Allowance” due to the “highly chaotic” nature of their lives as victims of violence.

Yet for those women who *are* able to tick all of the boxes, accessing refuge provision is still not straightforward. Perhaps one of the most overlooked dimensions of the reforms to the benefits system are their implications for women in employment. Nina supports several working women who *in theory* are eligible to pay for a space in a refuge but in practice are unable to do so without giving up their financial independence and social responsibilities:

You've got women who are being means-tested to see if they earn enough money to pay for their own space in a refuge and bearing in mind refuges cost upwards of 200 quid a week and these women have other financial responsibilities, mortgages, bills, childcare, debts and especially [those debts incurred] since the recession if they've lost benefits or they've been borrowing more money, they'll be sanctioned for not paying so they're not just going to use all their money [to access a refuge].

It can take numerous attempts for a woman to leave a violent relationship and financial concerns are one of the reasons it can be so difficult. Because working women are unable to retain their financial independence *and* access housing benefits they are often left with no other option but to remain in an abusive relationship. This is especially the case for women experiencing in-work poverty or financial abuse. Nina described this paradox as one of the most “mind-blowing” outcomes of the government’s welfare reforms and exclaimed: “they’re asking women to choose between financial independence and physical safety, like they can’t have both”.

Over the course of fieldwork I listened to anti-VAWG activists outline the myriad ways in which cuts to housing, social services, legal aid and welfare benefits were affecting the women accessing their services. However, the intersecting and mutually reinforcing nature of the cuts became most apparent when discussing the experiences of poor, minority ethnic and immigrant survivors of violence.



### *3.2 Intersectional Discrimination and the Cuts*

For participants working in specialist BME organisations, one of the key features of their activism is that they are supporting women who face a number of cuts all at once and the effects are exacerbated by intersecting gender, race and class oppressions (Crenshaw 1989). For example, BME women in the UK are more likely than white women to be living in poverty, to be unemployed or to be financially reliant on benefits and tax credits, to lack English language skills, and to confront racial discrimination when attempting to access work and education (Platt 2007; Emejulu 2008). As a consequence they are also more likely to be financially dependent on abusive partners and to lack social networks of support outside of the family. Salina explained that these intersecting inequalities are the reason why cuts to welfare support are disproportionately affecting BME survivors of domestic violence:

The very thin safety net that BME women had [before the cuts] has been ripped to shreds. We're supporting far too many women now who are providing for their children by sacrificing their own needs because they are that poor. And because they have poor English which we can thank ESOL cuts for, and because they have no money to pay for childcare ... they don't stand a chance of getting paid work and especially not in a racist labour market. So they can't become financially independent and we know how important that is for women to live their lives free of violence . . . In some cases we've got women who have so little money that their husbands control everything they do, from what they eat to whether they can leave the house that day, so these women are in a right state, physically and psychologically. They feel trapped because they can't access Legal Aid to prosecute their abusers because of all the cuts there, and especially in Family Law around child custody issues . . . And then on top of that the specialist BME organisations that are providing them with support are shutting down because of cuts to local authority funding and because of racial prejudices in the commissioning of services. And then on top of *this*, if one of them does manage to escape they might not even get a space in a refuge anyway because of cuts to the social housing budget. What is it, something like 230 women turned away from Women's Aid in a single day last year? And don't even get me started on specialist BME refuge provision because it's essentially non-existent.

I have quoted Salina's description of the asymmetrical impact of the cuts for minority

women at length in order to convey the complexity of the issues that anti-VAWG activists are addressing on a daily basis – and especially those working in specialist BME organisations. As Salina highlights here, the feminisation and racialisation of poverty under austerity measures is not just creating additional barriers to safety for minority women but is actually reproducing many of the conditions that make them more vulnerable to violence. Maternal poverty hidden within the home, for example, can act as a catalyst for economic violence and vice versa, and Salina has witnessed first-hand how the removal of various forms of welfare support ensures that poor BME women and children remain trapped in violent situations (see also Oxfam 2011). Other participants shed light on this issue by highlighting the specific plight of immigrant and asylum-seeking survivors of VAWG. Louisa in particular was very vocal about how the rise in anti-immigration policies since the introduction of austerity has been significantly detrimental for women with insecure immigration statuses and she identified some of the challenges that her organisation is facing as a result:

We are absolutely inundated [because of changes to immigration law]. Like as in I'm working 16 hour shifts most days just to keep up with the absolute shit storm it's created. We've got women who are no longer eligible for Legal Aid because they've been here for less than 12 months so we are trying to figure out how to help these women get indefinite leave to remain so that we can deal with even the most basic things like their housing situation or their access to healthcare. Not easy when their husbands are hiding their visas so they're accused of overstaying and deported or when they're trying to take them abroad and dump them there once they've gotten their dowry. Like honestly, our government won't provide them with Legal Aid, with any help if this happens . . . So here we are, running around like headless chickens trying to help women who have absolutely nobody else to turn to.

As well as giving rise to new forms of violence against women, including visa abuse and transnational marriage abandonment (Anitha et al. 2018) as Louisa highlights above, immigrant women are also being failed by police officers and social workers

who are under increasing pressure to team up with the UK Border Force in order to detect victims' immigration statuses rather than protect them from further harm (Siddiqui 2018). Louisa explained that some of the immigrant women she supports would rather live with violence than face deportation and that her organisation is "really, *really* struggling" to challenge this specific form of social entrapment, especially given cuts to their services and staff. To add to this complex scenario, some of these women have chosen to flee violent partners without state support and have subsequently ended up destitute. Catherine works for a project that supports homeless women and she explained that "too many" of these women are homeless because they had No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) when fleeing domestic violence. Several of them are now subsequently even more vulnerable to sexual violence and exploitation than when they lived with their abusive partners:

Far too many of the women with no recourse [because of their insecure immigration status] have ended up homeless because of domestic violence but then on the streets they're probably at even greater risk of violence and exploitation, sexual exploitation because they're engaging in sexual activities in exchange for food or accommodation or whatever and so the cycle continues but they're now in situations that are potentially more dangerous and more fatal than before ... Even going to People's Kitchens to get fed, they're putting themselves in a really vulnerable position because they might get all of these offers and they're going to know a lot of clients, ex-clients and even leaving that aside there is all of this research of so many different types of people now who are accessing food banks and for a woman to go down to a place where there is chaotic men or even just men, it can be terrifying.

This description encapsulates the way that neoliberal austerity policies place immigrant and asylum seeking women at increasing risk of violence and then discard them when violence arises. The one solution currently available for women on spousal visas is to find a way to overturn the NRPF stipulation. This involves providing the government with objective proof of domestic violence, as Louisa explained:

They've got to meet all these strict evidence requirements if they want to get the benefits, so police cautions, convictions within the last two years, but if they haven't reported it, which is too often the case for immigrant women, then sometimes they need to pay for evidence like a doctor's note or something which believe me is near impossible for some of the women we support but we need to find a way to tick all of these boxes if they want to even be considered for welfare.

If successful, women become eligible for the Destitute Domestic Violence Concession (DDVC) and can access welfare support – including housing benefits, jobseekers allowance and Legal Aid – for three months during which time they must apply for indefinite leave to remain. Some participants praised this measure for enabling them to help more immigrant women flee violence. However, most participants focused on its failings. For example, Beverley works in a refuge where “most of the chaos here is to do with the DDVC” because “it's not available to anyone that's not on a spousal visa, like a student or temporary worker ... [and] completely overlooks trafficking survivors who usually have no visa whatsoever”. She also outlined the difficulty of evidencing non-physical forms of violence such as psychological and financial abuse, which is why “we want them to [extend the range of evidence to] include a letter from their IDVA because they have the most knowledge of the abuse”. Nina explained that the DDVC is largely ineffective even when granted:

Half the time it doesn't work. It's better than the Sojourner Fund but it still won't cover you. I have women who have been with us for 4 years with no recourse to public funds. Like 6 weeks of the Sojourner Fund and 12 weeks of the DDV, it's not going to cover that. It's not going to cover it when she gets knocked back and you need to appeal and when you need to find the £500 so she can have the appeal. It's not going to cover the cost of the trips up and down to London.

Participants believe that these barriers to safety and justice are causing immigrant women to remain in or return to abusive situations, especially if they are faced with

representing themselves in court. Rajindar provided examples of Muslim women turning to Sharia courts for legal support in the absence of formal legal protection:

It's generally because they've exhausted all other options and it's really the last thing [any of us want] and we discourage but then what else? But it really can make things worse because the community and it's like are they bringing shame? And all the rest of it and it can just be a really bad experience because [Sharia law] is in favour of men and it's just ...it can put women in a lot of danger ... I can see that we're going to have to start wrapping our heads around a whole different set of legal challenges.

Research shows that “as the state rolls back funding and support structures for abused women, religious tribunals have gained prominence and are stepping into areas such as marriage, family law and child custody with devastating consequences for the safety and welfare of women and children” (Dhaliwal & Patel 2017: 90). Rajindar believes the state must do more to prevent women's diversion away from formal criminal and civil justice remedies. However, Barsha pointed out that the British justice system is capable of similar forms of surveillance and control:

The government seem to find it really difficult to make sense of the fact that somebody who has been controlled in their own lives, who has lived overseas, who comes into the country, into a new system that they don't know, and then they're being very controlled, not being allowed out of the house and so on and then they're expected to know everything about social welfare, they're expected to know what they should be doing and they're expected to know about benefits and safeguarding children and so on. So the NSPCC are now working with a family that we have been supporting and now they have got social services breathing down their necks and it just adds to their trauma because social services often come in, I wouldn't even say from a Western perspective, I'd say from a very male, draconian perspective of “You are in this. You did not report. You are not looking after your children properly” so it's just another level of control for these women and what's more is that they [social workers] are not screening male perpetrators and they are being manipulated by male perpetrators.

By seeking state protection, survivors of violence have always risked exposure to discriminatory forms of surveillance and control by agents of the state (see Bumiller

2008). However, there was a clear sense of anger and disbelief among participants at the level of harassment and state intrusion that poor and minority survivors of VAWG in particular were experiencing in all areas of welfare support since the financial crisis. Those participants that have campaigned around the intrusive surveillance and criminalisation of BME and working class communities described a sense of losing ground because they now have to contend with more police, more social workers and more immigration officials than ever before. Salina likened this to being “under constant observation”:

People wonder why women go back. I am not surprised. Would you go back to a set of abuse that you know and have found ways to survive through or would you prefer institutional abuse where you are absolutely powerless, where you feel you have got no one onside and you’re completely alone? You’ve got sexism and racism coming from all angles, threats of deportation, threats to take your children away. You’re under constant observation ... If I’m completely honest it’s sometimes easier to protect them while they’re in the violent relationship than when they’ve escaped it.

Salina’s powerful testimony to the difficulties of protecting women from violence under such constraining circumstances leads seamlessly onto the discussion below, which outlines the majority of participants’ deep sense of responsibility to help protect women from this structural and state-sanctioned violence. The chapter then goes on to show how the women’s sector and its VAWG services are themselves subjected to the neoliberal administrative surveillance of the state via funding commitments and competitive control, making activists’ efforts to support survivors and prevent VAWG all the more challenging.

### *3.3 Containing the Crisis and Managing the Harm*

This section shows that anti-VAWG activists are extending the remit of their jobs and increasing their (often unpaid) work so that their service users are not faced with buying the same services from private organisations or going without them altogether. Anti-VAWG activists are therefore central in both mediating and mitigating the impact and costs of the cuts for the women they serve. To be sure, all participants reported that the workload of their organisations had dramatically increased as welfare reforms and state surveillance of welfare claimants intensified under new austerity policies. During interviews the following welfare-focused activities were reported as making up a much larger proportion of their day-to-day work: providing information and assistance with regards to housing and refuge provision; helping women access legal aid and working with solicitors to build their cases; giving financial advice; preparing citizenship applications and giving immigration advice; providing information about divorce, custody and child contact issues; delivering workshops that help women with interviewing techniques, curriculum vitae preparation and employability skills; providing English Language classes for BME and immigrant women to assist their social mobility; and preparing women for screening appointments, health assessments and other compulsory evaluations to help them access welfare assistance. April explained that in times of severe economic strain this kind of support is more challenging but ever more crucial to provide:

Give most [survivors accessing our services] the option “do you want counselling or do you want, you know, help securing benefits or housing or childcare?” or actually not even that, do they want food and clothes and somewhere to wash themselves? ... I know it’s a crude example but that’s what they want because the financial element, the impoverishment and then if they have kids, it can be more stressful than the domestic violence, honestly, so we really want to help alleviate some of it so yeah we will help them write letters, make phone calls, we go with them to court, take them to the station, to the

foodbank and its time consuming and I pretty much can't remember the last time I slept but it's worth it.

A study by Postmus et al. (2009) likewise found that domestic violence survivors often value support around financial issues, childcare, transportation and housing more so than the emotional support they receive through counselling. April therefore spends a lot of her time – frequently in a voluntary capacity – attempting to alleviate women's concerns about a range of issues brought on by financial hardship and austerity. Salina explained that this involves spending a significant amount of time keeping up with ongoing changes to welfare provision:

Our knowledge has to improve all of the time. You have got to be learning all of the time. I try and learn as much as I can about myriad of legal changes, structural changes, how social services are working or whatever because if you don't know, how are you going to help support that woman or challenge that state agency?

Salina went on to explain that failure to keep up with welfare changes and learn about the specificities of the policies affecting women can result in dangerous mistakes. The most common example provided by participants was of refuge workers inappropriately applying for the Destitute Domestic Violence Concession (DDVC) on behalf of immigrant and asylum-seeking women with no recourse to public funds. The DDVC enables abused women without recourse to public funds access to an emergency grant that pays for their space in a women's refuge. However, as Barsha explained, the terms and conditions of the DDVC are not suitable for all eligible women:

With the DDV concession a woman has to give up her Spousal Visa and she is put onto a different type of Visa and she is given three months to try and prove the abuse or else she will be deported and so if you don't understand that or if the woman doesn't understand that and she doesn't want to give up her Spousal Visa, she may still want reconciliation, so you can't just go and try and get her



the DDV concession. You have to understand what she would be giving up in order to get it. So I think immigration is where professionals let women down the most. They have been made to seek asylum when they didn't need to or when they shouldn't have and so there are cases that have just been decimated by inappropriate intervention.

Due to their inability to access public funds, many poor immigrant women rely on the free advice provided by women's organisations and so "the power that nonprofit workers have ... to facilitate or impede battered immigrants' access to citizenship has concomitantly grown in its significance" (Villalon 2011: 252). I asked April about the financial support her organisation receives in order to provide advice and support services around issues of welfare reform. April explained that there has "never really been any funding" available for this kind of work:

There aren't really any funding streams for welfare support work so a lot of the existing roles have become more blurred. So like I'm [involved in management] but I still take on a lot of the additional practical support because we can't get the money to employ anyone to do this kind of work full time so I think pretty much everyone at [my organisation] has unofficially taken up this work; even the chief exec because it's probably one of our most work-intensive areas at the moment.

Other participants described how this work was being subsumed within the roles of youth workers, outreach and development workers, therapists and management teams because advice and support workers – including IDVAs and ISVAs – were unable to cope with the increase in demand. This was especially the case for specialist BME organisations. Barsha explained that her organisation has always struggled to access funding for BME women's social welfare needs because funding agencies adopt funding priorities that reflect the needs of largely white, middleclass women:

Most agencies work primarily at crisis intervention and then once the crisis is over that is it but with BME women you can't just let it go because they need

life skills, they need financial skills, they need training and educational opportunities, they need to know about systems and structures, they need to start living independently and they can't do this without information and knowledge. So they need [our organisation] more than ever and not only for us to help protect their welfare but to give them the tools to protect their own welfare. The problem is that funders don't look at the bigger picture of black women's lives so we have always had to do it without financial support on-top of everything else because it really is that important. The difference now is that this need is becoming greater and greater as minority women become more impoverished and excluded and BME organisations lose their staff and funding.

Barsha effectively outlines how important these services are for addressing the intersecting inequalities that render BME women more vulnerable to violence in the first place. Ada drew on a similar argument during her interview to question why these services are omitted from funder priorities given their alleged aim to mitigate VAWG:

I think we should be getting funding [to do this work] because it actually *is* responding to a form of violence. Austerity, the cuts, [BME] women being disproportionately affected, the survivors left destitute, that's violence in my eyes but funders see violence as something much more narrow, they aren't adopting this kind of definition which is about structural violence.

Ada views this omission of structural violence from definitions of VAWG as inherently problematic. Her priorities are protecting women from both direct *and* structural violence. Effectively meeting the complex needs of poor BME and immigrant women pushed into situations of poverty and deprivation because of domestic and sexual violence necessitates multifaceted and collaborative strategies that target the intersecting inequalities caused by structural VAWG. However, as the next section demonstrates, anti-VAWG activists must attempt this in a much less responsive political climate than in previous decades. While the needs and numbers of women survivor's increase, "the tasks of funding, staffing and developing resources

for organisations to meet those needs are difficult, poorly supported, and even actively undermined by those with power and wealth in our society” (INCITE! 2007: 130).

## **4.0 The Cost of Survival**

During fieldwork it became clear that significant cuts to local authority budgets following the introduction of austerity measures meant that the majority of women’s organisations were experiencing substantial reductions in funding despite significant increases in demand for their service. Barsha talked about the impact on her service and the women who use it. Her organisation lost their local authority funding at a time when they were experiencing a 400% increase in women accessing their services. Barsha believes that this increase in demand is due to rising levels of VAWG brought on by women’s diminished economic independence and cuts to public services on which they disproportionately depend. Nina works for a small women-only domestic violence organisation that experienced a 35% budget cut between 2010 and 2013. Their service for children who had experienced or witnessed violence was the first casualty of this budget cut, followed by an outreach service for homeless survivors, then a programme for survivors with mental health problems. Over a third of trained staff lost their jobs during this period. At the same time, the number of women accessing their services more than doubled.

It became apparent over the course of fieldwork that cuts to accessibility funding were some of the first made and several participants were facing difficult decisions around prioritisation. For instance, due to significant reductions in its core funding, Naomi’s organisation had to stop paying the bus fares of women financially struggling to attend their appointments. Naomi explained that as a result “the numbers

of BME and asylum seeking women have just absolutely dropped ... I think at one point we had about 19% BME service users and now it's about 6%". Another organisation had to stop providing a VAWG outreach service for women living in gypsy and traveller communities so that they could continue running their core services. Several others had to remove their crèche provision. All participants acknowledged that cuts to accessibility were disproportionately excluding poor, immigrant and disabled women and those living in rural areas. These are the same women who are identified by participants in the previous section as most vulnerable to violence due to the intersecting nature of public spending cuts and thus most in need of VAWG support. The painful irony of this situation was not lost on participants. Elizabeth's eyes filled with tears as she explained how her preoccupation with funding proposals and bids to keep the organisation running means she is less available to spend time with the women accessing her organisations services:

I was very hands on, very hands on and I loved that side of my work and it's sad to be detached from it and see all these women who I'm unfamiliar with and knowing that they, I'm pleased we have some volunteers, but I just see the pain and want to reach out and I should be there for them but I have to try my best for them behind closed doors.

This contradiction is only the beginning. The organisations that participants work in are diverse – encompassing a diversity of roles and missions and providing different services based on this. Some are working in small VAWG services specialising in LGBT or BME women's issues and others work in women's organisations that specialise in areas such as mental health and homelessness but which provide VAWG services as part of their broader remit. A few work in large refuges run by generic housing providers. Responses to VAWG in the women's sector are thus built on networks of organisations that provide a variety of different services. However, the

health and future sustainability of this network is under threat, as evidenced below.

#### *4.1 Changes in Commissioning*

The devolution of decision-making to local government on issues of service provision, in conjunction with significant cuts to local authority budgets, had led to quite significant changes in funding and commissioning programmes as I was beginning my research. These changes included a shift towards short term contracts alongside the increased participation of organisations and sectors that provide cost effective services but do not necessarily specialise in the area. With regards to VAWG service provision, participants described how this had been combined with an increase in the commissioning of non-feminist, gender neutral services. This meant that specialist VAWG services providing long term support at the grassroots level were at increasing risk of being replaced by generic non-specialist VAWG services run by large NGOs and private sector providers. Comparing the current short-term contract culture with the previous grant funding programmes under New Labour, April described a sense of losing control over the progress and management of VAWG services:

Because of the funding climate, so not only have they cut our funding but things have gotten much stricter so if you're going to get funding, they're going make sure they're getting every last drop of humility and self-respect because they want to control every aspect of services now, there's no room, so for example, we had this thing we wanted to follow up and get a project going and then we just realised like bam bam bam, nope there's no time to go there.

This issue was also raised by Catherine. Her organisation's funders are seemingly not interested in addressing the long-term realities of sexual violence in the lives of survival sex workers nor do they seek to prevent this violence from occurring in the first place. Rather, they are focused on managing the consequences of this violence

(i.e. rape, unplanned pregnancy, drug addiction) in the short-term in order to reduce financial strain on state services:

I think that the work that we do with profoundly complex and long term exploited and abused women, because commissioners are all about cost effectiveness and demonstrating short-term outcomes, I think that one of the challenges is to make sure that commissioners of services really understand the lengthy process of even beginning to try and encourage change and build self-esteem and that we need trust-building to let women know that relationships that aren't exploitative are maintainable, like it's not just going to be a short term thing so we can actually say to women "I'm not going to exploit you. I am actually going to be interested in you for *more* than three months".

Catherine's long term vision for her work is being undermined by funder demands for quantity rather than quality of outputs. She was not the only participant to describe the current funding climate in this way. Due to the increasingly short-term nature of most VAWG contracts and the amount of different funding bodies that her organisation has to satisfy at any one time, Louisa is constantly juggling different projects and outputs. She explained that a considerable amount of time and effort goes into this "plate spinning" behind the scenes to ensure that conflicting interests are neutralised and funder demands satisfied at the same time as providing women with a seamless service. However, Louisa believes that all of this plate spinning makes it more difficult to develop an understanding of the complex issues characterising women's lives:

Some of the stuff is just for like, "do this for six months and report back with the outcomes" but it's difficult to build a real picture of what's going on with women in that time frame and it's certainly not going to produce any quality outcomes, like we're talking about serious mental health issues developed over years of abuse ... so it's difficult when you've got a few of these projects going on at once because I find I'm spending more time measuring their so-called success than actually really properly getting to grips with what's going on in women's lives, the complexities.

Louisa's work is becoming increasingly output-led rather than survivor-led and this contradicts her feminist politics as described elsewhere in her interview. Nevertheless, she explained that women's organisations are "spending a lot of money and time on fancy software" that enables them to document how processes are being followed and funder demands satisfied so that good work performance can be measured. However, measuring success in this way was not always straightforward or financially beneficial. For instance, Beverley explained that funders rarely take into account the structural and policy barriers impeding their ability to produce successful outcomes:

What they are saying is that "you are not supporting enough women" and we're doing what we can to get people moved on as quickly as possible but they can only move on if the council provides the accommodation. So they criticised us for only having sixty women last year, but how can we move them on if there isn't the accommodation and especially with the implementation of the Bedroom Tax, I can't just put a single woman in a three bedroom house every month, it doesn't work like that, and there is a severe shortage of smaller properties in [City] so the smaller families have to stay in the refuge longer so you're getting less people through the door. So targets are higher, costs are higher and there's less accommodation.

Ultimately, Beverley needs the government to provide more social housing for women before she can "get people moved on" yet this is not something that her funders take into consideration. Danielle found herself in a similarly perverse situation of trying to evidence need through "proof of demand" rather than human emotion and intuition:

We have got 1.6 IDVA's and the recommendation is 3.5 so them two lasses are doing that job and they're working so hard that we haven't got a waiting list but as was pointed out at a meeting yesterday, they aren't going to fund another IDVA if we don't have a waiting list because a waiting list is proof of demand. But because of their commitment, because they would rather stay until 9 o'clock rather than tell a woman she's got to go on a waiting list and they might be in touch in a fortnight, we don't have that proof of demand. So they are getting taken for granted for doing this extra work all of the time. They are absolutely knackered, you know, like how long can they last like this? And how could you ever expect them to make that decision, to decide who to put onto a waiting list? You'd be playing with women's lives.

Here Danielle outlines a preposterous paradox which would require her organisation to put women's lives at risk in order to evidence "proof of demand" for another IDVA without whom the current two IDVAs will likely burnout from stress and exhaustion. This is an insidious catch 22 situation where the only possible outcomes are harmful. At the heart of this issue is a competitive commissioning environment that diminishes social change efforts in favour of managing social issues – including VAWG. Indeed some participants felt so pressured to convey successful management of these issues that they were presenting the outcomes of their work as successful to their funders even where this work was not very successful. Natalie admitted that her small community-based organisation has "occasionally exaggerated" the success of certain projects and services that did not work as effectively as intended in order to "maintain a positive relationship with them [the funder]" and Lucy likewise described a situation where she overstated the success of a project to her funders to "keep the money coming in" and is now dealing with the unintended consequences. These consequences include pressures to expand the project despite her organisation's concerns about its core aims and objectives. Lucy requested that the specificities of her example were not used in this research "just in case" her funders happened to read it. Such examples indicate that in some instances, anti-VAWG efforts may be becoming less flexible and innovative as activists repeat the same strategies and deliver the same projects that no longer (or never did) work in order to safeguard future funding.

#### *4.2 De-gendered and Generic Service Provision*

Nina explained that in the new commissioning environment, funding is not being allocated on merit or specialism but instead to organisations with huge incomes and disposable resources that can consequently provide VAWG services for the cheapest:



[Organisation] got the six figure contract but they are a multimillion pound housing provider, not a specialist DV provider. Yes they do work with people around all different kinds of stuff but that contract was massive and they came in and got it and they were rubbish because they didn't have the understanding or the workers who had the understanding of women's work and what that all means. The women's groups that were set up, for women to come and talk about you know, their experiences or whatever, it was knitting and card making and that kind of stuff and bingo, bloody bingo! You have got women with gambling problems, who are in debt up to their eyeballs because putting however much in the slot machine is like their weekly pleasure, you try and say "well you can't spend 20 quid on that because that is your food money" and then you encourage them to play bingo!

The local authority's decision to fund this generic housing association over the specialist women's organisation that used to run the refuge was one of several examples provided by participants of a shift away from the commissioning of specialist VAWG services. Olivia has found that the staff working at generic services tend to lack any feminist ethos:

We were talking about no recourse to public funds and this is when the Sojourner Fund was still in and [the refuge workers] were saying that "oh no we wouldn't take it because we charge £212 per week and we're only getting £208" and I was just like "surely £4 doesn't make a difference" and I was like "well why not" and they were just like "well we're not letting her [access the refuge]" so I said "surely as staff you would all put a pound each in" it's like "are you seriously saying you would leave a woman in danger for four pounds, could you not all have a whip around on a weekly basis?" And they were like "No."

Such developments were seen by Olivia as not merely coincidental or even solely about cost-cutting but rather as skilfully upholding the government's ideological post-feminist agenda:

It's not a new issue by any means, they've never wanted us loonies getting too close to exposing the truth (laughter) ...but I think they do have a stricter enforcement of [a gender neutral ideology] ... Feminism is really quite unpopular at the moment, there's quite clearly a backlash and I think the government are using that and taking advantage of it to reinforce the idea that men are victims [of domestic violence] as much as women and you know, I think with funding the way it is now, and how tense everything is ... they'll

probably be more successful [than Labour] at converting [feminists themselves] ... which is a terrible thought.

This move comes at the expense of local and grassroots organisations that have for years accrued the feminist expertise and organisational practice required to challenge gender inequality and VAWG more broadly. We see in the next chapter that some activists no longer adopt gendered analyses of VAWG and engage with the kind of victim-blaming narratives commonly associated with post-feminist discourse. Gabrielle noted that this preference for generic services is now being pushed in criminal justice commissioning which also appears to question the gendered nature of domestic and sexual violence:

Even though they're supposed to be independent, the IDVA's and the ISVA's are just sort of sitting in with the police and just working for them and it feels like the police just think "look at these Rape Crisis women or Women's Aid, they're too radical" so they actually want us to change things ... So they now have this very bureaucratic basically hierarchical structure, like with [Sexual Assault Referral Centres] they are saying that "SARC is the best way of providing services to survivors because it is gender neutral, because it is part of the police, because we want women to report and we do this, this and this and we don't have a feminist ethos" and we are kind of like "right why are you trying to take over our ground and neutralise it?" so it is quite concerning that that is going to be like their "we're doing the right thing so we won't give any funding to women's services".

With the Police and Crime Commissioners (PCC) in charge of funding VAWG services in the community since the establishment of these roles, many participants were concerned about the potential eradication of specialist women-only VAWG services. This concern was seemingly greatest among participants working in specialist BME organisations or in organisations serving large BME populations. As Salina explained:

If they don't want to fund stuff around gender equality they certainly don't want to be fussing around with race issues as well. Asking them to fund a specialist service that deals with both, you're at an immediate disadvantage [for receiving funding]. They'd rather just pay a generic provider to employ a BME worker or have maybe a group for BME women or something and that way they can tick off the equality boxes without having to properly invest in the cause ... Doesn't matter that BME women will receive a far worse service.

Research has found that organisations which employ a BME worker or provide a BME service as an add-on “rarely engage in the critical work and reflection that is required to transform the organisations practices and challenge structural inequality more broadly” (Imkaan 2016: 17). This is especially worrying given the complexity of the issues that specialist BME-led organisations are responding to, as evidenced earlier in this chapter. Yet the Coalition government appears largely disinterested in sustaining services that are led by and for BME women. Following David Cameron's declaration that state multiculturalism has failed, community-based services for women are now increasingly expected to accommodate *all* women's needs rather than develop responses based on specific political needs (Imkaan 2016). This form of assimilatory politics is currently being used to downplay the need for a specialised BME sector and Salina recognises that the government is ideologically and financially benefitting from this narrative. Nina spoke about how some VAWG organisations are beginning to reshape their strategies around these broad funder demands in the hope that they might secure the financial futures of their organisations:

Because of the ideological stuff, for example I know [organisation] have got a lot of contracts in [City] now, basically because they work with perpetrators and male victims, they work with BME [women], so I think that annoys a lot of people who think they are providing a better service for women and it is them coming in saying “oh we work with perpetrators, we'll work with men, we're going to get all of the money from the council because that is what the council want to do”. So they are basically just converging with this sort of neoliberal agenda that is looking to desiccate feminist and women-only organisations and erase their politics.

During her interview Nina argued that the government has strategically controlled how VAWG is conceptualised and responded to by some women's organisation via funding grants. Those organisations dependent on state funding must converge with government ideology or risk losing financial support. Perhaps Beverley's highly problematic use of intersectionality to argue *against* the need for specialist BME organisations is a symptom of this:

I have issues with people suggesting we should have specialist refuges or specialist BME services and I think why? Because we're singling people out or singling cultures out or ethnicities out and they don't want to be treated like that. More often than not we get women from the BME community who go "we're not working with that..." and they use the P word and say "we are not working with that Paki" because they don't want anything to do with that culture, with support workers that come from that area. They don't want BME support, they want to work with white workers, workers that have nothing to do with them whatsoever. So I take umbrage when people say we need to protect specialist [BME] services because I think this whole "if you're not from that culture or background you don't understand" is completely wrong ... We are culturally sensitive, we are intersectional, so why make it about specialisms?

There may well be some BME women who do not wish to use specialist BME services, for a variety of reasons. However, while Beverley's white-led organisation may indeed claim to be "culturally sensitive" or embrace intersectionality, using these points to make arguments against protecting specialist BME organisations actually dislocates race from the broader analysis by ignoring the underlying structures of white privilege and the structured subjugation of ethnic minority people that specialist BME organisations were developed to contest. A critical application of intersectionality would assure that both privilege and oppression are viewed as the products of multiple regimes of inequality yet Beverley's argument insinuates that her whiteness is unproblematic and her racial privilege fundamentally unchallenged by her organisational structure. This arrangement is not only inconsistent with feminist

organisational objectives to foster and promote relationships in which power is shared equally and not abusively but also raises questions about any organisation's ability to challenge forms of VAWG perpetuated by racism if it simultaneously engages with critiques that are more likely to reproduce than eliminate this violence. Whether intentional or not, this critique and others like it are having a destabilising impact on BME women's organisations and their efforts to support BME women experiencing or fleeing violence, while simultaneously increasing the financial and political status of white-led and generic organisations. Several BME participants were already concerned about the effects of austerity on their intersectional mobilisations and feared such misguided arguments would serve to undermine their services and advocacy.

#### *4.3 Implications for Social Change*

It would appear that over time funding trends might begin to influence the direction and priorities of anti-VAWG organisations as they compete for diminishing pots of funding. Gilbert believes that this situation "is carefully engineered precisely in order to prevent the emergence of any sense of solidarity or any effective forms of political organisation amongst workers and to ensure that competition remains the reality of their working life" (2015: 34). Several participants felt that competition was eroding solidarity within the VAWG sector as specialist organisations compete for survival:

It is pitting services against each other. We have done so much hard work about partnership working and talking to each other and now we are in a fight for money which is awful, particularly with [organisation], we have got similar contracts and you can feel that tension, it's like 'well who does it better?' and that is an awful place to be in, it'll only end in resentment. (Danielle)

For a lot of women it's paranoia and people feel paranoid because they have less workers, they are not able to go to as many meetings, they are not able to write as much and then they feel like they're out of the loop a little bit and it

makes them anxious because even I get frustrated when you have got these big meetings taking place or events and I kind of feel like “oh that’s great, it’s going to be the same big organisations again, dominating the agenda” because they have all got the capacity to send a member of staff and I haven’t. (Joelle)

Danielle and Joelle describe feelings of paranoia, anxiety and resentment among those working in smaller specialist VAWG organisations. During other interviews participants described how organisations were becoming more territorial and less willing to share ideas and information. They pointed to rivalries between organisations and pondered what the outcomes would be. They also spent a lot of time reflecting on the past and wondering if they could or should have taken different paths. For instance, many of the younger participants were very sentimental about their journey into feminism and the early years of their activism – entering the VAWG sector with a sense of hope and determination that they could help change the world. However, their reflections on the changes that have occurred since the introduction of austerity measures were filled with despair. Beverley noted a lack of social change agenda in the VAWG sector:

Well you know, when I first started I was fresh out of uni and I was going to change the world. 22 years old and I honestly thought I was going to change the world and rapidly that didn’t happen. But that is why I am not the chief exec because she does that. She has that vision and she will be thinking 3 years ahead but I can only think 6 months ahead so that is why she is paid to do that job. But realistically now I don’t think any of us can think that far ahead. In this current climate, I am thinking 6 months, but I can’t think past 6 months. In 6 months it’s going to be Christmas. I can’t think about next year or the year after that. There’s no sort of long term social change work going on in this climate.

This feeling of being unable to look to the future and explore ideas for social change has much to do with the current funding climate. It also has much to do with the erosion of alliances and solidarities brought about by competition for funding. Some activists

were doubtful that they would be able to engage in social change activism beyond their daily working roles due to the increase in demand for their services. In many instances they also felt unable to critique the state because much of their funding was provided and controlled by the state. This raises important questions about their ability to challenge the state about its austerity policies and their implications for women experiencing male violence. As highlighted earlier in the chapter, some participants view cuts to VAWG services as a form of violence in their own right and critiquing state violence is thus an integral element of resistance. Yet the increasing energy required to manage bigger workloads and longer working hours on top of increased voluntary work might be ultimately undermined by the forces of austerity. The final section of this chapter explores some of the resilience strategies that activists are employing in order to survive the cuts and uphold solidarity in the face of intense resource competition.

## **5.0 Resilience Strategies**

Unfortunately we're in an environment where organisations are competitive and the environment causes them to be competitive. However if we're not going to work together we might as well just go home because if not we're going to be sitting here in twenty years' time having this same conversation. What a waste of fucking time and resources. (Annette)

Competition is a highly disputed notion within feminism – “antithetical to important feminist aims, including the promotion of solidarity, the abolition of hierarchy and domination, and the rejection of particular masculinist norms that promote and support oppression” (Cawston 2016: 1). While some scholars have conceptualised competition between feminist activists as a “short-term friction generated by limited resources” (Milner 2014; 88) there is also evidence to suggest that these feelings remain long after

resources become more abundant. As outlined above, some participants felt that competition for resources was serving to erode the solidarities and relationships that have developed over years of organising – relationships that encourage commitment to collective social change efforts. The austerity context, with decreasing funding and increasing need, has served only to exacerbate this situation. However, for some participants this was precisely the time to work on building solidarity and alliances among their organisations:

Who actually benefits from our competitiveness? Because when women are arguing and fighting ... they're not looking at the bigger problem but at each other ... This isn't a short term problem that'll disappear when austerity disappears, it's a political strategy so ... we need to stay calm and think rationally about our ways forward and how we can support each other ... rather than the take the money and run approach because it's not doing any of us any favours (April).

April feels it is important to resist government scare tactics about diminishing resources because this projects the notion that local organisations need to hold onto what they can get – much like the “fortress mentality” that Lehrner and Allen (2009) encountered in their study of domestic violence organisations in the US. While data examined above suggests that this fortress mentality likely exists in certain parts of the sector, during fieldwork I also encountered several strategies devised by organisations to engage in competition in a compassionate and cooperative manner. In one county, this involved the development of a strategic partnership between five small VAWG organisations serving a large rural population. The purpose of this partnership was to ensure that all organisations survived the cuts and collectively resisted the merger of their organisations into one large generic organisation, as Edwina explained:

We are in talks about how we can tailor services, dove tail them because all five organisations have emphasis on different areas of domestic and sexual



abuse so how can we work together in a partnership and resist an official merger because this is about the people who need us, not about us ... So we're working together and being honest about "I think you'd be best doing that and we would be best applying for this funding..." and then eventually we want to create an electronic diary so that everyone can... well it needs to be worked out but either you have one organisation in charge of the whole DV and sexual abuse organisation in [county] and lose the specialisms and the [geographical] reach or you use the expertise and different parts to create a whole.

Interestingly it was Edwina's organisation that had been earmarked by commissioners as best positioned to lead the merger and take over all VAWG service provision in the county and yet it was her organisation leading the resistance. Most likely the commissioners assumed that Edwina would support this agenda because she presumably cared most about her own organisation's financial resources and future survival. However, this strategy was unsuccessful. For Edwina, acquiring a greater position of power in the VAWG sector was not worth the loss of this network of local VAWG experts. She explained that her organisation will "always resist" the devaluation of small, local VAWG organisations, especially after witnessing the "absolute mess that mergers have created" in other parts of the region and country. At the same time, she was aware that this was a "risky move" given that private sector corporations such as Serco and G4S are moving in on VAWG service provision contracts, meaning that "we could lose everything".

Several participants were also concerned about the development of consortium approaches to commissioning. As I was beginning fieldwork the local authority in one city released plans for a Domestic Violence Hub that would incorporate all domestic violence services under one accommodation and outreach model. The Hub and its services would be run by one single agency but there was an option for local domestic violence organisations to collaborate in the Hub's service provision by bidding as part of a consortium. Although the alleged objective of the Hub was to streamline funding

and avoid duplication of services while providing a seamless one-stop-shop for survivors of domestic violence, several smaller specialist VAWG organisations expressed concern that this proposal was simply an opportunity for the council to secure jobs for themselves and offer the remaining funding to organisations with large incomes and resources capable of bidding at a lower cost. Smaller organisations would be left to fight for scraps and organisations responding to both domestic *and* sexual violence might be excluded due to the restrictive remit of the Hub. One specialist BME organisation was so opposed to the idea that they eventually pulled out of negotiations. Nina provided me with her interpretation of the situation:

I think the idea [behind the Hub] is to get rid of the smaller specialist services and get them to essentially become part of a range of services offered by a larger provider, so have them detach from their autonomous leadership whether BME or LGBT ... It makes things cheaper and it makes things easier because their autonomy is really reduced meaning they're less of a hassle politically speaking but it also means you lose the specialism and expertise and their role in the movement ... So you know what [a specialist BME organisation] have done? They've told them to stick their money, they don't want it ... They've said no [to taking part]. Bold move! Bold move. An essential move.

Nina refers to this as a “bold move” because their decision to opt out of the council’s commissioning process has the potential to exclude this organisation from applying for funding in the future. However, the notion that this was also an “essential move” speaks to her recognition of the importance of sustaining specialist social movement organisations that have strong political agendas. Nina’s organisation – inspired by this bold but essential move – decided they too would resist any commissioning processes that might detrimentally affect the future survival of specialist VAWG services:

[One commissioning body] visited and ... was saying “oh well you have a disabled women in here and you have women with drug and alcohol problems in here and women with mental health problems, you have BME women, English women so obviously if you can do all of this under one roof then we

only need one big refuge” and I was like “no, you need more than one and you need them in different geographic locations and not being arrogant but the only reason we have got so many different needs under this roof and managing is because we have a highly sophisticated feminist practice which you’ll not get from the private sector”.

Nina is aware that commissioners are looking for “big organisations who can do everything” and she did not want her organisation to be used as a pawn in a political struggle that could result in the potential closure of smaller specialist VAWG organisations across the region – many of which have become the voices of the anti-VAWG movement and crucial to their local communities. Instead she decided to use this opportunity to educate the commissioning body about the importance of protecting specialist refuges despite knowing this could alter her relationship with them for the worse. While this might seem a relatively small act of resistance it nevertheless demonstrates a willingness to challenge commissioning cultures even where this might be detrimental to one’s own financial interests.

Another poignant act of resistance I encountered during participant observations involved an organisation that was in a relatively strong financial position but recognised that many other wealthy organisations were still “dumping” their most complex and time consuming cases on struggling specialist services. During a meeting with a number of other managers of VAWG services across the region, the manager of this organisation outlined a strategy for ending this unjust practice. I wrote about this in my fieldwork notes:

[Manager] told everyone about a ‘No Dumping’ policy she has decided to implement. She is fed up with larger financially stable organisations dumping their most complex and time consuming cases on specialist VAWG services – especially those led by and for BME women. She noted the irony that many of these larger organisations have won contracts that once belonged to specialist services and that they won these contracts based on the argument that they were able to provide specialist services for BME survivors at a lower cost. She was visibly furious that many of these organisations continue to refer cases to

specialist organisations knowing that they will get no money for these referrals. Her argument is that they should not have taken this money away from specialist services if they were planning to continue referring most BME women to them. She pledged in front of everyone present that her organisation would never refer a case to a specialist organisation without absolute proof that her organisation was not equipped to respond. She also promised that her organisation would never apply for funding that could be better utilised by a specialist BME organisation. She believes it is essential that white women are accountable to BME women and avoid compromising in any way their attempts at self-organisation and survival. She suggested that the 'No Dumping' policy involve publically naming and shaming the organisation in question, refusing to build or sustain alliances or partnerships with them, and writing letters to their funders urging them to consider funding a specialist service in the future. [Fieldwork Notes October 2013]

The manager of this organisation was determined to challenge power and stand in solidarity with those movement organisations struggling the most. Importantly, this provoked other women in attendance to pledge to do the same. In a similar vein, some participants were willing to risk their livelihoods to stand in solidarity with the communities they serve. Perhaps the most striking example was provided by Yolanda:

I mean there have been millions of times the council just sends a letter saying they are going to shut our building in a months' time if we don't accept money to work with [both sexes] ... We keep turning the money down like fuck off we don't want your money and then they say that the service is needed so they'll take all our funding and give it to someone who will work with [both sexes] and we are all like no, we aren't doing it ... We've spoken to the girls and we've consulted the local community and their mandate is that we're an organisation for women and girls and that's what the community needs ... It's recently happened again because there's even more pressure now because of austerity so we've had a discussion where if we have to close because we have no money then we will close but we are not suddenly going to become a mixed organisation because that's not what this community needs ... We'll close and use the time to think of a better way forward.

In spite of the bleak funding landscape, Yolanda and her organisation are determined to preserve their women-only mandate and continue their grassroots anti-VAWG work without giving into the coercive funding practices of their local authority. If funding dries up and the organisation has to close, Yolanda will use this as an opportunity to

spend some time reimagining the project and its vision for social change. Suggestions had been made of developing a voluntary project that would operate mainly through grassroots fundraising and community support and Yolanda agreed that the region would benefit from more grassroots anti-VAWG organisations – free from state control and separate from the women’s sector but open to partnership and collaboration with voluntary organisations to help forward their political agendas. I found this idea particularly enticing given the ways in which state and foundation funding appears to be curtailing more radical forms of anti-VAWG organising that target structural and state violence. It is for this reason that I have chosen to end this chapter with an example of how one particular grassroots fundraising strategy I encountered during fieldwork – implemented by feminist anti-VAWG activists working across the North East’s women’s sector – paved the way for solidarity and social change beyond the boundaries of state control.

### *5.1 Fundraising for CEDAW*

It was in the restrictive funding environment outlined above that a group of feminist activists from women’s organisations across the North East joined together in early 2013 with the aim of obtaining funding for a lobbying trip to the UN headquarters in Geneva. They were all members of North East Women’s Network (NEWN) – a coordinating body for the women’s sector across the region – and contributors to its case study, which documents the disproportionate impact of austerity measures on women in the region and uses the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) as a framework for outlining government failures and responsibilities (discussed further in Chapter Six). Having received financial support from several funding bodies to cover the costs of researching and

writing the case study (NEWN 2013: ii) they were now determined to put their findings to political use by sending a small delegation of feminist activists to lobby the CEDAW committee at the UK's hearing in July 2013. However, their submission for further funding was unsuccessful; rejected on the premise that lobbying and advocacy work did not fall under the remit of the same funding body that commissioned the case study. One NEWN activist noted in conversation that it appeared the research in itself could exist but it was not to be used for political purposes. She felt that this decision undermined the entire premise of the research which was to actively hold the government to account for the deepening levels of gender inequality and violence brought about by their austerity measures (Fieldwork Notes, June 2013). Another NEWN activist noted that it also undermined their efforts to highlight the impact of these policies on an already disproportionately deprived region; an insight she felt was too often glossed over in national reports (Fieldwork Notes, June 2013). Overall there were concerns that this rejection depoliticised the contributions of a whole region of activists who engaged in the participatory action research project that the NEWN case study draws on. Given the amount of time and energy this community invested in the project while simultaneously dealing with staff losses, increased demand for services and the high levels of stress and exhaustion brought about by the cuts, the NEWN activists felt an even deeper responsibility to ensure that women's local and regional voices and experiences were represented to national and supranational political bodies.

Eventually, it was with the ongoing support of this community that the NEWN activists were able to fundraise for a delegation of women to attend the CEDAW hearing in July 2013. The funding was raised from a social event – *We're the women: words, music and songs for CEDAW* (12<sup>th</sup> May 2013) – which placed value on

community engagement and maintained a firm connection to its base in the North East and to the feminist and women-centred principles that inform NEWN. The organisers agreed that raising funds was equally as important as bringing women and their communities together for a fundamental political purpose: to join in solidarity against gender violence and inequality and to celebrate community empowerment. The organisers extended invites to journalists, lecturers, lawyers, singers, artists, actresses and comedians – many of whom agreed to speak and perform at the event free of charge. Money was raised through tickets but reduced priced and free tickets were also made available so as not to exclude more marginalised or disadvantaged members of the community.

## *5.2 The Fundraiser*

Several of the women I interviewed for my research had also engaged with the participatory action research that informed the NEWN case study and many attended the CEDAW fundraising event. During their interviews they spoke about their hopes for shaping policy debates and challenging state-sanctioned VAWG through this research and their eagerness to help the NEWN activists raise funds to present the findings to the CEDAW Committee. Fortunately, the fundraising event was successful and enough money was raised to send six activists to the CEDAW hearing – the details of which are discussed further in Chapter Six. However, this was not the only positive outcome of the event. There was an overwhelming consensus among these women that the event had brought anti-VAWG activists and organisations together at a most vital moment: “just as I felt we were losing each other” (Stephanie). In an environment characterised by intense competition for funding and resources, most participants described their attendance at the fundraising event as having helped rupture feelings

of isolation and loneliness within the sector. Annette stated that “the whole thing was pretty emotional actually” when describing how her conversations with other feminist activists throughout the evening helped unravel the feelings of rivalry and conflict she often experiences as the manager of a domestic violence organisation. Lucia explained that “there were no funders or commissioners in sight and somehow that felt really empowering” and Dionne spoke about the promises and commitments she made to several of the anti-VAWG activists who attended the event:

We were saying that fundraising like this needs to be done more often and it needs to be something that’ll benefit more than just one organisation, something that addresses a bigger issue and we were saying ...well actually we promised to take this forward, pinkie promised [laughs] and we’ve spoken since and it looks like everyone is still committed to the idea.

Feminist literature on fundraising describes how fundraising efforts can be considered a form of political organising if they are part of a process of building relationships and alliances to sustain community power (INCITE! 2007) and there is certainly evidence to suggest that the CEDAW fundraising event went some way to achieving this. Firstly, the NEWN activists disinvested from the state and other funding bodies that have enormous influence over project priorities and outcomes and instead redirected their energies and limited time and resources to grassroots fundraising for a collective political purpose. This purpose was to expose and challenge state sanctioned and structural violence against women – something that several participants identified as a pressing need but were struggling to achieve due to restricted resources and fear of jeopardising their state funding. Participating in a grassroots fundraising event organised by an independent regional network thus enabled them to bypass the constraints imposed by funder demands without endangering their relationships with existing funders, compromising their strategic visions or betraying the specific needs



of their communities. Secondly, the funds that were raised served to benefit the whole of the women's sector and not just a select few privileged organisations. The NEWN case study achieved this by placing particular emphasis on the importance of protecting smaller, specialist VAWG services most detrimentally affected by public funding cuts despite being best positioned to meet the many complex needs of diverse communities (NEWN 2013: 3). This helped to remove pressure from services that have the least time and resources to campaign and fundraise for themselves while ensuring that their often marginalised voices and concerns were represented in the NEWN case study and at the CEDAW inquiry. Thirdly, the fundraising event brought women's organisations together at a time of fierce competition and rivalry. The organisers were evidently successful in creating a space for creativity and collective sharing and this appears to have served as a catalyst for solidarity and sisterhood rather than division and fragmentation. Participants spoke about how they renewed important bonds and made new connections at the event and most described these new relationships as lasting rather than fleeting. Finally, because the event was open to all women in the community, the NEWN fundraisers and activists were able to share with and learn from people outside of their immediate professional circles and to whom they are ultimately accountable. This inspired some activists to think about grassroots fundraising as a legitimate means of sustaining community power around issues of VAWG. As Louisa summarised in her interview:

I think we really have something here, a model perhaps of moving forward because I think that, I think I'd like to see them [NEWN] organising more things like this that are about community empowerment. The CEDAW stuff, using the UN to challenge the government, this is all [in the interest of our communities] and especially the women who we are working with every day ... I just think there's clearly a willingness to support stuff like this and so yeah I think we need to be looking to replicate it.

## 6.0 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the impacts of austerity measures on the VAWG sector in North East England. Interviews with activists and participant observations of meetings and events reveal that austerity localism has had significant impacts on the financial security, sustainability and ideological independence of VAWG organisations. It is clear that those groups that are most marginalised to start with – BME, immigrant, asylum-seeking and financially impoverished victim/survivors – are particularly hit by swingeing financial cuts to the public and third sectors. Fieldwork also revealed that withdrawal of state support leaves gaps in services, and activists struggle with the tension created; they want to resist these cuts, which amount to state-sanctioned violence, but have a deep sense of responsibility to support the women affected by them. The impacts of austerity localism are felt not only by women experiencing VAWG but also the organisations designed to support them; interviewees reported an increase in short-term commissioning (which precludes preventative work) and growing preference for large generic providers that adopt gender neutral approaches to VAWG, rather than small, specialist, feminist organisations. However, activists are resisting these harmful developments. They resist by building solidary and supporting each other; resisting moves for mergers and centralisation of services even at the cost of missing out on financial benefits; holding to account non-specialist organisations that have secured funding for services that specialist services are better placed to provide; and refusing to provide services for violent men where that contravenes the organisation's mission. The next chapter explores how anti-VAWG activists are conceptualising and theorising VAWG in the current austerity climate. While the context and issues outlined in this chapter play a large role in both enabling and constraining the social change strategies that activists pursue (see Chapter Six) it is

also important to understand how they are making sense of the structural landscape of VAWG as these understandings will also help shape and inform their strategies of resistance.

# 5

## **Conceptualising Violence Against Women during Times of Crisis**

### **1.0 Introduction**

Over the last decade, there have been a number of studies documenting how women's movement members conceptualise VAWG, especially in the US and usually with a specific focus on domestic violence (see Nichols 2013; Arnold & Ake 2012; Macy et al. 2010; Lehrner & Allen 2009). The main findings to have emerged from these studies suggest that anti-VAWG movement activists are increasingly adopting gender-neutral and non-feminist (i.e. non-structural) analyses of VAWG. This is often presented by scholars as a consequence of their preoccupation with criminal justice solutions to VAWG, or in some cases because of their complete detachment from movement history. For example, Lehrner and Allen (2008: 231) discovered "an absence of conscious engagement with divergent [ideological] perspectives" among

their participants, most of whom displayed “a general unfamiliarity” with the ideologies and action frames informing the anti-VAWG movement and “frequently met with incomprehension ... silences and confusion” questions about movement philosophy and goals.

The data analysed in this chapter, in contrast, demonstrates that the majority of participants who engaged with this research were highly educated about the history of the movement and upheld strong feminist analyses of domestic and sexual violence. Contentions over how VAWG should be analysed and concerns about which ideological and theoretical perspectives should be prioritised featured prominently in their discussions with each other and with the interviewer. At several of the events I attended as a participant observer, there were heated discussions about the differences and disagreements that existed or were emerging between activists and organisations across the region. Quite often these differences were highlighted as being about feminist versus non-feminist (i.e. individualistic and gender neutral) analyses of VAWG. However, these contestations also frequently transcended the feminist/non-feminist dichotomy to encompass subtle and nuanced *intra*-feminist differences between liberal, radical, socialist and Black feminist positionalities, and between activists of different ages and social backgrounds. This chapter thus demonstrates that a diverse range of understandings of VAWG pervade the women’s sector in North East England, and highlights some of the intricacies, nuances and implications of these analyses as they relate to the current political-economic-cultural climate. How activists conceptualise VAWG has implications for the strategies they employ in their attempts to resist and prevent this violence. These strategies are discussed in Chapter Six.

## 2.0 Upholding a Gendered Analysis of VAWG

Several participants conceptualised VAWG as a social problem rooted primarily in patriarchal gender relations and ideologies of gender subordination. This is an analysis most closely associated with radical feminism and Yolanda described why she believes this analysis is most important for preventing VAWG:

I think an understanding of male power, the patriarchy, it's the basics that you need to be able to do this kind of work because you need to understand power as emerging from gender norms and how this relates to violence and how the way men and women are socialised, so men as masculine, women as feminine, so men are socialised to feel entitled, superior, they have power in all institutions of life including the family and controlling women within these contexts is just a given . . . We have to change attitudes. You change attitudes, you change power. You change how women are viewed, how decisions are made . . . then you change the structures . . . It's hard when things are so aggressively against women these days though, trying to make out that gender isn't even a factor in this violence anymore.

Yolanda argues that male violence against women is normalised and institutionalised through gender roles and teachings of masculinity/femininity that reinforce sexism and male superiority and consequently feed male violence. This requires responses to VAWG that pursue attitudinal and cultural change, in order to change patriarchal structures. However, like many other participants she believes this is becoming more difficult to achieve as anti-feminist backlash forces attempt to strip gender of ideas of male privilege and female subordination. As established in the previous chapter, anti-VAWG activists in North East England are operating within a socio-political context in which the retrenchment of funding to women's organisations is occurring alongside the dissemination of gender neutral ideologies that divert attention away from the structural factors that oppress women. Nina is concerned that this anti-feminist

backlash is exerting a powerful influence on attitudes about the causes and acceptability of VAWG:

A backlash [against feminism] has always existed but I'd say hostility towards feminism has gotten worse in the current climate. We've got a ... I'd say a very, very Right wing media that trivialises women's experiences of violence, you know, whether it's blaming women for their rape, accusing them of lying or it's, they're accusing feminists of hating men, that they blame men for everything when men are victims too and how dare they, these despicable women, you know? And I think it's all of this that helps I'd say not only erase the structural causes but also it makes women more vulnerable to violence because it paints them as hateful and sort of maybe worthy of violence?

Nina believes that these victim-blaming and rape myth acceptance discourses are not only diverting attention away from men's responsibility for oppressing women and fostering violence against them but are also generating broader cultural justification for men's continued violence against women. I asked Sophie what she thought the purpose of such discourse was. She replied:

It's a diversionary tactic. Plain and simple. It's not about trying to help male victims, it's not about trying to understand the dynamics of power and control and I think worst of all is that it completely ignores what Liz Kelly calls the continuum of violence against women which means that yes we might be talking about sexual violence but what's happening isn't just about that because sexual violence doesn't exist in a vacuum, you know, like it's not disconnected from other forms of violence and inequality. So for me, well I'd say that feminism isn't a comparative project. It's not "oh well women can sometimes be violent so men's violence can't be the focus anymore". By all means, women's violence, it's interesting and it's important to understand but it's not the same, it doesn't have the same causes, the same impact, the, you know, the fact that over ninety percent of murderers are men. Over ninety percent of those who commit sexual assault are men. So don't you dare use the fact that women can be violent as an excuse to downplay or erase the magnitude of male violence against women, you know?

Sophie believes that feminists must not lose focus of men's power and control in all areas of public and private life. She references Liz Kelly's (1988) notion of a *continuum* of VAWG to highlight that this violence is not episodic but rather

normative and functional. Central to the concept of *continuum* is the understanding that male power cannot be abstracted from society; rather, the social sources of male power and male violence must be examined in order to understand the ways in which VAWG is sustained systematically – through policy, culture, media, education and law. At the time of interviews, several national women’s organisations had called upon the Leveson Inquiry to examine the prevalence of gender neutral and victim blaming language in VAWG reporting and the frequent failure of journalists to contextualise this violence within its wider social context (see Topping 2012). Olivia described how her initial optimism about this intervention had been quickly eroded by the high profile inquiries of Operation Yewtree into the historic sexual abuse and rape of young women and children by powerful male celebrities. She felt this inquiry demonstrated that the British media were still committed to inaccurate and often dangerous reporting on sexual violence as victim blaming narratives and assumptions of false accusations were prolific. During her interview, Olivia spoke about how the media continue to resort to discursive manoeuvres that render male violence less visible:

When a *woman*’s done something, she’s abused a man or a child, it’s front page news for days and I get that it’s shocking because it’s so rare but surely it’s more shocking that men kill three women a week? But clearly it’s not because when men abuse and kill women? Small paragraph somewhere in the middle of the paper and that’s if it even makes it into the news at all. Unless it’s extremely violent ... then sometimes it’s not even newsworthy so the connections [between different instances of male VAWG] aren’t being made . . . [So] it really upsets me when so-called feminists that are working in victim services keep drawing attention to women as abusers and men as victims and saying women are just as violent [as men] and it’s just, for me it just helps normalise [male violence] because they’re giving women’s violence disproportionate coverage while men’s violence gets swept under the carpet . . . It plays into a gender neutral analysis, a totally patriarchal analysis.

Olivia believes that when societal attention is drawn to sensationalist counter examples – in this instance, women abusing men and children – it becomes easier to



obscure the fact that men overwhelmingly commit more violence than women do. She recognises that patriarchal systems thrive off these exceptional incidents of violence because when fed to the masses they help detract attention from the causes of daily, routine forms of violence against women which, just because of their systematic nature and daily manifestation, count as normal. The continuum of VAWG is obscured by such discursive manoeuvres. Olivia therefore believes that when women working in VAWG services draw disproportionate attention to these highly infrequent incidents of violence they are helping reinforce anti-feminist ideologies that normalise male violence against women and conceal its more subtle and coercive dimensions. This concern is shared by numerous feminist scholars who view this symbolic coercion as the building block of the patriarchal system because once established it is very difficult to counteract (see McRobbie 2009). Some participants reflected on how this symbolic coercion operates today:

I think it is two things. I think one is denial of your own vulnerability. It's like "well it couldn't happen to me because I am not like those women and anyway men experience it too and men and women are equal now anyway". Women are just groomed. 'Patriarchal handmaiden' is a bit of an insulting term but I think some women have not managed to undo their training which is to nurture the oppressor sadly. (Nina)

I think you get such a kicking if you [talk about male violence in public]. I think that's why the women's sector, to an extent, has went downhill. You will just be beaten to the ground virtually and you have got to be hated. You have got to be prepared to have people call you all sorts of names, place you outside the system, and most women aren't prepared for that . . . Go on the internet and have a look at [some of these Twitter accounts]. The amount of hate and vitriol is astounding . . . And honestly, the irony, that talking about male violence against women online provokes such violent and abusive reactions from men. It would be laughable if it wasn't so depressing. (Sophie)

Both women provide explanations that converge with much that Angela McRobbie (2007, 2009) has written with regards to post-feminism and the "new sexual contract"

generated by neoliberalism which permits women minimal forms of visibility on the condition that they make themselves into self-reliant and self-governing citizens. Sophie believes that when women break this contract they are punished. In the extract above she points to a perceived rise in misogynistic hate and hostility directed at women who attempt to talk about male violence in public spaces. She went on to refer to this as “a form of control because they’re trying to silence women” from politicising men’s role in their oppression. I asked if this was a new problem. Sophie replied:

I don’t think backlash necessarily ever ends but I think things are pretty fucking bad at the moment and I was actually just saying the other day like, is it because men, because they’re feeling like this recession is all about them and there’s this sort of resurgence in feminism, especially online and they’re thinking like “hold the fuck on, this is about us, we’re the victims” and I think maybe it begins with that? Like I mean it’s so misogynistic and abusive so it’s obviously more than just that in terms of how they perceive women in general, the rape threats and the death threats but I think they don’t want to give up any power and that’s how it gets worse?

Several of the women I spoke to presented similar interpretations. Some of them were attempting to launch anti-VAWG campaigns and feminist blogs online and described how terrifying this experience could sometimes be (see also Lewis et al. 2016). Other participants spoke about how younger generations are increasingly consuming sexual violence as entertainment through pornography, television and the media, which they believe affects their perceptions of violence and the willingness to endorse it. One organisation led a social media campaign against the Fifty Shades of Grey trilogy – dubbing it “Fifty Shades of Abuse” – because they were so concerned about how it might influence young people’s attitudes about women, sex and violence. However, while several participants placed blame on media and entertainment industries for the (often highly violent) sexualisation of women, Nina suggested that feminists may have played an unwitting role in women’s sexual objectification:

We rebelled against [conservative gender norms] and we were like “sex was who we want and when we want and we will go for the full lexicon and go for the woman on woman and man on man, who is patriarchy to tell us?” And now I look and it’s almost compulsory having some kind of Olympic sex credentials, being able to perform a whole variety of sexual acts for men, although young women are saying “it’s about me” and I’m like, “is it, really?” I’m just heartbroken, seriously. I look at the experiences of some of the young women that we are working with and they don’t know they’re being raped and it sounds crazy saying you don’t know you’re being raped but they just aren’t seeing it as rape. If you have been brought up groomed on internet porn, you haven’t had any idea what sex is, and then that sex is enacted on you and you think “God in my book that was rape” and it really, really guts me and I think what have we done to our young women?

Given the challenges outlined so far it is perhaps unsurprising that so many participants were concerned about upholding an analysis of VAWG that centres patriarchal structures of gender inequality. The feminist movement struggled for a long time to have this analysis acknowledged and accepted in mainstream politics and these participants clearly do not want to lose power over this critique. However, some of these women also characterised their preoccupation with defending a radical feminist analysis of VAWG as a frustrating setback. They were concerned that at a time of crisis when anti-VAWG activists need to be developing alternative discourses and strategies in order to rise to new challenges, they are instead stuck having to defend the most basic principles of feminist ideology. Olivia explained:

I sometimes think is that the whole point? To keep us distracted with the fundamentals of everything we all already know and have been saying for decades, because does that help stall progress and limit the power of our resistance? Because we all know that gender is one dimension, one part like say for Black women they’ve got so many other complex things reinforcing their oppression and the backlash, obviously racism and poverty and the immigration climate and I just think we need to be coming together around this bigger picture but then we’re all so strapped for time and resources and they’re trying to get rid of women only services and a gendered analysis and so maybe, yeah, is that the whole point?

Olivia recognises that sustaining this gendered focus must be achieved *within* coalitions of intersecting projects that challenge patriarchy, racism and capitalism/class oppression as they intersect in the lives of women. However, she is finding it difficult to balance this need for intersectional activism with the need to defend the centrality of gender/sexism/patriarchy to women's experiences of VAWG in the face of backlash forces that are seek to erode women-only spaces and services for survivors. However, not all participants were as reflexive about the power relations at play here. Several of the women discussed in this section frequently spoke about women as though they were a homogenous group united by gender and their analyses of backlash focused predominantly on men countering progress toward *gender* equality – other contested grounds around race, class, sexuality and nationality were largely overlooked. Might it be the case that some anti-VAWG activists are reverting back to simplistic notions of “universal sisterhood” and “everywoman” in order to defend basic gains that might not actually protect all women? This may be the case for some participants (usually white, middle-aged, domestic violence service providers) but can certainly not be said of other participants – particularly those from working class and BME backgrounds – who identified how the political and cultural climate of austerity works *through* intersecting gender, race and class oppressions, as demonstrated further below.

## *2.1 Women Perpetrators and Male Victims*

Some participants expressed concern about the exclusions inherent in gendered analyses of violence that focus solely on men as perpetrators and women as victims. While all of these participants agreed that a gendered analysis of domestic and sexual violence is essential, they also argued that the common character of this violence is

not always a male perpetrator but rather the broader social meaning of the abuse: that women are targeted *because* they are women. This stance does not presuppose the identities of victims and perpetrators but rather focuses on the meaning of the violence and its beneficiaries. Catherine explained:

I think the domestic violence term at the minute, it's definitely quite homogenous, it looks at man, woman, living together, having a relationship for a period of time and the man starts to abuse the woman and it doesn't look at other types of relationships. [At a recent meeting] we talked about this kind of revolving door cycle when women have short prison sentences and the real problem that we have with usually older women grooming younger women and getting them into sex work because they often get rewarded for bringing more women in and often it will start as a prison sentence, within the prison it will be completely different to on the outside, they might have a sexual relationship in the prison but when they come out its more around doing stuff together and sex work together and really grooming younger and more vulnerable women.

Catherine supports and provides services for sex workers and survival sex workers who have experienced violence, but she requires an analysis that enables her to understand women's role in abusing and oppressing other women. Another example of women's violence was provided by Rajindar who highlighted that domestic violence is not always confined to intimate heterosexual relationships in nuclear families. Rajindar has supported several South Asian women whose mothers-in-law became violent and abusive toward them once they moved into the extended family household. She believes that coercive control is utilised as a way of preserving the joint family structure and ensuring the daughter-in-law upholds family honour. She explained that this can help explain women's collusion in domestic violence and honour based violence:

Women help the men by monitoring other women and with the daughter-in-law, because of son preference and the honour of having a son it's often in the mothers interests to control her daughter-in-law because if the son moves out or whatever this can have financial implications and also affect how she's seen

by the community so it's in her interest to make sure the daughter-in-law is never in a position to instigate anything like that.

Rajindar believes that while this violence is often committed in the interests of men, women can also infer power from this violence. This broader framing of patriarchal power was conceptually, politically and practically useful for participants working around forms of VAWG that are sometimes perpetrated by or involve the collusion of women. However, Jenna sought to extend this framing to male victims of patriarchal violence, providing an example of a homosexual man whose family attempted to force into a heterosexual marriage in order to preserve family honour. While acknowledging that the focus of my research was on women victims of male violence, she questioned whether feminists have a responsibility to support gay men who are punished under the patriarchy for failing to uphold appropriate versions of masculinity. She questioned: "Maybe there needs to be a place for gay men in the violence against women strategy?" because of the ways in which heterosexism, homophobia and transphobia create a complex structural environment which enables the use of power and control tactics against LGBT people. However, this was a largely unpopular view, with several other participants concerned that the inclusion of *any* form of violence with a gendered dimension would undermine the already limited space and resources reserved for women and girls. This argument was sometimes extended to transgender women. The extract below perhaps best encapsulates the challenges that many participants were experiencing when attempting to reconcile their analyses of patriarchal power with the workings of homophobia and transphobia:

Whatever you believe about gender ideologically it's kind of like, like transwomen experience so much violence and probably more than trans men as well so I think we have to [provide services for them]. It just seems like a pointless ideological point scoring to deny a group that is so vulnerable so yeah

definitely and there is not really a management issue with providing those services because it's not in a group setting anyway so I think individual counselling yeah but I think my sort of perception would be that somebody who would want to do that in group work, without consulting [the other woman-born-women] maybe wouldn't have the same understanding of gender and of oppression so I guess the difficulty there is like, how do you self-define or self-declare your identity and your gender like transwomen do if you also view gender as an oppressive hierarchy? Like is that not cognitive dissonance really? (Gabrielle)

Few participants were as nuanced in their consideration of this power dynamic and Gabrielle was particularly astute in her recognition of the inherent conflict between feminist ideology and feminist practice in this scenario. While some feminists may certainly consider it problematic that Gabrielle defends excluding transwomen from women-only group work, she explained that she was “attempting to find a balance” so as not to alienate women-born-women or neglect the needs of transwomen. Other participants were much less willing to make such ideological compromises, with some citing fear about women's safety (i.e. that transwomen might be perpetrators of male violence) and concerns about protecting women-only space (i.e. where women are free from patriarchal power) as their reasons for opposing the inclusion of transwomen in women-only VAWG services. One participant suggested that transwomen have deliberately inserted themselves into this debate in order to create ruptures within feminism and facilitate a governmental shift toward gender neutral analyses of domestic and sexual violence.

## *2.2 Evidence of Gender Neutral Analyses among Participants*

Evidence to justify concerns about the omission of patriarchy from analyses of VAWG emerged during interviews. Three participants – two younger and one older – presented gender neutral and individualistic analyses of VAWG throughout their

interviews despite self-identifying as feminists. All three worked in domestic violence services but two had no prior engagement with feminism or domestic violence before their employment. During her interview, Charlotte often confused risk factors for domestic violence with causal factors of domestic violence and consequently presented this violence as a psychological problem that lies within the individual, rather than a social problem created by structural forces:

I'd say the most common causes are (counting on her fingers) mental health problems, alcohol and drugs, not coping with stress ... and there's also childhood, so it might be that he's witnessed violence in the home, experienced violence in the home ... anger management is clearly a big challenge too. There's obviously more than just these five but I'd say they're the biggies.

While Charlotte identified relevant stressors and risk factors her focus is nevertheless on the individual and *his* lack of anger management or *his* substance use. This is perhaps because she was also unsure about the gendered nature of domestic violence:

I am a feminist but sometimes feminism doesn't fit for me because we get a lot of common partner violence, the same kind of couples coming through, referrals for him, referrals for her and it's really hard because there's only the two of us as [support workers] so I will take the woman and she will take the man and then we will swap over and try and work it out. Normally they're both victims and perpetrators and the main issue is alcohol not gender because the women are sometimes just as abusive as the men.

Charlotte is correct in asserting that women can be perpetrators of domestic violence but she seems to imply that *because* women can be violent, feminists must be wrong about the patriarchal causes of domestic violence. This line of questioning did not inspire her to think about why women use violence and what this might mean for a feminist analysis. Instead she automatically bypassed this thought process and a range of related theories in order to construct domestic violence as a non-gendered phenomenon that arises from chemical imbalance. Carla likewise drew on



individualised analyses of domestic violence and this was perhaps best demonstrated during our discussion about the Freedom Programme:

We try and promote healthy relationships and that there are nice decent men out there and we've got some volunteers that run the Freedom programme, one of them was really badly assaulted for a good few years but she is married now to a really good guy and it's nice for them to hear that she has gone through that and now she has this really lovely man ... It's just nice for them to see that not all men are bad.

While the Freedom Programme does draw upon individual level categories such as “Mr. Right” and “Mr. Wrong” to help women make sense of their experiences, Carla frequently characterised domestic violence as an outcome of individual psychology and ‘bad’ disposition, erasing the contribution of structural inequalities. She also engaged in victim-blaming when she criticised women for not leaving their abusive partners:

Younger clients, they'll come through and it'll be “I'll do whatever you say, I'll do what I need to do” and I think you find half of the time the younger ones are really on the ball, they'll do the right thing . . . Mine was great, she went and gave her evidence at court, she did everything she needed to do to make herself safe whereas you get some that are in their 40's and 50's and they're like “well maybe I should just go back to him” and it's like “this nineteen year old knows better than you do, calm down!” So it's a struggle all of the time because we can't really say to them that we're not going to work with them if they go back because it's a bit like blackmailing them.

The underlying message here is that domestic violence continues because female victims *let* the abuse (re)occur. Carla also implies that a woman's age should determine her ability to leave an abusive relationship while ignoring the numerous other internal and external factors that might prevent older women in particular from escaping abuse (see Beaulaurier et al. 2008). During her interview, Edwina also made repeated references to women's responsibility for their own victimisation, which were often based on the logic that women – and younger women in particular – should be

better educated about abuse and self-monitor their behaviour in order to avoid male violence:

Young women think they have got freedom and I think if they're well educated then they have got the freedom but I think there's a lot of young women who have not had a good education who are suckered into some relationship which has too quickly become a sexual relationship with a boy and I just think there's a discrepancy between what young women appear to be, which is self-confident and actually they are just pissed and go out with their mates and they are stuck in an abusive relationship and they think it's the norm to be hit so they just put up with it ... It's our job to help them see that if they don't take control of the situation then yes they will become victims.

From this perspective, it is the victim who has control over the violence committed against them and thus her failure to take control that “causes” the violence. Overall these three participants’ analyses of domestic violence appear to align with the rationalities of neoliberal postfeminism, which have sought to individualise social problems and reinforce principles of agency, reflexivity, self-governance and self-actualisation (see Chapter Two). From this perspective, women need not be victims if they learn to live by neoliberal standards and to embrace their recent liberation and emancipation (Romkens 2013). This approach contrasts greatly with the rest of the women I interviewed who recognised both the structural causes of VAWG and the material and cultural barriers that prevent many women from leaving abusive relationships – especially in the current political and economic context of austerity. Stringer (2014) has argued that anti-victim narratives are not progressive but neo-conservative, reflecting neoliberal values of personal responsibility and creating a “profoundly depoliticizing” situation whereby young women are encouraged to guard against their risk of victimisation “instead of focusing on their right not to be victimized” (Stringer 2014: 7; see also Cole 2007).

### **3.0 Austerity Policies as State Sanctioned VAWG**

The majority of participants felt it was important to direct their activist energies toward liberal reform in order to target the austerity policies disproportionately disadvantaging women and rendering them more vulnerable to violence. A range of policies were highlighted as contentious over the course of fieldwork and many are discussed in Chapter Four with regards to the challenges they present at the level of service provision. Cuts to domestic violence refuges and housing benefits, cuts to specialist VAWG services, cuts to Legal Aid and cuts to police and CJS budgets were the most frequently cited areas of concern among participants and their cumulative impact on the most marginalised women was recognised by many participants. However, rather than reiterate the specific policies that activists critiqued, this section instead examines how participants implicate the state in this violence. For example, Nicole identified as a liberal feminist but acknowledged the “necessary tension” at play when feminists call for greater state action to prevent VAWG through their organising against state actions that perpetuate and exacerbate VAWG:

It's one of those things where we've made a lot of gains through the state, through changing policies and laws and it's always wonderful when you feel like you've got the government on side, but they ultimately have the power to throw things into disarray, obviously that's what's happening now ... You're challenging them through their own sort of mechanisms . . . Oppressor and liberator. Oppressor for now but we're obviously hoping to change that.

Nicole constructs the state as both an instrument of social justice and of domination and oppression. This was a perspective loosely shared by the vast majority of other participants. While gender equality might be formally recognised in domestic policy, Dionne believes that the government's readiness to undermine and retreat on its alleged commitments to end VAWG sends out a very damaging message to society:

Yeah well basically they're saying "we don't actually care *that* much about this" so you know, it's like "okay abuse women, we'll tolerate it" and I just think come on, surely not? Like I think we need to be going that step further and actually calling them out as perpetrators. If they think it's okay to take away women's life lines and send out the message that abuse will be tolerated, that it's not worthy of a government response, then yeah, they are perpetrators in my eyes.

The passage through parliament of reforms that cut state provision for women victims of violence was viewed by Dionne as contributing to a culture of impunity for men who are violent against women – hence her construction of the state as complicit in this violence. Indeed, the majority of participants viewed the legal system as an arena with the potential to provide symbolic as well as actual justice for women. Nina explained:

We can and do and have made a difference to the law. When I started this work people laughed at the idea of rape in marriage being illegal, I got howled at and sneered at and ridiculed and I don't mean it was just me it was other people as well and now it's like "of course it's illegal", everyone takes it for granted now, stuff that was considered like "are you alright in the head?" is now like "well of course, what are you on about?"

Yet while legislation can help influence public opinion and shift attitudes, it also depends on effective enforcement (Htun and Weldon 2013). Several participants were concerned that liberal feminist demands were losing their gravitas in the current policy climate. Firstly, participants felt that the government's Localism agenda was making it more difficult to hold central government to account for their lack of enforcement of their VAWG strategy. Jenna explained that "we're all getting pissed off with our local authorities for cutting services for victims but they're sort of just puppets doing what they need to do because it's central government that's cut their funding". During her interview she acknowledged that while short-term gains may be made by lobbying local government about their funding decisions, long-term change will only manifest

by targeting the source. She concluded that “making it difficult [to target central government] was probably their plan all along”. Secondly, several participants also highlighted that challenging central government about their decision making was becoming more difficult due to the closure of the Women’s National Commission and the replacement of the Gender Equality Duty with the Public Sector Equality Duty, which Danielle described as a “double blow” for feminists attempting to make gender specific social justice claims. She believes that this will have major implications for the future of women’s anti-VAWG efforts:

Working at the local level, especially when you’re outside of London, it’s already really difficult to challenge policymakers and we’ve sort of relied on things like the Women’s National Commission for taking up our concerns and raising them with government on our behalf. So that’s going to be become a lot more difficult and same with the Gender Equality Duty, we needed something specific, committed to gender but it’s no surprise that’s gone with the way things are going.

Danielle believes that measures to promote and ensure equality are now increasingly under threat in a political climate that is undermining equalities legislation and those attempting to organise on behalf of equality groups. A number of other participants also raised this issue. Thirdly, some participants felt that women’s concerns are only listened to when the economy is on track. Joelle stated that women are “made to feel greedy for asking for protection against violence ... We’re being greedy and selfish because the economy is unstable and we should know not to ask”. She believes that this makes it “a very difficult time to be a feminist”. Adkins (2015) has recently written about the ways in which austerity measures have shifted power away from inclusive policy-making and towards “crisis management” that privileges economic growth above all else. Likewise, Otto describes how the Coalition government adopted a rhetoric of urgency in order to legitimise its far-reaching and increasingly invasive

welfare reforms and argues that it is within this context that liberal feminists have been pushed “off the map” (2009: 76). During fieldwork I met a group of activists who were attempting to develop media campaigns and strategies to expose the government’s collusion in violence against women via its cuts to VAWG services. They felt this would put pressure on the government to uphold their commitments and obligations under Human Rights legislation and as outlined in their *Call to End Violence Against Women and Girls* action plan. Dionne explained why this media strategy was important:

We want to send out the message that the government are just as complicit in perpetrating violence against women as the person who’s throwing the punches. It’s incomprehensible, like what was the point of even introducing a strategy if they were just going to undermine it by making ridiculous cuts to our services and to all the other services that women disproportionately depend on? They *know* that women depend on these services more than men and they *know* that the most marginalised women depend on them more than anyone else.

Nearly every participant placed emphasis on the *disproportionate* impact of the cuts on women. At one of the first NEWN meetings I attended – which brought together a number of anti-VAWG activists working in strategic and managerial roles within a range of different VAWG services – there was a discussion about the findings of the Fawcett Society report regarding the “triple jeopardy” of austerity for women (Fawcett Society 2013). It was noted that this triple jeopardy – which refers to job losses in the public sector, cuts to welfare spending and a “looming care gap that women will be expected to plug” (Fawcett Society 2013: 2) – was having serious repercussions for women’s experiences of male violence. As one attendee asserted: “You can’t tackle violence against women without tackling women’s health and women’s position in the economy” (Fieldwork Notes, May 2013). However, it appeared that many participants were struggling to make sense of why the government would introduce cuts that they

know would disproportionately impact on women and increase their risk of violence.

Dorothy explained:

I think that people are struggling to... I think people feel powerless actually, it's powerlessness, people feel that clearly our political leaders are a bunch of thieves and vagabonds, you know, you can't trust them, you can't trust anybody so what can you do? And I think that there is a real serious undermining of democracy going on and it has been going on for some time now because of how our politicians are behaving, because of this bloody government who were voted in on a certain kind of manifesto, for example no top down dismantling or privatisation of the NHS service, and what have we got, you know? Liars, liars, the whole lot of them and I think that is really serious, and generally speaking I think there is no alternative, or it feels that there is no alternative or that there is no way to express what is going on and I think that should be our biggest concern, that there is no agreed political analysis that people can use to understand the situation that they are in, you know.

The next section explores how participants were making sense of the structural forces upholding the austerity agenda. Where liberal feminist participants tended to view gender inequality as emanating from overt legal and political discrimination, meaning that VAWG would be eradicated once women have the same opportunities and equal rights as men, other participants believe that this approach is only capable of reducing levels of gender violence and exploitation in the short term.

### **3.1 The Structural Causes of VAWG**

During fieldwork there were several participants who presented sophisticated analyses of what feminist theorists might refer to as the appropriation or 'neoliberalisation' of feminist knowledge, but what Olivia referred to in her interview as "a type of feminism that isn't really feminism, it's not doing what feminism's supposed to do". Here Olivia is referring to a version of feminism she has "too often" observed among colleagues and other anti-VAWG activists who "aren't presenting any *real* challenge to the system". I asked Olivia to explain what she meant by *real* challenge:

For me it's not real feminism when you're just harking on about equal pay, equal opportunity, because what we mean by equal is status quo and our status quo is built on male standards, patriarchal capitalist standards actually. So this type of "feminism" isn't about challenging the status quo, challenging structural oppression, it's about "how can we help women fit into this?" . . . Changing the system is what feminism used to be about but that's not what those in power want is it? Hence all this bloody equalities crap and gender mainstreaming crap and [whiney voice] "how can we get more women into positions of power...?" and feminists going along with it because they need funding or they're trying to influence policy and I'm sorry but no! That's not going to end inequality and it's not going to end violence against women.

During her interview Olivia was largely critical of liberal feminism and was concerned that reformist actions for equality would have a limited transformative potential. As a feminist influenced largely by socialist and Marxist philosophy, she brought scrutiny to the political-economic determinants of VAWG:

I think we need an overturn of the entire system and that's what's difficult to stomach and that's why it's much easier to focus on short-term goals like making sure women have Legal Aid or making sure they have access to jobs and whatnot but women's exposure to poverty, unemployment, it comes from structures that actually downplay the importance of women in social and economic life, doesn't it? Women are paid less because capitalism benefits from that and also men benefit from that . . . We need to be overturning the structures that inform what decisions the government make.

Socialist feminists are concerned primarily with women's oppression under capitalism and therefore focus on women's exploitation by the state and by capitals. However, Olivia went on to acknowledge that these insights have generally not been well integrated into VAWG prevention approaches which have tended to overlook both the material and structural dimensions of gender inequality. Dorothy also acknowledged the absence of socialist feminism and anti-capitalist critique in the VAWG arena during her interview. She questioned whether this might have something to do with the postmodernist turn in feminist theory:



The one thing about postmodernism is, and it does have some good things to it, you got the attention to other more marginalised peoples voices such as disabled women and Black women that had been ignored so this notion of personal politics, that we all have power, that we all come from different places, and that we all have a certain amount of power in relation to each other, and that we need to respect that, so I think there is a lot of good there and it certainly allowed a lot of other movements, I think in terms of sexuality, disability, so in terms of the identity politics, that was some of the good side of postmodernism but the bad side was that it didn't address the issue of structural power so nobody was seeming to ask "why do some people have more power than others?" and so it kind of ends up focusing on the individual so that's where I think socialism comes in and a critique of patriarchy and capitalism and women's lives under capitalism and this is how I try to approach [my work around VAWG].

During her interview, Dorothy recognised the importance of defending women's access to welfare provision and rights via engagement with state mechanisms. However, as the structural landscape of VAWG begins to change in line with macroeconomic policies and welfare reforms, she recognises an opportunity to engage with a more radical politics of redistribution (Fraser 1998). This is something that has recently been endorsed by Griffin (2015) who highlights how dominant discourses of austerity have focused on the human flaws and institutional weaknesses that led to the crisis; distorting an understanding of the broader historic structures of gendered and racial discrimination on which global capitalism has been built. She refers to this as "crisis governance feminism" and believes it has become a technique of governance under neoliberal capitalism. Elizabeth explained that she has recently started attending meetings with male socialists in order to raise issues of women's historical oppression under capitalism:

It got to the point where I was like "I've been preaching to the converted for too long" and all the anti-capitalist stuff is always so male-dominated so I was like "fuck it I'm going to give them a piece of my mind!" ... For me the biggest problem [with capitalism] is that our country has never paid women for the work they do in the home and it has never provided free or even remotely affordable childcare ... We've been expected to do this work for free with no

thanks or recognition ... So I turn up to these meetings basically to let everyone know that the economy has been built on the backs of women! The looks I get! But if they give me a chance they can sometimes see where I'm coming from, you know? Like when I'm talking about violence against women, we hear all the time that women need economic independence and access to decision making power and all the rest of it but if we have to give up all hopes of a career and accept a shitty zero hour contract where we can barely make ends meet just so that we can be around for the kids because somehow that's *our* responsibility ... Surely men are capable of seeing that that's something worth campaigning about?

Elizabeth wants to challenge men to take responsibility for issues that oppress women.

Feminist anti-VAWG organisations such as INCITE! in the US have long challenged men to “address how their own histories of victimisation have hindered their ability to establish gender justice in their communities” (INCITE! 2007: no pagination). A few other participants also discussed men's experiences of oppression and how this relates to VAWG. For instance, Stephanie spent time reflecting on men's violent reactions to economic recessions and to the loss of secure entitlements they often bring about. In particular, she identified recent economic reforms and austerity policies as having threatened men's presumed entitlement to resources and power and associated this with men's heightened risk of perpetrating violence against women:

I think it's got so much to do with their sense of entitlement ... They're angry because they've been socialised to think that they're the breadwinners and the power holders but what they're mostly experiencing is loss ... They've lost their jobs, their income, their sense of self, their sense of purpose and they're feeling threatened because they don't know how to make sense of it all ... Our community here, the families are mostly poor ... [and] the men have been through a lot over the years and I think when we talk about the violence, it's often about their attempt to find some sort of control because they've ran out of ways of like, feeling masculine ... I think especially poverty, no jobs, no money, it contributes to that feeling of failure and like the need to regain control by using violence which let's be fair, that's what the patriarchy teaches them ... [and] I think that's why we're seeing a rise in violence [against women] at the moment.

Stephanie believes that rising levels of economic inequality since the financial crash and the accompanying poverty, stress and reduced resources have been conducive to increased rates of violence against women in her community and across the North East region, which she referred to as “the most deprived region” in England. Her view is that VAWG has become one means by which poor and working class men can perform masculinity in order to compensate for their disempowerment in a context of rapid socio-economic changes (see True 2012; Weissman 2012). However, while she recognises that pro-VAWG gender norms are seemingly escalating as levels of male economic disadvantage and social isolation increase, she went on to explain that it would be counterproductive to link preventative measures to the acquisition of greater male power. Instead she believes it would be more worthwhile to challenge the legitimacy of these power expectations and “help men identify ... the real causes of their anger and insecurity so they can stop taking it out on women”.

A similar argument was also taken up by Louisa in her interview. Louisa’s organisation serves a large South Asian population where political and economic grievances have steadily worsened “since austerity measures were brought in” and “with all the racism and immigrant-bashing ... with the Tories in charge”. Louisa spent some time discussing the detrimental impact that poverty, racism and xenophobia might be having on South Asian men’s societal privilege and their subsequent attempts to preserve honour and status via violence or threats of violence against women. However, she was particularly concerned about the development of a reactionary religious identity politics in the community, fueled by increasing anger and resentment toward the British state:

There seems to be a lot of manipulating going on [by certain religious groups and religious leaders] ... and a lot of worrying stuff about women and their

role in the family, the importance that men assert their authority, their masculinity, that they should be using violence to protect their honour and they're using religious texts to justify [this] ... I think some of it probably goes beyond honour though ... I think it's got something to do with the way the West has basically positioned itself as superior and forced a load of really damaging policies [on the South] ... [and] I know I'm really simplifying things here but to think of like obviously the inequalities they're experiencing now in this country, there's so much poverty and racism and so much hatred of Muslims and like now, like with the rise of nationalist parties [in the subcontinent] ... and in the UK ... there's an opportunity for them to feel a sense of belonging and fight back and I think violence against women connects a lot of these dots because if you can manipulate your religion to justify your actions, it gives men a sense of authority and control ... [while also serving the purpose of] creating a strong masculine identity ... [and] countering Western values.

Here Louisa describes a complex structural environment which she believes is conducive to the nurturing of violent masculinities by reactionary religious forces. Existing literature suggests that religious fundamentalist movements are often interested in strengthening the logic of heteropatriarchy and sanctioning male violence against women in their communities – and that this is sometimes supported by male community and religious leaders (Balzani 2010). Louisa is concerned that some men are becoming more susceptible to the ultraconservative forces building within their communities as they are exposed to greater economic insecurity, racial discrimination and social humiliation. Yet she can see that these forces are also “counter-productive” to the interests of the majority of South Asian men in her community, most of whom will not see an improvement in their social or economic situations because the classism, racism and xenophobia generated by the government's economic policies will be left fundamentally unchallenged. In fact, Louisa believes this will simply give the government “even more justification to target them unjustly.”

In the current policy environment, several participants recognised that such ammunition was serving only to enhance new forms of authoritarianism, stricter

immigration policies and aggressive surveillance and over-policing of minority communities. Although many participants were keen to work with the state in order to improve responses to VAWG and hold men accountable for their violence, several participants acknowledged that for BME and immigrant women and their communities, the state is not always a safe place and can often expose them to more violence, especially in the current austerity context.

### **3.2 The Scapegoats of Austerity**

In Britain, the clampdown on the welfare system since 2010 has been enforced through the stirring of anxiety and resentment directed against immigrants, the poor and the disabled – those failed neoliberal citizens “parked” on benefits due to a “poverty of aspiration” (Jensen 2012: 10). Olivia believes that the British government has capitalised on this inflated sense of fear and insecurity; pitting vulnerable groups against each other in order to ensure that blame for the recession is projected onto the *victims* of the financial crisis and not onto governments, banks and other global financial institutions:

It's a divide and conquer strategy at the end of the day, turn the vulnerable against the vulnerable, the poor against the poor ... use the immigrants as scapegoats to justify cutting welfare support and any number of racist and classist policies ... All they have to do is convince everyone that their problems are because of the greedy immigrants and Labour overspending on said greedy immigrants ... Anything to prevent us from realising that it's our own politicians and *their* own greed that's working against us.

In times of economic recession it is not uncommon for the resentment and shame directed against vulnerable groups such as immigrants and the poor to intensify and Olivia believes this is especially the case when these groups are demonised by their own governments in order to justify welfare retrenchment. Louisa adopted a similar

analysis during her interview when linking the government's attempt to deploy poor and "racialised" people as scapegoats for austerity, with the increase in hate crimes and violence against BME women across the country. She believes this violence is being perpetrated by those "looking for someone to blame" for their deteriorating social and economic situations:

These women are now, and I would say visibly Muslim women with the hijab and that in particular, they're going out into their communities and they're actually getting attacked, they're getting attacked by white men *and* women who are looking for someone to blame for the shitty situation they find themselves in at the hands of their *own* government. These people, you know, that, I think they're deeply unhappy, they're suspicious and they're encouraged to be suspicious by their own government. They're being encouraged to feel this hostility and hate towards communities that are, that are being sold as scroungers and terrorists you know so, and because of the political climate it's Muslim women that are bearing the brunt [of this hate]. They're scared of leaving their homes because of it . . . Can you imagine how this feels for the women we're supporting? They're already experiencing violence in their own homes and now they're bloody petrified about what's going to happen to them outside their homes too.

This outlook compliments Bourdieu's (1979) argument that symbolic violence increases the probability of aggressive and violent acts by more dominant groups against those perceived as relatively inferior, as socially accepted discourses of hate and contempt create fewer compassionate bystanders and fewer people willing to intervene. The monumental rise in racist hate crimes against Muslim women in recent years certainly speaks to this theory yet it is interesting that both Olivia and Louisa view the people committing this violence as themselves casualties of a system that uses its most vulnerable citizens as scapegoats during times of crisis. This appears to have provided them with an insight into how these longstanding oppressions are finding new ways to manifest today. Nina believes that it is within this context that even the smallest acts of resistance become significant:

There is feminism as an obvious political intent and there is smaller feminism and it's like, the last time we had good snow, taking thirty BME women up on the slopes at [the local field] in a very conventional sort of working class area and the whole community watching a group of women having a whale of a time, not a man in sight, sledging in their burkas and hijabs. That is feminism in action and pretty radical feminism and in some way it is like "we will occupy public spaces and we will enjoy those public spaces as a group of women and we will not feel threatened and we don't care if you are astonished".

However, Nishta explained that it is not just members of their community that minority women need to fear. She believes that state agencies play a role in sensationalising violence against South Asian women as emanating from their inherently violent and "backward" patriarchal cultures in order to push race-based solutions that harmonise with the government's racist immigration agenda:

They always do this. If they need a new excuse for controlling the borders, like they do now [in the austerity context] so limiting the number of immigrants, the type of immigrants, justifying deportations, locking immigrants up, whatever it is really, but being able to say "we're doing it for your protection, trust us, you don't want these kind of people in your communities, you know, they are so backward, honour based violence, forced marriages, blah blah blah." It's gold.

During her interview, Nishta demonstrated a very sophisticated understanding not only of the state's complicity in maintaining violence against women but also its interest in *deploying* this violence for political gain (Nayak & Suchland 2006). In contrast to concerns outlined earlier in the chapter that VAWG is being stripped of its gendered dimensions, her Black feminist standpoint has enabled her to recognise how "culturalised" forms of VAWG such as honour based violence and forced marriage are explicitly gendered by the British government and always for repressive political purposes. Nishta later went on to suggest that the government covertly benefits from religious fundamentalism because its existence enables them to validate excessive interventions in minority communities whenever they like. Extending this analysis to

the transnational level, Elizabeth stated that the British government also deploys these “culturalised” framings of violence in order to justify its otherwise unnecessary involvement in foreign conflicts:

It happens all the time, not just with Afghanistan, they’ll say “oh these poor women, it’s so barbaric, the men are so barbaric, we need to intervene for their safety” but is it just a bit coincidental that the only conflicts they seem to want to intervene in are those taking place in countries with lots of natural resources? Oil being the obvious. So what’s really going on there? Is it about the women or is it about the money? I know what I think.

Elizabeth was only one of a small handful of (mostly BME) participants to raise this particular issue during interviews, but she is by no means alone in this accusation. Several feminist scholars have likewise argued that this violence is being used as a Trojan horse to justify Western imperialism and military intervention in foreign conflicts, enabling Western governments and multinational corporations to feign concern about VAWG while they simultaneously gain control of foreign resources (Mason 2013; Philipose 2008). This situation has led Nayak and Suchland to conclude that violence against women is no longer simply the outcome of war or conflict but “is vital and pivotal to the possibility of political violence and hegemony in the first place” (2006: 473). During her interview, April highlighted another “major contradiction” in the government’s responses to sexual violence in conflict and sex trafficking:

What I find most infuriating is that they go on about all this stuff about sexual violence and how they’re helping ... but once these women reach our borders they’re treated like vermin ... It’s the same with the stuff around sex trafficking, all the development stuff goes out the window ... . So we lock them up in Yarl’s Wood instead. Give the contract to our buddies at Serco and let the cycle of abuse continue. Ka-ching!

April is suggesting that the government profits from the incarceration of asylum-seeking women who have fled sexual violence in conflict – despite their alleged commitment to helping these women in international development. The “cycle of



abuse” she is referring to is based on reports that women are being physically and sexually assaulted by immigration officers at Yarl’s Wood detention centre in the UK. This topic became heavily politicised toward the end of my fieldwork when the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women was denied visitation to Yarl’s Wood by the British government. Several participants were furious that the state’s violence against asylum-seeking and refugee women was being concealed from the UN. They spoke about the importance of exposing and challenging state violence against women at every opportunity. Nina explained:

It’s about having the analysis that covers all of the class recognition, all of the different structural oppressions that women face, also at the hands of the state. It’s recognising all of those and challenging them at every stage and not just accepting the status quo. We had a woman who was really quite psychotic when she came to us, she had been trafficked and had a horrendous time, a black woman, and she went into real melt down because that is what the whole psychiatric system does to women, how it drugs them and whether it helps them and what the underpinning theory is but anyway beyond our consent the psychiatrist insisted she was sectioned and we didn’t particularly want her to go to hospital but once the law was involved, out come the policemen, out comes the psychiatrist, out come the ambulance crew and one of them, thoroughly irritated, he said to the police “if I were you I would Taser her mate”. So what steps in there is a whole analysis of the abuse of women under the psychiatric system, racism, the state’s use of violence ...

Nina explained that her intersectional approach to analysing VAWG encourages her to examine how women’s experiences of intersecting gender, race and class oppressions are reinforced by states and social institutions. Another participant explained that it is important to acknowledge how institutionalised discriminations play out in state responses to VAWG and highlighted that the government’s decision to “culturalise” violence against minority women has had dangerous implications with regards to police responses to this violence:

We had a woman fleeing forced marriage in our refuge and soon realised that the whole refuge was surrounded by gangs of Bangladeshi men who were

going to have her back so every road was circled, every route exit and they were talking to each other on their mobile phones and the police came saying you're going to have to move her on and I was just like (shocked expression) because she was being told to come home and consummate this marriage, to get upstairs and do it now. So I got security out and we went out to tell them to fuck off. One of the policemen actually said to [security guard] "what are you doing here? It's nothing to do with you, it's cultural" and [security guard] said "since when was fucking rape cultural?" So what you had there was our refuge, literally under siege by a large group of very entitled men who felt that they had the perfect right to come and drag a woman out of there, put her in the back of the car and take her to have sex with someone she had no intentions of having sex with, because that's what the whole community expected, and the police were willing to let that happen.

This scenario demonstrates how institutionalised racism and assumptions based around "culturalised" violence can lead to state unwillingness to intervene in violence perpetrated against minority women. Taking into consideration data from Chapter Four which outlines the difficulties minority women face in reporting violence and accessing the resources required to safely escape this violence (often due to the no recourse to public funds stipulation associated with their immigration status) this is yet another example of the structures in place that prevent them from living lives free from violence. It is also why most BME participants and several white participants recognised that criminal justice solutions to VAWG are not only limited in that they deal with the consequences rather than causes of VAWG, but also because the criminal justice system is often a site that further oppresses women and enacts violence against them.

### **3.3. Thinking Globally**

Several participants recognised that many of the challenges they faced were also faced by women from across the globe. However, they often struggled to envisage and build connections and solidarities across borders. For instance, Gabrielle explained how her

organisation's attempt to politicise the rape and murder of Nirbhaya in India in 2012 was misinterpreted by some of the other women who attended the protest:

When we did One Billion Rising we did a profile on a woman in India and so it is kind of like "yeah it is absolutely connected" but we got a lot of criticism around the campaign for appropriating the experience of women around the world, saying it was invalid and "what are we supposed to do, start protesting about something that happened on a different continent where violence against women and girls looks completely different?" Like it is still the same problem but we don't really know the specifics or how to address it over there so if we just generally say "it's bad" it's not going to have a massive effect with those words so maybe I can see why some people felt it was meaningless. Maybe they thought it was coming from this position of "we're better and it doesn't happen here" but that wasn't our intention, it was about "it does happen here, and it happens there, it might look different, but it's the same problem".

A few other participants spoke about the difficulty of connecting the experiences of women living in the South Asian diaspora with issues pertaining to VAWG on the subcontinent. Barsha felt her organisation should have made more of a stand against the rape of Nirbhaya beyond the vigils that were organised in the aftermath of her murder. She felt it was important that this violence was not "exoticised as something that happens over there" and should have been used to establish links between the rise of neoconservative and religious fundamentalist forces within the diaspora and rising levels of domestic and sexual violence against South Asian women in the UK. With reference to the "incredible ways" that Indian women are challenging rising levels of VAWG across India, Barsha declared that "there is so much that the UK could learn from the Indian women's movement ... but nothing ever really happens because it is that superiority thing of how can we as a developed nation take advice from India?" Indeed, a few British-born participants demonstrated this type of superiority complex regarding the North/South divide, including Zoe:

I did a qualification through [organisation] so I did a lot of studying and I studied about war crime and I was absolutely horrified because I knew a lot

about war crime but I didn't actually know the figures, the numbers ... and I did a lot of studying around FGM as well so I have got that and we did about witch trials as well and it is still going on in Africa at the moment like that is the new thing in Africa so I have got a lot of understanding about those because of that.

Yet when I asked Zoe what the course taught her about the connections between these diverse manifestations of VAWG, she descended into a culturalist analysis explaining that “it is awful to say but in England I think we are a lot more forward than other countries” and that “witch hunting would obviously never happen here”. During this explanation she completely overlooked how ongoing British imperialist and neo-colonialist interventions in developing nations such as those in Africa are creating the conditions in which this type of violence (re)emerges and flourishes (see Federici 2004). However, some participants were genuinely interested in seeking out connections with women from the global South in order to learn more about how VAWG is manifesting at the transnational level and how activists might build bridges across their similarities and differences in order to tackle this broader picture. They were largely building these connections over social media:

From Bangladeshi to Syrian feminists to South African, Canadian, American, French and that is only possible because of the internet, we all learn from each other, you really learn and share ideas, so that has been useful and you can exchange ideas and pick stuff up and I think you affirm your reality. You support each other against the onslaught of what I don't see as feminist ... You gain insights that you never previously had. (Nina)

I feel that there is so much we could learn from Latin America, from Africa, about overcoming the control of others in whatever form that has been, but I feel frustratingly lonely in knowing this because I feel like my time is more connected to things that I can only read about through my phone, that I don't feel so able to participate in. (Naomi)

During her interview, Naomi went on to talk more about how learning from Latin American and African feminists “might help with our own situation” with regards to

austerity policies and welfare reforms. She acknowledged that these kinds of structural adjustment policies that were rolled out across the global South during the 1990s now “affect rich and poor countries”. It was the La Via Campesina movement in particular that had caught her attention because she likes “their notion of how food sovereignty is connected to the whole agenda to eliminate violence against women and girls and it’s about how the food is grown and put together and engaging the community and I just love that”. During her interview, Yolanda remarked that women’s lives in the UK now include struggles similar to those experienced by women in parts of the developing world:

I think we’ve got to start looking at the bigger picture, that, you know, capitalism, you know, austerity measures, all of these things are being talked about now because since the recession they’ve started to affect women in Britain ... Feminists from developing countries have been talking about it for decades, understanding violence from a more structural perspective of colonialism, imperialism, imbalances in the economy ... I think we’re finding ourselves at an important tipping point in that respect.

While there were no participants (at the time of interviews) actively engaged in transnational movements against VAWG, several were nevertheless thinking about ways of building these connections, especially via social media. Like Naomi, Joelle was also interested in building connections with women from the global South in order to develop more nuanced understandings of the gendered workings of capitalism:

Capitalism is all about exploiting women’s cheap labour, exploiting their reproductive labour, which is free labour and this is all over [the world] and it saves the economy well you can imagine [how much] ... When things go tits up, women fill in and that’s what austerity’s all about is so it was never meant to *not* hurt women disproportionately. That’s basically its defining characteristic. It *means* to hurt women disproportionately and I think women from Africa and Latin America have a very good grasp of this fact and I think we can learn from that.

Throughout her interview Joelle acknowledged that simply trying to reform the system so that women and men share the burden of austerity *equally* is not only insufficient but likely impossible. Feminists from the global South have found that attempts to alleviate the worst effects of Structural Adjustment policies often reproduce their potency because this strategy detracts attention from the long term structural causes of women's oppression under neoliberal capitalism (see Chapter One).

## **4.0 Conclusion**

This chapter has demonstrated that anti-VAWG activists are very concerned about the implications of austerity for women's experiences of violence and most participants presented sophisticated analyses of the cultural, institutional, representational and structural dimensions of this violence. Only three participants presented non-structural and gender-neutral analyses of VAWG that align with post-feminist discourse, and all three had little connection with the feminist movement or with anti-VAWG activism before entering their jobs. Overall, the findings presented in this chapter suggest that the financial crisis may have provoked a transformation of the interpretive frameworks used to analyse VAWG by activists in North East England, which may potentially create spaces for alternative views and analyses to emerge; including those that have been previously neglected or relegated to the sidelines (i.e. socialist and anti-capitalist analyses). It is likely that the austerity context has provoked greater receptivity of socialist feminist approaches to socio-economic justice; though a few white and most BME participants made it clear that an analysis of capitalism and imperialism have always been central to their analyses of VAWG. The vast majority of participants demonstrated nuanced understandings of the ways in which systems of domination and oppression intersect in the lives of women to condition their experiences of and

exposure to VAWG. Some participants identified their analyses as being “intersectional” but most did not use the language of intersectionality during our conversations, unless the concept was first raised by the researcher. While the term “neoliberalism” was only used and understood by two participants during interviews, those who did not use this term or understand its meaning nevertheless addressed many of the problems that scholars would identify as emanating from the neoliberal capitalist system. Unlike recent trends in “crisis governance feminism”, these participants critiqued existing structures and mechanisms of gender privilege associated with the global political economy. With all of this in mind, how are the complex and diverse understandings of VAWG outlined in this chapter informing activists’ social change efforts? The next chapter examines how anti-VAWG activists across North East England are organising against this violence and the strategies they employ.

# 6

## Using Local and International Frameworks for Activism

### 1.0 Introduction

In the year prior to the commencement of my research, North East Women's Network had been busy researching and writing their own case study about the impact of austerity measures on women across the North East (NEWN 2013). They used participatory action research methods – including focus groups and consciousness raising groups – to enquire about the everyday issues encountered by local women. Over 300 women participated in this research, each accessed via NEWNs links with over 150 voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations. When I entered the field in April 2013 it was clear that this project had generated a movement for social change amongst various local women and local organisations. NEWN had recognised that many of these organisations were lacking the capacity to criticise government decisions and develop a political profile – often because they were reliant on state funding – and so the need for an independent voice that channelled the knowledge and expertise of the women's sector into the political arena was becoming increasingly



clear to them. This case study was the first step toward mobilising collective action among service users and activists. Its findings demonstrated that women from across the region were “extremely concerned about limited employment opportunities, the lack and cost of childcare, reduced services for young people and older people, domestic violence, sexual exploitation and gender stereotyping” (NEWN 2013: 6).

## **2.0 Relocating Grassroots Women as Key Agents of Knowledge**

Many of the anti-VAWG activists that participated in my research likewise recognised the importance of engaging their service users in discussions about the issues affecting their lives. They were aware that many of the survivors accessing their services were worried about their own and their family’s wellbeing and survival and therefore unable to prioritise campaigning and other forms of political work on top of this. However, they were also concerned that the further marginalisation and oppression of these women under austerity might lead them to believe that their experiences and concerns are irrelevant and that they are powerless in the face of larger economic forces. Nicole wanted to avoid this outcome:

It’s our responsibility to make sure that the women coming through that door for whatever reason, that they’re at some point given the opportunity to work for social change and when I say “work” what I mean by that is that they’re, that we essentially want to offer them more than just a service and they might not want that which is fine but we find that most of them do and I think with the way things are going with austerity and what have you, we really need to be thinking about how we engage some of our most marginalised because we don’t want them to feel powerless and excluded and we also don’t want to just be speaking for them. We want to help them speak for themselves.

This outlook was particularly common among participants working closely with some of the most marginalised women in their communities, including poor, BAME,

immigrant and disabled women. Due to problems of deep and intersecting inequality, these women have in many ways come to rely on others for representation. However, Nicole believes that simply *representing* those silenced by inequalities is not enough. Rather, the more empowering and politically advantageous strategy is to help these women speak for themselves in order to challenge power inequalities and build communities of struggle against VAWG. Her organisation had therefore began organising events for women in the community who have limited opportunities to come together and talk with each other:

So I think we're going to keep things separate for now because we find that's usually the most empowering move so a different group for BME, LGBT, disabled and it's a space for them to come together and we'll have conversation starters prepared and we'll be sort of guiding and monitoring whenever necessary and I know it might not sound like much, like just getting people together for a conversation but we know it works because we had a group a few years back that we got funding for and it was for about 6 months of work and it's still running today. There's no funding for it but the women felt empowered and they wanted to continue and who were we to stop them?! So they still turn up every Thursday afternoon, putting the world to rights in this very room!

Nicole resists false distinctions between service delivery, critical education and political activism. Her organisation values the importance of all three elements and the events she was organising are evidence of this. During fieldwork I encountered a range of innovative projects that were born from the same desire to help survivors collaborate and educate and organise on their own behalf. Some of these projects had developed organically and others were the outcomes of carefully crafted funding proposals that place emphasis on the importance of working with marginalised and underserved communities to discuss the issues affecting their lives. As Nicole explained: "You don't go in all guns blazing like "we're going to help these women challenge and eventually undermine these oppressive institutions!" They don't need

to know that (laughter)”. It became apparent during my observations that different techniques were being utilised by different organisations to facilitate critical discussions among specific groups of women. This is because marginalised women’s experiences of silence in the public sphere stem from a range of intersecting social issues that strengthen social exclusion and that are often compounded in certain political and ideological contexts (Hill Collins 2017). The two projects discussed below adopted different strategies for raising women’s critical consciousness but are both important examples of how young women from different social backgrounds are “resisting the epistemic violence of austerity through counter-hegemonic knowledge production and activism derived from their lived experiences, perspectives and agency” (Emejulu & Bassel 2017: 119).

## *2.2 Arts and Crafts Activism with Young BME and Immigrant Women*

During fieldwork, an arts and crafts project was developed by an organisation that works closely with BME and immigrant women. The organisation recognised that many of the younger women accessing their services were describing similar experiences of oppression and raising similar issues and concerns with their case workers but were rarely presented with an opportunity to collectively voice their opinions and ideas in a safe environment with other young BME women. During participant observations, the manager of this organisation explained that many of the young women accessing their services are from very poor backgrounds, lack strong English Language skills and have no further or higher education – restricting their ability to engage in the formal political arena. She also explained that although a VAWG support group exists at the organisation, it is attended mostly by older BME

women which might deter the younger women from really opening up. Without creating an alternative political space for young BME and immigrant women to get together, these barriers would likely continue to restrict them from explaining the world through their own vantage points. The idea behind the arts and crafts workshop was thus to bring young BME women together to think about and discuss the main social issues and injustices affecting their lives and to convey this using the arts and crafts materials provided.

One of the most poignant pieces of artwork that emerged from this project was a cardboard “story box” made by a small group of BME women who wanted to convey the different dimensions of discrimination and oppression they face at the intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, age, class and nationality. In the corner of the story box was a Black female Barbie doll looking out into the room. Catchphrases now synonymous with austerity rhetoric – including the notion of “fairness” and the idea that “we are all in this together” – were written on the walls of the room, highlighting the inherent contradictions of an ideology and discourse that is actually excluding Black women from the political sphere and generating hostility towards their racialised and gendered identities. An image of George Osborne, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, was hanging on the wall of the story box and had written over it “AND THEN EVERYONE WILL BE POOR EXCEPT FOR US” – an effective use of counter-hegemonic discourse with which to denounce the dominant political ideology informing austerity. On the floor of the story box were words highlighting some of the key issues affecting the young women’s lives: immigration, racism, education, abuse, depression, culture and unemployment. These are the stepping stones on which young BME women must walk every day and that characterise every aspect of their lives. However, their symbolic placement on the floor of the story box is suggestive of a

desire to *stamp out* these oppressions. Indeed, the doll in the corner of the room would be unable to leave the room without encountering the stepping stones. Finally, on the wall furthest away from the doll and closest to the door are the words “Changes to Legal Aid” – their main policy concern and one of the greatest barriers to justice for survivors of domestic violence. These changes include significant cuts to Legal Aid for family justice issues, meaning that women are often forced to represent themselves against their abusers in court – enough to compel most women to stay in the abusive relationship (O’Hara 2014). This is likely why “Changes to Legal Aid” are the final barrier preventing the doll from leaving the room. During an interview I asked Anita why projects like this are so important:

It’s just really great because, well it’s about giving them the tools to do something that’s a bit different than just having a conversation or being sat down and taught something like in a classroom because it gives them a chance to speak out and share experiences and get creative and to feel all the emotions that come with that and that come with solidarity.

Anita believes that this sharing of emotion, experience and knowledge between the young women creating the artwork helped stimulate consciousness raising and solidarity building in ways that might not have been achieved through ordinary conversation. To be sure, the artwork encouraged the women to think in detail about issues of power and oppression. It also called on them to analyse and interpret their own realities through a social and political lens. Given that there are countless examples of BME women being marginalised and silenced for critiquing power structures and expressing views that fall outside of dominant discourse – including in wider feminist spaces (see hooks 1984) – this arts and crafts workshop created a safe space for BME women to speak freely and “express themselves apart from the hegemonic or ruling ideology” (Hill Collins 1990: 22). The artwork would later be

displayed by NEWN at some of their CEDAW workshops – discussed later in this chapter – so that the voices of these young BME and immigrant survivors were included in broader discussions about human rights, equalities instruments and the importance of *substantive* equality.

### *2.3 Exploring Race and Class Oppression*

Stephanie is the manager of an organisation based in a community characterised by high levels of deprivation, homelessness and violence and she witnesses every day the impact of these conditions on women in her community. However, she believes that most of her service users were initially not speaking out about the impact that poverty, unemployment, financial dependence and poor social housing were having on their lives and their experiences of violence because they were not fully aware of the power relations that perpetuate these social conditions. Instead they were often choosing to criticise and blame BME and immigrant families for their deteriorating living conditions. Stephanie felt frustrated because she believed that many of these women's understandings were being effectively distorted by the dominant racist and xenophobic ideologies sustaining the austerity agenda and by the increasingly influential propaganda of the far Right. Her organisation therefore decided to bring these women together to discuss some of their concerns:

We're always doing stuff about power and control and we help them understand why domestic violence occurs and the structural causes, so patriarchy and what have you but we realised [after this discussion] that there was obviously still gaps [around race and class] and it was around this time that [a feminist academic] got in touch and she was all "I have got this great session plan and it is about the convention on human rights and I'm out to make local people understand it and what the implications are for them and the global..." and she is all like "please test it out with [your service users]" and we realised this was actually a useful framework so we decided to do a session where we look at how to make global issues like capitalism and class

oppression become local so that local people who are working class and in a disadvantaged area understand it because if we don't do shit like that then they will just be horrible to asylum seekers and refugees so we have got to have a practical analysis that helps them see the bigger picture.

Ackerly (2000: 221) argues that if women “are silent because they are unaware of their circumstances and the power inequalities that perpetuate them, then informing them is a form of institutional change”. Stephanie’s organisation recognised that the silencing of this particular group of white, working class women was not so much an issue of voicelessness than of ideological manipulation (Gramsci 1971). This understanding inspired them to develop an educational workshop to help the women better understand the ways in which their interests have been manipulated and repressed and how they might better tackle their oppressions going forward. The use of human rights materials encouraged the women to look outward to the global and national forces that profoundly affect their experiences at the local level, including the recent implementation of austerity measures, helping them to disavow the notion that immigrants are somehow responsible for the issues they face. Stephanie went on to describe some of the longer term outcomes of this project:

I think we have been through a struggle in this organisation about making sure that we work with the *whole* community because this has been a very white area but the Asian community has been getting bigger and bigger ... so we have been through our own struggle with it and we’ve had to challenge outlooks and educate ... but these kinds of things pay off because now we have loads of, especially with the Arabic women, Bengali women, Muslim women and African women who are asylum seekers or refugees, we probably have more BME women now than we have white women and I feel proud to see them all coming together, socialising with each other and learning from each other ... In this community there’s a massive distrust of the state and there’s also a historically hostile relationship with the police so you know a lot of underreporting around stuff like domestic violence and you know, they are picking up on things like this ... [and] becoming politicised together.

This outcome is an excellent example of how power relations can be transformed “even when the location of activist agency is marked by subordination *and* dominance” (Huijg 2012: 13). In raising their critical consciousness, these white working class women have been able to address their oppressions and their prejudices in order to build common ground with BME and immigrant women in their community based on a recognition of their similarities (i.e. lack of power and resources as poor and working class women) and differences (i.e. racial privilege and oppression). This has enabled them to unite over joint issues of concern – in particular, their fear of disclosing their abuse to an inherently classist and racist criminal justice system.

#### *2.4 The Importance of Survivor-Centred Politics*

While the pressures of austerity may create new divisions between activists (see Chapter Four) these two projects show that this context has also opened up the space for new and necessary alliances. Both projects have provided women survivors with the resources to involve themselves in the issues that most immediately impact them. They have helped raise awareness of the socio-cultural and political-economic roots of VAWG in our societies and encouraged women to connect what they have learned to their own experiences of violence. They are the meeting places for debates and activities that address the experiences and needs of women across diverse social backgrounds and they are also educational spaces that bring global issues into focus – something that Featherstone et al. (2012) have referred to as a “progressive localism” that creates “positive affinities between places and social groups negotiating global processes” (2012: 179). Ultimately, while there has been a shift toward institutionalised and professionalised service provision within the sector, these



organisations are still mobilising bases for collective learning and action in our communities.

While there is insufficient space to describe the numerous other projects I encountered that help raise women's critical consciousness, it is important to briefly acknowledge that much of this work goes beyond traditional political educational workshops. Some organisations were using dance contests, sports days, cooking classes, knitting and theatre to help women reach across their differences and make important emotional connections with those living through similar situations. One artist activist, Yolanda, was in the process of raising funds to develop a grassroots project that would help survivors express themselves through short stories and illustrations:

I want to work with survivors in a specific way which is that I have written a graphic novel which depicts my experience of this whole thing and I have found that to be one of the best ways to be dealing with it ... I've written a series of short stories, nasty things about crown prosecutors and nasty things about magistrates and domestic violence workers, really nasty because when you become a domestic violence victim you immediately get relegated to the underclass, whatever class you identify yourself as belonging to, you're still the lowest and I don't want to lose sight of this, this relegation because I want it to be "fuck you, we're survivors!"

The driving force behind this project derives from Yolanda's own experiences as a survivor of physical and psychological violence and her subsequent treatment by criminal justice and state agencies. She acknowledged that women are disproportionately bearing the precarity wrought by austerity – losing their support networks, wages, jobs and freedoms – and does not want the criminal justice system (CJS) to be another arena wherein women are punished and shamed for living the lives they are living. Yolanda hopes her project will provide women with an opportunity to channel their anger and despair into transgressive forms of art that can be at once

deeply personal and profoundly political. The next section focuses in more detail on women's experiences of the CJS and documents anti-VAWG activists' attempts to influence the Police and Crime Commissioners' regional VAWG strategy in the North East.

### **3.0 Influencing the Police and Crime Commissioners**

NEWN and its member organisations have been doing a considerable amount of work at the sub-national level in their attempts to inform how the region's three Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) respond to violence against women and girls. PCCs were elected for the first time in November 2012 with the purpose of setting local policing priorities and distributing funding to support these priorities, including funding for voluntary and community sector services. With regards to VAWG prevention, all the new PCCs were encouraged by the Home Office to explore ways of tackling this violence in their communities via "joined-up working at a local level" (Home Office 2013). According to Gains and Lowndes, the PCC candidates were also "lobbied extensively by the Women's Aid Federation of England on behalf of a national network of domestic and sexual violence services" (2014: 530). However, despite this pressure, very few PCCs ended up prioritising VAWG in their local policing and crime prevention strategies (Gains & Lowndes 2014). This is why the North East situation is so unique. It is the only region in England where all three of its PCCs teamed up to create a regional strategy to prevent violence against women and girls.

### *3.1 The Partnership*

NEWN felt it was important that this new strategy was monitored and examined by VAWG experts from the women's sector. They applied for funding from the Northern Rock Foundation to scrutinise the strengths and weaknesses of the PCCs regional VAWG strategy and to assess its impacts and outcomes – and they were successful. However, on hearing about this project the PCCs contacted NEWN and the Northern Rock Foundation to propose an alternative approach. One of the region's PCCs explained this to me in an interview:

The Northern Rock Foundation funded the North East Women's Network to scrutinise the ways that the North East Police and Crime Commissioners were tackling violence against women and I said to them and to the Northern Rock Foundation you know "what is the point of letting us develop our strategy and then coming back saying we haven't gotten it quite right, why don't you pull your money with ours and help us get the strategy running in the first place?" . . . It's truly good for both of us in the sense that they have a positive informative role rather than a monitoring process and for us, because in order to get the kind of knowledge we needed for the strategy we would have had to reinvent the North East Women's Network to get deep enough into women's organisations ... so we really wouldn't have been able to do that without them.

That the PCCs wanted to work in partnership with women's voluntary organisations to develop their VAWG strategy was a cause of great excitement and surprise for most NEWN members. This type of collaborative process was not taking place anywhere else in the country and the fact that its purpose was to improve responses to VAWG – considered by many activists to be one of the most overlooked aspects of local police work – was momentous. Several of the activists I spoke to described relatively poor relationships between their organisations and the police and many felt undervalued and misunderstood by state agencies. It is for this reason that most activists felt this was a historic moment for the sector – an unprecedented opportunity to improve the sector's relationship with the police and its influence over CJS responses to VAWG:

I could not have imagined thirty years ago when I was trotting around the street on a Reclaim the Night march that [City] would have a feminist Police and Crime Commissioner whose priority was violence against women. I wouldn't have even been able to think that, let alone that [police force] would be the first PCC area not only with a woman PCC but with a woman chief constable as well and a woman chief executive. It was ...it just wasn't even on the horizon back then. (Annette)

It's definitely too great an opportunity to pass up and I think with the PCCs now that they have control over commissioning [our services] it's even more important that we're developing this kind of partnership ... They'll be watching us to get a sense of which services are best placed [to respond to VAWG] and which ones need their funding and support. (Louisa)

Louisa was hopeful this partnership would help positively influence the PCCs commissioning agenda but her remark that the PCCs will be “watching us” also underlines an important new dimension created by this partnership whereby the PCCs were now in a position to monitor and scrutinise the women's sector and its VAWG services. This introduced an element of competition between women's organisations as it became an opportunity for them to demonstrate the importance of their particular VAWG services and to establish themselves as consultation experts in the hope of securing funding.

### *3.2 The Focus Groups*

In order to help identify strategic priorities for the PCCs VAWG strategy, NEWN developed a series of focus groups designed to elicit specialist knowledge around different aspects of VAWG (including domestic violence, sexual violence and exploitation, stalking and harassment, forced marriage, FGM, honour based violence and sex trafficking) and the experiences of different groups of women (including BME women, asylum seeking and refugee women, LGBT women and sex workers) encompassing rural and urban locations. Managers and practitioners specialising in

these areas of VAWG were asked to attend the relevant focus groups throughout April and May of 2013. NEWN informed them that this was an important opportunity to determine the long-term outcomes of the PCC's VAWG strategy and ensure that the women's sector was recognised, valued and regularly involved in the review of progress. However, the focus groups were well underway before NEWN realised that disabled women's voices were missing from the research. An online survey was created to rectify this omission, but that this had to happen speaks to the exclusion of disabled women's voices in the broader anti-VAWG and women's movements (see Nixon 2009). While one NEWN member described this exclusion as "terrible ... regrettable" (Fieldwork Notes, May 2013) it nevertheless raises important questions about why disabled women's experiences of violence are so often overlooked, despite evidence that disabled women experience twice the rate of sexual assault, domestic violence and stalking than non-disabled women (Women's Aid 2007).

A week before the NEWN research commenced I was invited to take notes of the main issues raised during focus groups so that this information could be incorporated into the NEWN report. At the same time I was permitted to conduct my own observations for the purpose of my PhD research. Each focus group began with an open question asking participants to raise key issues regarding police responses to the specific type of VAWG under discussion. Unsurprisingly, this question generated conversation about a vast range of issues and while there were a lot of similar overlapping concerns there were also a lot of conflicting opinions that were difficult to coherently record. As I wrote in my fieldwork diary after the second focus group:

Popular areas of agreement are the need to challenge police attitudes towards victims, strengthen multi-agency partnerships, increase conviction rates and provide regular police and CPS [Crown Prosecution Service] training around legal and policy changes. However, there were also a lot of conflicting opinions. Some participants think the police need to prioritise more funding

for SARCs while others criticised the police for funding SARCs [Sexual Assault Referral Centres] over independent sexual violence organisations. Some believe the police need to invest more in the MARAC [Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference] while others criticised the MARAC for creating a police culture where only high risk cases of VAWG are taken seriously. Some felt the police need to improve responses to male victims and incorporate male victims into their VAWG strategy while others strongly opposed this suggestion and were visibly angry at any attempt to derail the discussion from its focus on women and girls. Obviously these are all interesting and important nuances but given the strategic purpose of this project there was no time to reach a broad consensus (Fieldwork Notes April 2013).

Perhaps reaching consensus is not something I should have anticipated at this early stage in the project, or indeed at any stage. The participants were relaying opinions and arguments based on their own priorities and reflecting their own positionalities and political ideals. They were also clearly anxious to have their voices heard and their organisations represented, especially given the additional incentive that the PCCs might choose to fund their organisations based on the information provided. Annette had taken part in one of the focus groups and explained:

I found those PCC workshops a little bit soul destroying and I worry that that whole process is trying to consult to death and try and be inclusive but we're missing a trick because it has become everyone's individual takes on things and it was a golden opportunity to stand back from the whole thing and really think creatively, really strategically and creatively and come up with something that could be really quite something but everyone has a different take, everyone is fighting their own corner depending on what project they work for and I am guilty of that as well, you sort of feel like you are forced into that position because you have got to justify your work and all the rest of it and it's really divisive so I think it was a bit of a missed opportunity.

This competition for epistemic authority was interesting to observe. Some participants (usually those in managerial or strategic roles) were better than others at articulating their arguments in clear and rational terms and those lacking in epistemological authority (usually younger women whose opinions contradicted dominant feminist perceptions) were often quickly shut down. This was especially evident during focus

groups about LBT women's experiences of violence. Concerns about transgender women accessing women-only VAWG services and disagreements about the incorporation of gay men into the VAWG strategy often divided the group across generational lines. Divisions also emerged while discussing violence against sex workers. All participants agreed that sex workers should not be criminalised but some participants wanted to see the CJS prioritise exiting strategies while others pointed out that sex work is often survival behaviour with numerous structural driving forces that cannot be adequately alleviated by the CJS. These conversations were fascinating but for the purposes of the focus groups there was no time to address these concerns, resolve disagreements or surmount conflicts in any meaningful way. This inevitably raised concerns about how conflicting information would be translated by the PCCs for the purposes of their VAWG strategy.

The second question asked participants to imagine what a successful VAWG strategy might have achieved in 2-3 years' time with regards to: (1) tackling the culture of VAWG; (2) developing and maintaining specialist VAWG services; (3) delivering specialist training to police officers and those involved in the commissioning of VAWG services; and (4) piloting a preventative policing project to promote the active monitoring and management of serial perpetrators. It was at this point that the focus groups tended to become a bit more focused as participants concentrated on ideas relating to the four main themes. The most effective responses to this question occurred in focus groups where participants kept in mind the strengths and limitations of the CJS in preventing VAWG so as not to digress into unrealistic or tokenistic wish-list-style answers (which did occasionally happen). Participants that remained focused were much more likely to identify specific areas of weakness in CJS responses to VAWG, unpack the reasons why and highlight how the women's sector might help

them strengthen responses in these areas. This approach was clearly strategic and based on helping the PCCs recognise the strengths of the women's sector in comparison to generic services that are frequently unable to tackle the diverse needs of women.

Some of the best examples of this approach emerged from focus groups discussing BME women's experiences of domestic and sexual violence. During one of these focus groups participants agreed that in order to tackle the culture of VAWG in BME communities the police would first have to stop contacting community and religious leaders for help and advice about VAWG and instead seek this information from women's specialist VAWG organisations. They explained that this was important because the struggle to prevent violence against BME women takes place at the intersection of gender, race, religion and nationality, especially in a context where religious fundamentalism is seeking to limit the freedom of women from minority communities. Participants wanted the police to help protect secular spaces and resources for women escaping violent situations rather than collude with conservative and patriarchal religious leaders and undermine these efforts. They then linked this argument to the question about monitoring and managing serial perpetrators. They argued that in order to achieve this the police need to better understand the networks that perpetrators, their families and communities (including community and religious leaders) build to both abuse BME women and conceal this abuse. They highlighted that women's organisations have important intelligence about these networks and that the police need to start drawing on and taking this intelligence seriously, especially since BME women rarely report their abuse to the police (Anitha 2008). As I recorded in my fieldwork diary:



[One participant] mentioned that the police were disinterested when her organisation tried to provide them with third party info about the involvement of taxi firms in the trafficking of BME women to other cities to be raped before bringing them back home. She believes this is because the police are prioritising cases that will lead to easy convictions in order to boost their outputs. She highlighted that this tactic disproportionately disadvantages BME women who due to multiple intersecting oppressions are unlikely to directly report their abuse to the police or provide evidence in court. Another participant added that it was likely because the police think that Muslim men only groom non-Muslim white women. (Fieldwork Notes, May 2013).

All participants agreed that sexual violence, domestic sex trafficking and forced prostitution of BME women is poorly understood by the police – especially in cases where BME men are perpetrators – and that convictions will never arise without close partnership work with specialist BME organisations that support the victims of these crimes. A similarly effective argument was made during a forced marriage focus group. The criminalisation of forced marriage was going through its parliamentary stages at the time of this focus group but most participants questioned the need for criminalisation given that women facing or enduring a forced marriage are significantly more likely to approach specialist BME women's organisations rather than the police (see Wilson 2014). They also expressed concern that criminalisation would further silence women who do not wish to prosecute their parents and bring dishonour on their family. One participant highlighted that this policy was being introduced at a time of austerity when the specialist BME organisations most capable of responding to forced marriage were also suffering the worst of the cuts to women's services. Her main suggestion for the PCCs was thus to financially invest in specialist BME services that are best placed to prevent forced marriage from occurring. Significantly, it appears that these kinds of arguments were picked up by the PCCs because one of the most striking features of their VAWG strategy (see PCC 2013) is

its recognition of the importance of sustaining specialist women-only and BME-led VAWG services in order to reduce levels of VAWG across the region.

### *3.3 The VAWG Strategy*

There are three key elements of the PCCs VAWG strategy that are important to reflect on. The first is that some of the main findings that emerged from the NEWN focus groups are directly referenced and built upon in the strategy. For instance, the report acknowledges that “a NEWN consultation focus group expressed concern about the lack of knowledge about domestic trafficking policies” and goes on to outline the PCCs subsequent commitment to building closer links with women’s services and the UK Human Trafficking Centre in order to determine whether individuals may be trafficking victims (PCC 2013: 34). The report also outlines strategies that respond to some of the conflicting demands that participants made during focus groups. For example, contradictory positions held about the MARAC (see above) are addressed through the proposed Domestic and Sexual Violence Champions Network “which will aim to improve community and organisational responses and provide training and assistance to enable front line staff to support the standard and medium risk cases not picked up by MARACs or specialist IDVA services” (PCC 2013: 21). This means that investment in the MARAC can coincide with a community-based approach to supporting lower risk victims of VAWG, satisfying the concerns of those who believe the MARAC replicates the power and control dynamics that survivors are seeking to escape. Concerns outlined about CJS involvement in developing exiting strategies for sex workers are addressed in the strategy’s statement about the importance of developing and sustaining holistic support (i.e. around housing and education and mental health) to help women exit sex work. While this does not address push factors

it does demonstrate a commitment to fund support services that transcend the justice system's historically limited preoccupation with drug treatment (PCC 2013: 35).

Secondly, the strategy directly acknowledges the importance of sustaining specialist women's VAWG services. The PCCs pledge to "maintain networks of independent advisors and advocates to women survivors of violence" (PCC 2013: 55) and promise that the police will always offer to connect victims with a local VAWG organisation because "many women want help and support from an independent women's group rather than formal police action and we want to pass them on to the experts so they can be empowered to deal with their situation" (PCC 2013: 38). The strategy also demonstrates the PCCs seeming willingness to instigate direct partnership work between the police and women's organisations. For instance, it outlines a pilot scheme enabling experienced workers from a women's organisation in Northumbria to accompany police officers on calls about domestic and sexual violence in order to provide advice and support to victims and advice police on safe action plans (PCC 2013: 24). It also outlines its commitment to "work with the women's sector to design and deliver training to front line officers and staff" (PCC 2013: 28). These strategic actions send an important message to other local commissioners and funders about the social importance of investing in specialist women-only VAWG services. In the context of austerity – with diminished public funding for an increasingly diverse range of social problems that are often cheaper to tackle via private sector resources – this commitment to investing in the women's sector and its slightly more costly but highly specialised VAWG services was viewed by some participants as a significant display of solidarity. However, the sector would have to wait to see whether this panned out in practice.

Finally, the strategy responds to the general recognition among most focus group participants of the need for tougher sentencing and higher conviction rates of serial perpetrators as well as community-based interventions that focus on challenging and changing the attitudes and behaviours of perpetrators. Participants wanted to see “more powers for the police to act when women feel powerless to do so” (PCC 2013: 51) and so the strategy outlines plans to secure victimless prosecutions by collecting evidence at the scene via photographs and body-worn camcorders. It also outlines new plans for scrutinising cases which fail to reach the required evidential levels for prosecution. However, the notion of increasing police powers of arrest did not sit well with three of the activists I interviewed. They were displeased to hear that focus group participants were keen to establish more formal intelligence sharing processes with the police and that they were offering to assist in the delivery of police training to help improve reporting and conviction rates. Their reasons for this are discussed below.

### *3.4. The Problem with Criminalisation*

Many of the problems associated with police and CJS responses to VAWG are well documented in Chapter Two. Criminalisation has not led to a decrease in VAWG because it does not tackle the root causes of VAWG (Smith 2012) and some believe that the CJS has actually increased the level of VAWG in society due to heightened levels of police and state brutality (INCITE! 2007). The austerity context undoubtedly presents new and complex challenges. During her interview Elizabeth questioned the potential implications of demanding higher conviction rates for perpetrators of VAWG at a time when austerity politics seek to disinvest from poor communities and strip back the social safety net while increasing the state’s policing and punishment powers:

Oh there's something sinister afoot alright! And they're all in on it! Let's lay it out ... We've got a government that doesn't care about community services, welfare, about investing in housing and jobs as we've already established yeah? But it *does* want to invest money in prisons and punishment ... build those big super prisons ... [where they'll] put all the poor buggers that are struggling to get by ... Blacks and immigrants mostly ... Do we really want to be part of that? Like of asking for the police to get stricter just so [the poor] end up suffering more ... [and] then the government can profit from it? Nah I'm not sure (shaking head).

Here Elizabeth is describing what is now often referred to as the “prison industrial complex” – a multi-billion pound industry that creates massive wealth for states and corporations while incarcerating marginalised and socially excluded people in prisons and immigration removal centres (Davis 1998; Sudbury 2014). Rather than address the deep rooted social and economic problems that lead to increased levels of violence and anti-social behaviour, politicians promote criminalisation and imprisonment as a catch-all solution in order to profit from their financial links with the corporations contracted to run the prisons (Smith 2012). Elizabeth believes the government is using the austerity context as an opportunity to further criminalise, police and imprison poor and racialised men and women for the purpose of capital accumulation. As Sudbury likewise observes: “prison is one of the few industries that sees business go up when the economy goes down” (2008: no pagination). April raised similar concerns during her interview, questioning whether the focus group participants’ demands for increased police responsiveness to VAWG would protect all victims:

I think ... women are often forgotten in all this and maybe not so much by [BME activists] but definitely in terms of like the violence of the police and with [threats of] deportations and stuff and like why isn't that mentioned [in the PCC strategy]? I don't think it was? ... Women are ending up in prison more and more these days for the simplest of things that are usually always about something oppressive ... like even when they call [the police] about domestic violence some of them end up in jail as you know from what we were just saying [about the majority of women in prison having experienced

domestic violence at some point] ... [So] I'm a massive advocate of alternative solutions [to the criminal justice system].

That criminalisation and incarceration often place poor and marginalised women at heightened risk of both interpersonal and state violence (see INCITE! 2007) was not addressed by the majority of the women who participated in the NEWN focus groups, despite having been raised by some of these same women during interviews for my research (see Chapter Five). The resultant PCC VAWG strategy reflects this omission and so women victims of state violence and police brutality are rendered largely invisible, as is the continuum of domestic and sexual violence that moves from women's homes onto the streets and into the prison (Davis 1998). Olivia found this omission problematic. She spoke about a group of women she had recently met from Women Asylum Seekers Together (WAST) – an asylum seeker led project based in Manchester – whose membership includes several women who have been detained at Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre. Yarl's Wood is run by Serco – a for-profit social service corporation – and their contract is to detain women asylum seekers for indefinite periods of time until their citizenship applications are resolved. Olivia asked:

Have you heard about any of the stuff? About the rapes and violence and that? It's fucking horrific. They're asylum seekers for fucks sake! Most of them are fleeing violence ... I don't get why we aren't asking [the PCCs] about this kind of stuff. Like I know it's a different city but it's the same criminal justice system that puts them there. I've heard there's plans for a protest outside [Yarl's Wood] which I'm going to go to.

I caught up with Olivia following the protest. A sexual violence organisation in the North East hired a bus to take activists and survivors to the demonstration – an important display of solidarity and an opportunity to build new alliances with women anti-prison and anti-police brutality activists. She described how the women inside

Yarl's Wood gave their testimonies over mobile phone which were broadcast to the crowd via a PA system. The women provided descriptions of sexual violence and intimidation, the neglect of disabled and elderly women, a lack of medical treatment and their inability to access legal representation. It did not surprise Olivia that a few months prior to the protest the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women was denied entry to Yarl's Wood. She simply remarked: "Of course she was" (Fieldwork Notes, June 2014).

Janet Newman (2012) has recently described feminism's collusion with the prison industrial complex as one of several "perverse alignments" that appear to be forming among feminist and neoliberal projects. Uncertainty about how to respond to this tension within the movement was palatable among these three activists in particular. They each recognise that survivors of VAWG are entitled to and deserve police protection and justice when requested but they also recognise the need to challenge and transform the institutions that enable this violence to continue – the criminal justice system included. At the time of fieldwork these participants were only in the initial stages of exploring potential avenues of resistance to the criminal justice system and to the prison industrial complex more broadly. The next section explores activists' attempts to utilise the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) to hold the Coalition government to account for violations of women's human rights.

#### **4.0 Using CEDAW to Challenge State Violence Against Women**

Following the closure of the Women's National Commission in 2010, many of the local activists I spoke to felt that their access to national representation had been shut

down – limiting the potential for seeking domestic legal solutions to issues of gender injustice. Therefore, when NEWN heard that the Women’s Resource Centre (WRC) had formed a CEDAW Working Group and were planning to submit a Shadow Report at the next UK Examination, they decided it was time to join together with women’s organisations from across the country to challenge the government’s austerity policies at the international level. The CEDAW Working Group for the North East was established in 2011 with the aim of educating women’s organisations across the region about CEDAW and gathering knowledge and information to incorporate in the UK Shadow Report. By early 2012 the network had successfully applied for funding to develop a case study about the disproportionate impact of austerity measures on women in the North East – discussed briefly in the first part of this chapter – with the intention of submitting it as evidence to the CEDAW Committee (NEWN 2013). The WRC supported this endeavour while simultaneously collaborating with women from another 42 UK NGOs to gather as much information with which to critique the government’s compliance with their CEDAW obligations since the 2008 examination. The production of the Shadow Report brought women’s organisations together as part of a national movement to hold the Coalition government to account for the human rights violations engendered by its austerity programme. The final Shadow Report submitted to the CEDAW Committee – titled *Women’s Equality in the UK – A Health Check* (WRC 2013) – reflects the broad range of issues raised by women across the UK and corrects several omissions and falsehoods in the UK government’s official report.



#### *4.1 The CEDAW Working Group for the North East*

While this section focuses on issues relating to VAWG it is important to highlight that both the NEWN case study and UK Shadow Report explore a broader range of issues based on the various CEDAW Articles, including women's experiences of discrimination in employment, education, religion, health, family and politics. VAWG does not have its own dedicated Article but was introduced in 1992 under General Recommendation 19 which defines VAWG as a form of "extensive discrimination against women [that creates] an obstacle to the participation of women, on equal terms with men, in the political, social, economic and cultural life of their countries" (CEDAW Article 1). It clarifies that governments are "responsible for private acts [of VAWG] if they fail to act with due diligence to prevent violations of rights or to investigate and punish acts of violence" (CEDAW Article 1) and it is this declaration of state responsibility for preventing private acts of VAWG that has provided activists with the political power to challenge government (in)action around this violence. That said, Dionne believes that the broader remit of CEDAW is very useful for activists attempting to prevent VAWG:

I like it because it broadens the scale ... When you're working around violence against women, sometimes things get a bit narrow and obviously CEDAW has all of its individual components which all have some kind of impact on gender-based violence because they are dealing with different aspects of gender inequality including the economic so I've ... I was looking at the [NEWN case study] summary earlier this week and I think it's important it's being framed around austerity and the economy because it's definitely having an impact [on VAWG] and I think that's a good way to approach it at the CEDAW thing because it focuses on loads of different forms of discrimination that feed into violence against women.

In the build up to the UK Examination, NEWN recognised that many local activists were expressing an interest in CEDAW but were unsure of its relevance at the local

level. The Network therefore decided to organise workshops to help women realise CEDAW's full potential. At the time of her interview, Nicole had recently attended one of these workshops where she was introduced to the concept of *substantive equality*, one of CEDAW's three protocols:

From what I gather, from what [the workshop coordinator] was saying it's about equality of results ... Some women might need more support than other groups to reach the same outcomes because of the discrimination they face so say like they might face more obstacles for escaping violence and they'll need policies or certain frameworks in place to remove the obstacles ... That's where the Equalities Act is being misinterpreted because I'm sure it's supposed to be about substantive equality but what happens is it just becomes about not acknowledging the power imbalances so everyone is just treated the same, gender-neutral ... I think that's where CEDAW will come in most helpful for us.

Nicole was hopeful that CEDAW might help her organisation challenge misinterpretations of equalities legislation whereby "equal treatment" is often conflated with "same treatment" because resource and power imbalances are not taken into consideration (Razack 2002). I later learned that her organisation had incorporated information about substantive equality into a funding bid to outline the funder's obligations under CEDAW to support specialist women-only VAWG services. Gabrielle similarly explained that her organisation now draws on the CEDAW protocols of *substantive equality* and *anti-discrimination* in its mission statement and official documents:

I know we have used a lot of the wording about eliminating discrimination and substantive equality and stuff in our documents for [sexual violence organisation] because it comes from the same place we do really ideologically and we use that to kind of challenge gender neutral and anti-discrimination so it is quite useful and I'm pleased we're signed up [to CEDAW] but I do sort of wonder, is there going to be any retribution if the government don't do what they're supposed to or are they just going to ignore it?

Gabrielle was not the only activist to express doubts about the government's dedication to fulfilling its commitments under CEDAW, especially since signatories are only *morally* rather than legally obliged to so do. She also noted that the Coalition government had implemented austerity policies that "surely go against everything CEDAW stands for in terms of violating women's human rights" and that they did this "only two years after the last examination" in 2008. I return to this issue at the end of this section in order to raise questions about CEDAW's (in)compatibility with the neoliberal project. For now it is important to highlight that at this point during fieldwork there appeared to be a general consensus among participants that "CEDAW is worth checking out" (April) and some activists were even keen to see the NEWN coordinator attend the UK examination in Geneva to ensure that the NEWN regional case study was effectively represented to the CEDAW committee. This idea ultimately led to the highly successful CEDAW fundraising event that is discussed in detail at the end of Chapter Four. This event raised enough money for six NEWN members to attend the UK CEDAW Examination in July 2013.

#### *4.2 Lobbying the CEDAW Committee*

The North East CEDAW delegation consisted of the NEWN coordinator, four BME anti-VAWG activists and one Family Law solicitor. I was the seventh member of the delegation and funded by Northumbria University. We arrived in Geneva in the afternoon of Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> July in time to meet six other members of the UK delegation for dinner. Some of them had arrived in Geneva a week earlier to receive the UN's specialist lobbying training and they told us about some of the most useful things they had learned – including the importance of using "short and to the point lobbying materials" and "making the most of breaks and lunches to lobby committee members"

(Fieldwork Notes, July 2013). All women appeared positive, excited and eager to attend the NGO Oral Presentations the following morning.

On arrival in the UN building we were greeted by a range of colourful flags designed for the CEDAW Committee by young women from Big Voice London. Each flag depicted what the artist believed to be the most important issue facing young women in the UK. The issues covered employment, gender stereotypes, discrimination against Muslim women, victim-blaming, domestic violence, FGM and forced marriage. I wrote down one of the flags' descriptions in my fieldwork diary:

A woman's wedding day should be one where the bride sheds tears of joy; instead these young brides shed tears of hurt and fear. My flag represents freedom from the shackles of forced marriage with hands in green and purple, colours taken from the suffragette movement, symbolising dignity and hope for change. (Fieldwork Notes, July 2013).

This powerful introduction to the UN sits in sharp contrast with the formal lobbying procedures that were to follow. Charlotte Gage of the WRC was given three minutes to present her speech to the CEDAW Committee on behalf of the UK CEDAW Working Group. She focused on three broad issues: (1) the impact of the government's austerity measures on women, including welfare and benefit reforms, cuts to the public sector, unemployment and changes to Legal Aid; (2) the localisation of social welfare and healthcare, with specific reference to cuts to specialist VAWG services; and (3) the lack of implementation of a gender-sensitive framework of equality in the UK, which she linked to the dismantling of the Women's National Commission and the reinforcement of damaging gender-based stereotypes. Other UK representatives, including those from Scotland and Northern Ireland, were similarly rushed to present their statements. A few members of the UK delegation began whispering concerns about the effectiveness of this task since the speakers were unable to convey in any

detail the severity of the issues raised. However, the questions asked by the CEDAW Committee in response to the presentations opened up space for elaboration. In particular, the Committee were interested in learning more about changes to Legal Aid, with one Committee member asking: “Can we really say that all women are cut off from access to Legal Aid?” (Fieldwork Notes, July 2013). Family Law solicitor and member of the North East delegation, Cris McCurley, answered this question, outlining the various barriers which prevent victims of domestic violence from proving their abuse in order to access Legal Aid. She then explained that providing objective proof of domestic violence is not even an option for asylum seekers and refugees whose insecure and sometimes ‘illegal’ citizenship status prevents them from accessing public funds. At the end of her explanation she requested that the CEDAW Committee pressure the UK government to grant all asylum seekers and refugees access to public funds while they reside in the UK otherwise there is little prospect of challenging injustices visited upon them. Several members of the UK delegation later thanked her for speaking out about an issue that many other legal experts continue to overlook or remain silent on.

That evening the North East delegation returned to their hotel to create handouts in preparation for the Lunchtime Briefing for CEDAW Committee members the following day. One of the handouts focused on the impact of austerity measures on women in North East England. It provided statistical evidence to show that women are much more reliant on public sector employment than men; that women are thus disproportionately affected by redundancies in the public sector; and that women’s economic dependence on men is increasing. A statistic in large print highlighted that unemployment among North East women was the highest since records began and nearly twice the national average. Another handout was titled *The Looming Crisis in*

*Gender Inequality in the UK* and charted the impact of government policies and economic decision making on women's lives. It placed emphasis on how welfare reforms are undermining the independence and advocacy roles of NGOs; reducing their resources in the face of increasing demand; forcing staff and volunteers to do much more with less; compromising the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of their work; and disproportionately impacting on specialist NGOs for BME, LGBT and disabled women. The following morning these handouts were placed on chairs and tables around the conference venue along with postcards that had images and statistics about the government's cuts to Legal Aid. One postcard depicted a cheque with a monetary value of "more than I can afford to pay for evidence of domestic violence" and a large red rejection stamp over the top stating "NO LEGAL AID". The effort made by activists to disseminate this information in creative and impactful ways was commended by a few of the CEDAW committee members at the Lunchtime Briefing. However, the Briefing itself was described by one delegate as "rather a stressful affair" (Fieldwork Notes, July 2013). This description resonates with an extract from my fieldwork diary:

We were all crammed into a tiny room with a huge table that the Committee members sat around. Delegates were pushed up against the walls and sprawled across the floor. There was no air conditioning and it was a very hot day. There had been very little communication between the various UK NGOs about how to approach the briefing giving that there was only a one hour timeslot to be shared by all groups from the UK. Delegates began by introducing themselves to the Committee members and outlining their particular area of expertise. However, after a few minutes it became apparent that this would take up the entire briefing so in the absence of a clear plan it was decided that Committee members could begin asking questions about issues that most concern them. This was not ideal as it was clear that some delegates had specific topics they had hoped to raise. I sensed that delegates from Scotland and Northern Ireland were frustrated that English NGOs were dominating the discussions. There were definitely more questions directed at English and especially London-based NGOs than any others. (Fieldwork Notes, July 2013).

On further reflection, the dominance of the London-based NGOs during these discussions was likely a result of the questions asked by Committee members rather than a deliberate attempt on the part of London-based delegates to exclude or silence the other NGOs. While this did not help alleviate the tension, it was clear that the Committee members were interested in gaining more information about religious tribunals and the implications of Sharia Law for women in the UK, and the delegates from London-based organisations were best placed to answer. A Committee member explained that traditionalist religious beliefs and practices that rationalise violence and discrimination against women are at direct odds with the principles of CEDAW and its requirement “that equality for women take primacy over cultural and religious discriminatory norms” (CEDAW Article 5a). However, where these discriminatory beliefs and practices are embedded in religious *law*, the CEDAW Committee is restricted in its ability to intervene regardless if there is a breach of human rights taking place. One delegate explained that this is an issue her secular BME-led organisation struggles against on a daily basis and even more so now that cuts to Legal Aid are pushing Muslim women into Sharia courts. Both delegate and Committee members agreed that this is something that “needs to be worked on together” in order to ensure that religious discrimination against women has no defence in the field of human rights (Fieldwork Notes, July 2013). The opportunity for continuing interaction between Committee members and UK based women’s organisations beyond the formal examination was an exciting proposition and delegates later remarked on the potential this might hold for influencing the policies, practices and priorities of CEDAW beyond their time at the UN.

### *4.3 The UK Examination and Concluding Observations*

I hope that the CEDAW panel, when they make the recommendations, that they are such that we can actually then use them and I really hope we can, otherwise all of our efforts, our incredible efforts, it will be difficult to keep the momentum going. (Dorothy)

The UK Government was examined by the CEDAW Committee on 17 July 2013. The Committee welcomed the UK government delegation, headed by Helene Reardon-Bond, Director of Policy at the Government Equalities Office, and formally acknowledged the presence of NGO delegates in the examination room, remarking on the “record number” in attendance. Committee members then proceeded to ask the government questions on how it was tackling a range of issues affecting women in the UK. Many of these questions covered issues relating to VAWG including: the potential exploitation of Universal Credit by abusive male partners; the impact of reforms to Legal Aid for survivors of domestic violence; the no recourse to public funds stipulation and its implications for women with insecure immigration status; the role of religious tribunals in legitimising discrimination against women; the lack of national infrastructure for combatting the trafficking of women and girls; the criminalisation of abortion in Northern Ireland; institutionalised prejudices surrounding the credibility of sexual violence survivors; the sexualisation and objectification of women in media and advertising; and the devaluation of women’s reproductive labour and its implications for women’s position in society.

During the Examination the CEDAW Committee did not make direct reference to the situation in North East England or to the NEWN case study but many of the areas of concern highlighted in the case study were raised by the CEDAW Committee. While there is insufficient space to unpack the various responses provided by the UK



government during their five hours of questioning by the Committee, there was a general sense of anger and frustration among the NGO delegation that the government were using the examination as an opportunity to reinforce the image of a strong and responsible government making tough but just decisions under difficult (austere) circumstances. A quiet mocking laughter broke out among the NGO delegation when a government representative claimed to be unaware of any evidence that women's services were being adversely affected by the government's spending cuts. However, this laughter soon turned to anger as the government answered question after question in the same disingenuous way. This anger manifested most intensely during discussions about Legal Aid and especially when a Ministry of Justice representative claimed there was "no evidence" that victims of domestic violence were struggling to access the Destitute Domestic Violence Concession (DDVC). As NGO delegates were not allowed to speak during the Examination, family solicitor Cris McCurley (2013: no pagination) responded to this remark in an article for the Feminist Times a few months later:

When protesters from all stakeholder groups asked what women were supposed to do if they could not afford to pay, Andrew Tucker of the MOJ replied that this was a done deal: "A Ministerial decision has been taken that everyone can afford at least £50-60." What is not in doubt is that the ministers can afford it, but tell that to the woman who has fled her home with her children, whose benefits have been scuppered as a result, and who needs legal help to sort out her family issues against her husband's barrister, who is applying on his behalf to take the children away from her. If you happen to meet any Government ministers, do ask them what they mean when they say, "we're all in it together."

This outlook was evidently shared by the CEDAW Committee who were so concerned about changes to Legal Aid that in their Concluding Observations – published slightly over a month later on 30 August 2013 – they requested that the UK government report back on the Legal Aid situation within two years rather than the usual four years. The

Committee asked that the government consider extending the DDVC to all women who experience gender violence including “all women with insecure immigration status ... until their return to their countries of origin” (CEDAW Concluding Observations 2013 para. 57). They also requested that the government provide information about whether changes to Legal Aid are pushing minority women “into informal community arbitration systems, including faith-based tribunals, which are often not in conformity with the Convention” (CEDAW Concluding Observations 2013 para. 22). In line with the discussions that had taken place during the Lunchtime Briefing regarding CEDAWs limited ability to challenge religious law where it breaches women’s human rights, the Committee reminded the UK government that states can still be held to account for breaches of women’s human rights that are arbitrated through community or religious forums.

The CEDAW Working Group for the North East met after the Concluding Observations had been published and the activists started to outline potential ways of using the Committee’s recommendations to support local feminist mobilisations, strengthen local alliances and influence local policy makers. Their experiences of gathering evidence, submitting a case study, lobbying the CEDAW committee and giving extensive attention to the legal status and bargaining power of international human rights norms was only one part of the process. The next step was to bring this back down to the local level, sharing the political and material resources made available by CEDAW and giving them to grassroots women’s organisations. To achieve this, NEWN organised training workshops, consciousness raising events, published information via newsletters and took steps toward integrating CEDAW principles within its organisational framework. Gradually, in the months that followed, NEWN opened up new spaces within the sector for feminists to come together to

discuss and debate the relevance of international law and human right's principles for their activism. While the long term practical outcomes of these discussions are yet to be fully realised, several scholars have found that grassroots activism that continues outside of the UN has been essential for countering some of the effects of co-option and institutionalisation that occur when movements become fully 'harnessed' by the UN institution (Otto 2009; Brooks 2002). This is an important because, as briefly discussed below, feminist goals are not always well served by this institution.

#### *4.4 The Limitations of CEDAW*

Raday (2012) explains that CEDAWs anti-discrimination framework is based on the notion that gender violence and inequality "springs from the fundamentally unequal status of women in our society, hence its demands are aimed at increasing the physical, social and economic autonomy of women" (2012: 516). In theory this opens up a whole range of possibilities for tackling gender inequality, and the UK delegation undoubtedly made the most of this opportunity, demanding fully funded childcare, access to higher paid jobs and a range of welfare provisions to help women escape violent relationships and rebuild their lives. However, for many feminist scholars the problem with this framework is that the goal is to gain access to economic and political power on the *same* basis as men. As Rosa Brooks remarks: "CEDAW suggests that nothing need be changed except stereotypes and formal barriers to access: just let the women in, and that's that" (2002: 351). Brooks suggests that CEDAW does not offer a framework for questioning or critiquing the structures around which social and political relations are currently organised, namely because its reformist approach to gender equality is based on the assumption that "maleness" is the norm. This flawed

assumption is even more problematic when we consider that inequality of resources and political rights between men and women is not an unfortunate by-product of capitalism but is rather one of its strongest forces for progress (Harvey 2005). The neoliberal project actively pursues policies and promotes ideologies that suppress women's rights and freedoms across race and class divides because this is what helps fuel capital accumulation – especially in the aftermath of economic crises (see Chapter One). Once home from Geneva I made the following observation in my fieldwork diary:

There was very little criticism of international issues related to global capitalism and no questioning of the role governments and corporations played in the financial crisis or in the rising levels of poverty and violence characterising most countries around the world. It was mostly all about “quality of life” issues and making sure that the government conducts gender impact assessments of its austerity policies to ensure that they impact everyone equally rather than women disproportionately. The actual political legitimacy of austerity was not brought into question. It was still treated as a necessity rather than a political choice. That's why the focus was on things like helping BME women and disabled women access the labour market to alleviate their poverty and vulnerability to violence. While these things might improve women's capacity to participate in the public sphere, they do not address the fact that women are being incorporated within a labour market that traps them in low paid, unregulated work because of the capitalist system's refusal to integrate childcare and reproductive work into its economic model. The exploitation of women's cheap and unpaid labour is what makes them more vulnerable to poverty and violence in the first place! (Fieldwork Notes, July 2013)

This fieldwork observation reflects frustrations embedded in much that has been written about liberal views of social justice, which seek merely to improve the situation of the oppressed so they can enjoy a higher standard of living (Brooks 2002; Munro 2007). While there might be “no direct denial of women's rights to equality” within neoliberal philosophy there is nevertheless a strategic “refusal to acknowledge differences resulting from gender stereotyping or to accommodate special needs arising from biological aspects of women's reproductive role” (Raday 2012: 516).

That CEDAW promotes a legal framework which requires women to claim equality with men is thus not only flawed but also “precludes the kind of transformative change which would allow women to participate in social and political institutions on their own terms and in accordance with their own realities” (Raday 2012: 513). This is the type of transformative change that some participants recognised as essential during their interviews (see Chapter Five) but have so far been unable to translate into practice. This is not a criticism. The global imperialist project of capital accumulation is built on and sustained by a range of powerful non-state transnational institutions and global market regimes, and so transforming this structure is not a straightforward task. Indeed, despite its impressive resources and position of international authority, the UN itself is deeply limited in its ability to challenge human rights violations committed by global corporations or that are functions of the international movement of capital and labour (Ackerly 2000). The challenge for feminist activists drawing on international law and the human rights principles of CEDAW is thus to find a way of using this framework to challenge domestic injustices and increase women’s access to social and economic power while continuing to think in more long term and transformative ways about the national and transnational structures upholding and reinforcing women’s oppression (Otto 2009).

## **5.0 Conclusion**

Anti-VAWG activists who participated in this research used a range of strategies and tactics to produce alternative knowledge about VAWG, raise understandings of it and hold the government to account. The first section of this chapter documents how activists have worked with grassroots women to raise their consciousness and

understandings of VAWG and to generate knowledge to inform strategies, services and campaigns. This work is particularly valuable when it examines the intersections of class, gender, ethnicity and geographical location. Activists have also worked with formal, state organisations at regional (PCCs) and international (CEDAW) levels. Their experiences of regional collaboration with PCCs reveal tensions and dilemmas: while the opportunity for close collaboration was seen as unique and potentially impactful, it also led to reliance on a criminal justice approach to preventing VAWG which supports the growing prison industrial complex which criminalises, amongst others, immigrant women who have experienced VAWG. Similarly, activists' efforts to use international frameworks – CEDAW – to hold the government to account demonstrate the tensions of such work. Activists' experiences reveal the intricacies and pressures of lobbying work, the scope for such work to be used to raise understanding and awareness at local and international levels, as well as the limitations of international frameworks.

# 7

## **Conclusion: Resilience, Resistance and Reincorporation**

### **1.0 Introduction**

This thesis has explored anti-VAWG activism in a context of neoliberal austerity. Using empirical data from a study of anti-VAWG activists working in women's organisations across North East of England, it has explored the challenges they face in a context of rising levels of violence against women, diminishing funding for VAWG prevention efforts, and complex organisational restructuring. In particular, it has examined how anti-VAWG activists are conceptualising and make sense of the rising levels of VAWG in Britain and how this is informing their strategies to tackle VAWG in their local communities. It has also asked where activists are aiming their demands for social justice (i.e. central government, local government, criminal justice systems) and in what ways these demands target the underlying structures, norms and ideologies perpetuating VAWG today. This final chapter draws together the main

findings outlined in the empirical data chapters in order to reflect on the strengths, possibilities and limitations of anti-VAWG activism in North East England in the current historical moment. The chapter is split into three sections – resilience, resistance, reincorporation – and each section demonstrates the various ways in which anti-VAWG activists are adapting and flexing to their surroundings; at times deploying creative and innovative tactics to by-pass and undermine oppressive policies and forms of governance, whilst simultaneously engaging in practices or upholding discourses that appear highly compliant with the neoliberal rationalities undermining their anti-VAWG efforts.

## **2.0 Resilience**

Over the course of my fieldwork I spoke to activists about their encounters with a variety of neoliberalism's rationalising schemes – including professionalism, self-responsibility, resourcefulness, entrepreneurialism, flexibility and competitiveness – in order to learn more about how these forms of governance shape their ways of understanding and enacting their politics. The data analysis chapters demonstrate that anti-VAWG activists' encounters with neoliberal forms of governmentality are rarely straight forward and that this governance is often simultaneously embraced, negotiated, contested and reproduced by the activists. As documented in Chapter Four, several interviewees stated that they were proud of their resilience and resourcefulness in the face of austerity measures and public spending cuts. At first this determination to survive the cuts appeared to be a demonstration of their willingness to adjust to the “triple” burden of productive, reproductive and community work under neoliberal austerity measures (Griffin 2015). To be sure, a number of activists spoke about their



decision to take salary cuts and increase their working hours to ensure that their organisations survived. However, it soon became apparent that the activists in question were not unwittingly embracing the logic of neoliberal austerity. Most of them were in fact very aware that – in helping alleviate the impact of public spending cuts by filling gaps in state service provision – they were in many ways validating the work of austerity and its retrenchment of the welfare state. Yet in this particular context the need to delegitimise and dismantle the ideological mechanisms informing austerity and state retrenchment had to take a back seat whilst activists focused on responding to the immediate and often life threatening consequences of the cuts for women survivors of domestic and sexual violence.

This is not to say that the activists were not committed to resisting austerity politics. That they were beginning to question how their activism might reproduce the oppressive structures that the anti-VAWG movement seeks to eradicate is in fact a prime example of the new spaces of power and radical critique that were emerging and evolving during my time in the field. As discussed later in this chapter, the work of North East Women's Network (NEWN) in bringing activists together to question some of these underlying tensions within the movement was profoundly beneficial for those working in the VAWG sector, enabling them to critically examine and document the implications of austerity for women's experiences of violence and inequality. However, as this section shows, the impacts of austerity localism are not only felt by women experiencing domestic and sexual violence but also by the organisations designed to support them. In North East England, anti-VAWG activists' determination to respond to the increase in demand for their services – and often with significantly less funding and resources than in previous decades – has demanded considerable levels of resilience, solidarity and self-sacrifice.

## *2.1 Mediating and Mitigating the Costs of the Cuts for Women*

Chapter Four examines the consequences of cuts to VAWG provision and prevention in a context of rising levels of VAWG and an increase in demand for VAWG services. The situation is one in which anti-VAWG activists are responding not only to women's experiences of interpersonal violence but also to the cumulative impact of the cuts on women's lives and the complex welfare needs emerging as a result. There was a clear sense of anger and disbelief among most activists at the level of harassment and state intrusion that poor and minority survivors of VAWG in particular were experiencing in all areas of welfare support since the global financial crash. Those activists who had previously campaigned around the intrusive surveillance and criminalisation of BME and working class communities described a sense of losing ground because they now had to contend with more police, more social workers and more immigration officials than ever before. Crucially, due to cuts in state-funded welfare services, these same activists are now central in both mediating and mitigating the costs of the cuts for the women they serve. For instance, the data in Chapter Four show that activists are spending less time addressing women's direct experiences of violence and much more time helping survivors prepare for screening appointments, health assessments and other compulsory evaluations that can help them access housing and refuge provision, childcare, legal aid and so on. Activists have had to extend the remit of their job roles and increase their unpaid labour so that survivors are not faced with buying the same services from private organisations or going without them altogether. Furthermore, they are spending an increasing amount of time keeping up with changes in government policy because failure to do so has occasionally resulted in dangerous mistakes, particularly around immigration issues. Concerns about burnout and stress were frequently raised but the majority of activists nevertheless continued to meet the

complex needs of poor, BME and immigrant women pushed into situations of poverty and deprivation. Their priorities are protecting women from both direct *and* structural violence (i.e. economic violence) and their commitment to alleviating survivors' concerns about a range of issues brought about by financial hardship and austerity is a clear demonstration of this.

## *2.2 Defending Women-Only and Specialist BME Organisations*

The complexity of the activists' workloads as outlined above is further complicated by the fact that they are operating in a commissioning environment that fundamentally disadvantages local specialist women's organisations. Large generic organisations with broader user bases can offer cheaper services per user as a result of economies of scale and are therefore sweeping up the vast majority of large funding contracts for VAWG services across the region. Activists described how the smaller specialist women's organisations that have extensive expertise in supporting disadvantaged women with complex needs and very high quality standards in service delivery, are cutting staff, reducing services or closing altogether. Those specialist organisations that manage to survive face a range of challenges including grants that run only for a few months, complex and bureaucratic reporting requirements and an increasing disregard for women-specific services. The shift toward gender neutral commissioning and the rise of degendered postfeminist analyses of VAWG among commissioners and, more problematically, among activists within the VAWG sector presents a double whammy for activists attempting to make gender-specific justice claims. Yet it is important to acknowledge that attempts to resist these trends were evident during fieldwork. I observed activists challenging gender-neutral language whenever they

encountered it; resisting mergers of smaller specialist organisations with larger generic organisations; and I spoke to a manager of a women-only organisation whose staff had agreed they would close the organisation if forced by commissioners to compromise their women-only policy.

Several activists were also committed to protecting specialist BME organisations in a political environment that is largely opposed to funding and sustaining specialisms based around race, ethnicity and immigration. Political debates about the failures of multiculturalism and an apparent shift toward a politics based on ideas about assimilation is serving to negate the significance of difference in the lives of the British public (Korteweg 2017). Government preference for generic service provision and one-stop-shop service delivery models are undermining intersectionality as a lens for understanding experience and shaping practice, and commissioners are becoming increasingly reluctant to fund specialist BME organisations when larger generic organisations claim to provide these services at the same high quality and for cheaper. Yet the data in Chapter Four demonstrate that anti-VAWG activists from women-only organisations are working in solidarity with activists from specialist BME organisations in order to ensure their survival. To do so they must not only appeal to commissioners; they must also appeal to other members of the anti-VAWG movement. This was a disturbing discovery. I interviewed one activist who believed that because her organisation was “culturally sensitive” and embraced intersectionality this meant there was no longer a need for specialist VAWG organisations led by and for BME women. Yet by using this point to argue against the protection of specialist BME organisations she completely ignored the underlying structures of white privilege and racial oppression that specialist BME organisations were developed to contest. Other activists were aware that these kinds of arguments were beginning to

gain momentum in the VAWG sector and several argued that this was having a destabilising impact on BME women's organisations and their service users. To be sure, it is likely that such narratives are being used to increase the financial and political status of white-led and generic organisations that purport to offer an all-encompassing one-stop-shop for all survivors of violence, in line with government interests.

Those activists working in solidarity with specialist BME services deployed a range of strategies to resist this trend. They directly and sometimes publicly challenged those organisations compromising the health of BME women's organisations; they arranged meetings with commissioners to present information and data highlighting the importance of preserving these organisations; they created 'no dumping' policies to ensure that specialist BME organisations were not receiving unnecessary referrals that drain their already limited resources; and they committed to placing BME women's needs at the forefront of future campaigns and social change efforts. These actions are making a significant difference at the local level but activists were aware that systemic change would only emerge by targeting and challenging central government attitudes and decision making. These forms of resistance are discussed further below.

### *2.3 Renewing Political Bonds*

Many participants remarked on the ways in which competition for resources was serving to erode the solidarities and relationships built between movement organisations over a number of decades; relationships that encourage commitment to collective social change efforts. However, the examples above demonstrate that

several activists were also succeeding in forging alliances and solidarities in an environment of intense competition and entrepreneurialism. During participant observations I became 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, and there was no doubt among participants that this work was becoming simultaneously more difficult and more essential. As documented in Chapter Four, financial insecurity is curtailing activists' organised resistance, namely because they have less time, energy and resources to engage in creative political work. This insecurity has made some activists more fearful for speaking truth to power for fear of the repercussions (e.g. lost contracts, complete organisation closure). At the same time, activists are spending much more time trying to demonstrate innovation to funders than focusing on changing structures and society. Whilst activists working in larger organisations tended to have dedicated staff to write tendering applications and monitor outcomes, those working in smaller specialist women's organisations had to divert their attention away from VAWG prevention efforts in order to quantitatively measure the progress of their service users – a process they found intrusive, anti-feminist and neglectful of the long-term needs of some of the most vulnerable women in their communities. Activists were well aware that the time spent documenting outcomes for funders was drawing their attention away from challenging those in power. By managing and controlling their efforts to survive, funding bodies are ultimately eroding the radical and transformatory potential of the movement.

This depoliticisation of activists' anti-VAWG efforts was for a short while counteracted by the CEDAW fundraising event that NEWN organised for those working in the women's sector. In an environment characterised by intense competition for funding and resources, most participants described their attendance at

the fundraising event as having helped rupture feelings of isolation, rivalry and conflict within the sector. Participants spoke about how they renewed important bonds and made new connections at the event and most described these new relationships as lasting rather than fleeting. In addition, the fundraising event also provided activists with an opportunity to disinvest from the state and other funding bodies that have enormous influence over project priorities and outcomes and instead redirect their energies and limited time and resources to grassroots fundraising for a collective political purpose. This purpose was to expose and challenge state sanctioned and structural violence against women; something that several participants identified as a pressing need but were struggling to achieve due to restricted resources and fear of jeopardising their state funding. Overall, this fundraising event appears to have been the morale boost that many anti-VAWG activists needed. The outcomes of this fundraising effort – which enabled a group of local activists to attend the UN to lobby the CEDAW committee about government austerity measures – are discussed further below.

## *2.4 Intensification of Physical and Emotional Labour*

Anti-VAWG activists' attempts to overcome several of the challenges outlined above is testament to their commitment to protecting women from rising levels of interpersonal, state-sanctioned and structural violence. However, it is important not to gloss over the feelings of stress, anger and disillusionment that several anti-VAWG activists expressed during interviews and participant observations. Activists were clear that employment in the women's sector has always been relatively precarious. Public funding priorities frequently change from one year to the next and from one

government to the next meaning that jobs and projects in the sector are never fully protected or sustainable. To be sure, there is already an established literature on how financial insecurity and fluctuating workloads in the women's sector leave activists more vulnerable to stress and burn out (Kulik 2006; Baines et al. 2012) and some scholars have argued that such emotional intensities are becoming an accepted feature of these occupational identities within and beyond the UK. However, as well as pointing to long histories of emotional stress and exhaustion associated with workplace restructuring and welfare reform, there was overwhelming consensus among participants that the cuts made by the Coalition government had significantly degraded the conditions of their employment in ways that previous governments had never quite managed. This is because the vast majority of participants were experiencing heightened job insecurity, increased workloads and diminished wages and resources *alongside* a whole host of other social risks in their personal lives, including cuts to welfare support (especially childcare, disability allowances and housing benefits) and escalating indebtedness and poverty. Consequently, their everyday lives had gotten much more difficult and complicated since austerity measures were introduced and this was taking a toll on the personal and collective resources for their activism.

In this context, it is easy to understand why so many participants felt disillusioned as they failed to see positive results despite the intensification of their physical and emotional labour. In Chapter Four we see that some activists were highly sentimental about their journey into feminism in the early years of their activism, yet their hope and determination has gradually been replaced by feelings of despair. One activist described how the short-term nature of funding meant she was unable to look to the future and explore long-term ideas for social change. Such findings raise



important questions about the extent to which this disillusionment is creeping into anti-VAWG activists' political identities and whether their ability to continue will gradually be weakened or called into question as they see very little progress being made. Might the high level of mobilisation needed to do the required extra hours, to contribute to the growing workload of specialist VAWG services with a large amount of volunteering on top of their job, be ultimately corroded by these undermining forces? Future studies must pay more attention to this situation. For now, this chapter turns its attention to the ways in which anti-austerity politics have captured the “radical imaginations” of numerous anti-VAWG activists across the region. Havien and Khasnabish (2014) describe the “radical imagination” as the envisaging of positive, possible futures and finding a way to bring these back to “work on the present, to inspire action and new forms of solidarity today” (2014: 3). How are such efforts informing anti-VAWG activism in North East England today and what are the outcomes?

### **3.0 Resistance**

The anti-VAWG activists who participated in this research used a range of strategies and tactics to produce alternative knowledge about VAWG, to raise understandings of it in their communities and to hold the government to account for its failures in effectively addressing and preventing this violence. Chapter Five in particular shows that the majority of activists interviewed for this study were drawing upon nuanced feminist analyses of VAWG that encompass the interpersonal, cultural, institutional, representational and structural dimensions of this violence. Contentions over how VAWG should be analysed and concerns about which ideological and theoretical

perspectives should be prioritised featured prominently in their discussions with each other and with the interviewer. This finding contrasts greatly with reports in the US that anti-VAWG activists are increasingly adopting gender-neutral and individual-level analyses of domestic and sexual violence (Nichols 2013; Macy et al. 2010) and are generally unfamiliar with the feminist ideologies and action frames that have for decades guided the movement (Lehrner and Allen 2008, 2009). Whilst such analyses were certainly present among the activists I interviewed and observed, they were by no means the most dominant; though concerns about degendered, postfeminist analyses did feature prominently during interviews.

### *3.1 Analyses of VAWG*

#### *3.1.1 Upholding a Gendered Analysis of VAWG*

Several interviewees acknowledged the importance of upholding a gendered analysis of VAWG in the face of rising levels of anti-feminist backlash and postfeminist understandings of VAWG and victimology. Activists expressed concern about the dissemination of gender neutral ideologies that divert attention away from the structural factors that oppress women, and recognised that these analyses were being used to justify the retrenchment of funding to women-only and specialist BME organisations. In order to resist this trend, a number of activists were committed to upholding an analysis of VAWG that centres patriarchal structures of gender inequality. The feminist movement struggled for a long time to have this analysis acknowledged and accepted in mainstream politics and activists did not want to lose power over this critique. Of particular concern to these activists was the presence of such analyses among other members of the anti-VAWG movement. Whilst only three

interviewees drew upon postfeminist analyses over the course of my fieldwork, some activists implied that this issue was highly prevalent.

There are a number of potential explanations for this turn away from structural gender inequality in conceptualisations of VAWG. For instance, Salter (2015: 465) argues that the proposition that VAWG “is a cultural problem to be prevented and treated largely by improved education and changes to attitudes dovetailed with neoliberal characterisations of social problems in terms of individual maladjustment and ‘bad’ family and community cultures”. Other factors that may have contributed to this focus include the proliferation of criminal justice responses to VAWG, and the cultural turn in feminist thought towards the symbolic and discursive dimensions of women’s oppression, potentially occluding the contribution of structural inequality (see Chapter Two). This latter point was raised by one participant who, reflecting on her participation in the anti-VAWG movement over the last fifty years, told a story of both progress and loss: progress beyond the essentialised categories and identities of the 1970s towards the celebration of difference and diversity, alongside a loss of a commitment to social and political change. This is a story similar to those told by feminist scholars such as Fraser (2013) and Eisenstein (2009) who are mostly critical of the cultural turn in feminist theory and practice. However, this story often conceals the diversity in movement analyses and responses to VAWG (see Hemmings 2011). To be sure, several BME and working class activists claimed that their politics have always addressed the root causes of gender violence and inequality, and they reject the notion that this analysis has completely diminished.

Interestingly, some activists characterised their preoccupation with defending a radical feminist analysis of VAWG as a frustrating setback, preventing the development of alternative discourses and strategies that respond to new challenges

facing the movement, including new forms of sexism, austerity, conservatism and xenophobia. At the same time, it became clear during fieldwork that much time and energy was being invested in divisive debates about gender politics, particularly regarding the presence of transgender women in women-only services, and the role of the movement in supporting male victims of domestic and sexual violence. Unable to reach any form of agreement, activists were splitting themselves into opposing camps. This is an immensely problematic development that is contributing as much to the erosion of solidarity within the sector as is the fierce competition among organisations for funding; and it does not seem likely that this will be resolved anytime soon.

### 3.1.2 Analysing the Disproportionate Impact of the Cuts on Women

The majority of activists demonstrated a very strong understanding of the gendered dimensions of austerity and their implications for women survivors of domestic and sexual violence. The disproportionate impact of austerity policies on women was an issue raised frequently during interviews and participant observations. At one of the first NEWN meetings I attended there was a discussion about the findings of the Fawcett Society (2012) report regarding the “triple jeopardy” of austerity for women. It was noted that this triple jeopardy – which refers to job losses in the public sector, cuts to welfare spending and a “looming care gap that women will be expected to plug” (Fawcett Society 2013: 2) – was having serious repercussions for women’s experiences of male violence. Economic insecurity and financial dependence on abusive partners were two of the main issues raised by activists as critical in determining whether a victim can escape abusive relationships and situations. Whereas austerity politics uphold the belief that welfare reform empowers individuals, makes them independent and active citizens and addresses social exclusion, activists

argued that welfare reform was achieving the exact opposite: it disempowers and punishes women, reinforces their social exclusion and redefines their rights as citizens and non-citizens. It is particularly interesting that many activists articulated these outcomes as a form of state-sanctioned violence, especially where they relate to the passage through parliament of reforms that cut state provision for women victims of violence. This was viewed by many activists as contributing to a culture of impunity for men who are violent against women; hence the construction of the state as complicit in this violence.

Many participants also acknowledged the specific vulnerability of women whose gender intersects with inequalities based on class, ethnicity, disability, nationality and immigration status. The cumulative impact of the cuts were described eloquently by several interviewees and many spoke about the ways in which BME and immigrant women's experiences of violence provide guidance, not as a universal case for all oppressed groups, but rather as a catalyst for theoretical insight concerning the interconnections of domination and resistance. Such ideas echo the recent work of Collins (2017) who writes about how saturated sites of intersecting power relations (i.e. violence at the intersection of gender, race and class oppressions) facilitate the normalisation of political domination, which is why it is important to target saturated sites of intersecting power relations as venues for political resistance. As Collins (2017: 1466) explains: "Saturated sites of intersecting power relations lie at the heart of power, and pressure applied to such sites potentially resists domination across multiple, interconnected systems of power". This is something that many activists were seemingly committed to achieving. For instance, their vocalised concerns about how the government uses certain marginalised social groups (e.g. poor immigrant communities) as scapegoats to generate the levels of fear and insecurity required to

justify welfare retrenchment is a prime example of activists applying pressure to a saturated site of intersecting power relations. They are aware that this symbolic violence is facilitating the naturalisation and normalisation of political domination whilst simultaneously having real-world effects on minority women's experiences of interpersonal violence, which is why targeting this saturated site of power is so important.

Some participants identified their analyses of VAWG as being “intersectional” but most did not use the language of intersectionality during our conversations (even if they demonstrated strong intersectional analyses) unless the concept was first raised by the researcher. A few interviewees described the language of intersectionality as too academic or too exclusionary (i.e. that it alienates women who are not educated or cannot grasp the complexity of the concept). However, it may also be the case that activists are becoming increasingly aware of the ways in which intersectionality is being misused, rendering the concept less appealing. To be sure, there is evidence to suggest that intersectionality is being dislodged from its radical moorings in Black feminist thought (e.g. when used by activists to argue against the need for specialist BME services). In such cases, intersectionality appears to have become little more than a buzzword (see Davis 2008) that is devoid of real intent and meaning. Those activists whose practices most closely aligned with foundational intersectionality scholarship tended to talk about the importance of placing BME and immigrant women at the centre of anti-VAWG politics. In much the same vein as Collins' (2017) argument about the importance of targeting saturated sites of power relations, these activists recognise that this is best achieved by placing the most marginalised and excluded women at the forefront of their political analyses and activism.

### 3.1.3 Developing an Analysis of Structural Violence

As the structural landscape of VAWG begins to change in line with macroeconomic policies and welfare reforms, it appears that many anti-VAWG activists in North East England are becoming increasingly interested in issues of redistribution and socio-economic justice as a means for reducing and preventing VAWG. Such interests were particularly common among participants who drew on the concept of structural violence to make sense of the deeply unequal access to the determinants of health (e.g. housing, good quality health care, and unemployment) among specific groups of women, which then create conditions where interpersonal violence can happen and which shape gendered forms of violence for women in vulnerable social positions. As Hall explains: “In violence enacted on women’s bodies, one can read local and global structures of violence, and responses to one must be tied to the other” (2015: 18). Some participants also considered the implications of structural violence – in the form of neoliberal economic policies – for men and their use of interpersonal violence. For instance, three participants spoke about VAWG as a means by which poor and working class men can perform masculinity in order to compensate for their disempowerment in a context of rapid socio-economic change. They also spoke about the importance of engaging with global structures of economic and social inequality in order to develop an anti-VAWG movement that is truly transformational.

The concept of structural violence is deliberately broad and some have questioned whether it extends the meaning of violence to such an extent that it risks losing focus of the term. However, I would argue that activists’ use of this concept is helping them to make sense of VAWG in a variety of contexts and is underscoring the importance of the historical and social contexts that exacerbate levels of violence

against women (Hall 2015). This is a particularly useful analysis in a political environment that individualises VAWG and divorces it from its causal structures (True 2012). As demonstrated further in the next section, such analyses have led to the implementation of interventions that consider the broader structural contexts in which women are experiencing violence. This broader focus has also recently been endorsed by Griffin (2015) who highlights how dominant discourses of austerity have predominantly focused on the human flaws and institutional weaknesses that led to the crisis; distorting an understanding of the historic structures of gendered and racial discrimination on which global capitalism has been built. Griffin refers to this as “crisis governance feminism” and believes it has become a dominant technique of governance under neoliberal capitalism.

Overall, these findings indicate that austerity politics may have provoked a transformation of the interpretive frameworks used by activists to analyse VAWG. For those scholars who have called for activists to re-engage with a politics of redistribution and a radical socialist critique (see Fraser 2013; Walby 2012) these findings will likely be of great interest. To be sure, whilst austerity has closed down many of the spaces in which activists have traditionally come together to analyse and strategise against VAWG, it has also opened up new spaces for alternative views and analyses to emerge, including those that appear to have been previously neglected or relegated to the side-lines (i.e. socialist and anti-capitalist analyses). The next section explores how these analyses are informing anti-VAWG activists’ resistance strategies in North East England.



## *3.2 Strategies of Resistance*

### **3.2.1 Consciousness Raising and Critical Education**

The data explored in this thesis show that anti-VAWG activists in the North East are not conforming to trends reported in the US where activists have largely remained “on the side-lines of legislative debates affecting social welfare policies, despite the impact of such policies on domestic violence victims” (Weissman 2012: 6). In contrast, anti-VAWG activists’ concerns about austerity and its links with rising levels of violence against women have given rise to increasing levels of activism at local, national and international levels. Chapter Six begins with a discussion about NEWNs participatory action research project which was developed to expose the disproportionate impact of austerity measures on women in the North East. A number of anti-VAWG activists I interviewed felt it was important that the case study was being framed around austerity and the economy because the current situation was clearly having an impact on levels and experiences of VAWG in Britain. In particular, they wanted to be able to use the findings to demand the immediate reversal of some of the most damaging austerity policies affecting the lives of women, and women survivors of violence in particular. Importantly, NEWN had recognised that many women’s organisations across the region were lacking the capacity to criticise government decisions and develop a political profile – often because they were reliant on state funding – and so the need for an independent voice that channelled the knowledge and expertise of the women’s sector into the political arena was becoming increasingly clear to them. This case study was the first step toward mobilising collective action among service users and activists, and it appears to have had a deep and lasting effect on the women’s sector.

However, whilst NEWN was certainly supporting mobilisation efforts, some organisations had developed their own anti-violence models based on community engagement and critical education. Chapter Six shows that a number of organisations were working with women at the grassroots level to raise their consciousness and understanding of VAWG in order to create communities of struggle against VAWG. The findings indicate that this type of work is particularly valuable when it examines the intersections of class, gender, ethnicity and geographical location. For instance, one organisation had created a safe space for young BME women to come together to discuss issues of power and oppression in their lives, while another was encouraging young white women to address their prejudices and oppressions in order to build common ground with BME and immigrant women in their community. They achieved this by thinking about their similarities (e.g. lack of power and resources as poor and working class women) and differences (e.g. racial privilege and oppression) which eventually enabled them to unite with BME women over joint issues of concern – in particular, their fear of disclosing their abuse to an inherently classist and racist criminal justice system. Inherent in these examples is an aspiration to mobilise BME and immigrant women and bring their voices and concerns to the forefront of the movement. It also demonstrates activists' commitments to targeting saturated sites of intersecting power relations, as outlined above. It is likely that such a strategy will help strengthen the movement in the years to come.

### 3.2.2. Informing the PCCs Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy

During my time in the field anti-VAWG activists were also developing new terms of engaging with the state. In particular, their role in informing the PCCs regional VAWG strategy helped consolidate their position as legitimate actors in planning and decision-

making processes beyond the women's sector and within the state. Brodie (1995) argues that women's groups are often not consulted about important political decisions as they are deemed more likely to attempt to "hijack" the agenda or derail it with their own specialised agendas. Yet it appears that the presence of a self-declared feminist PCC in the region has helped anti-VAWG activists overcome this hurdle and establish themselves as professionals capable of advising the state about VAWG issues. To be sure, those who participated in the focus groups led by NEWN were able to shift the PCCs strategy toward the aims of the women's sector. Several of the points made during focus groups were incorporated into the strategy. For instance, one of the most striking features of the strategy is its recognition of the importance of sustaining specialist women-only and BME-led VAWG organisations in order to reduce levels of VAWG across the region (PCC 2013: 18). Activists' concerns about the MARAC and its replication of the power and control dynamics that survivors seek to escape were also alleviated via the proposed introduction of a Domestic and Sexual Violence Champions Network which would support lower risk victims of VAWG within community-based settings (PCC 2013: 21). It therefore appears that anti-VAWG activists in the North East may be in the midst of building a new consensus in which women's organisations are viewed as active partners in local governance rather than special interest groups to be avoided.

However, this is not to say that the activists' partnership with the PCCs was unproblematic. While the opportunity for close collaboration was seen as unique and potentially impactful, there were a number of tensions and dilemmas. The pre-determined frames for the focus group discussions limited the focus of the discussions and the dynamics of the focus groups did not allow any space to question these frames or propose changes; accepting them was a precondition for participation and inevitably

resulted in weak compromises. For instance, some participants felt that the focus of one of the frames on trialling a preventative programme for repeat offenders was not an efficient use of police time and resources, yet they were unable to question or amend this focus. Furthermore, because no time had been factored into the focus groups for conflict or deliberation about common values and ends, activists' suggestions for improving policing practice began to read more like an unrealistic wish-list because all participant's opinions were treated as on par with one another. As a result, the activists were ultimately participating through performance rather than through knowledge, and with very little control over what information would be drawn on to inform the PCCs VAWG strategy. In such a context it is extremely difficult to resist the co-optation of feminist knowledge, revealing the inherent difficulties of working with neoliberal institutions, actors and policies to keep gender considerations at hand.

Anti-VAWG activists' collaboration with the PCCs also led to a reliance on a criminal justice approach to preventing VAWG, which supports the growing prison industrial complex and its criminalisation, among others, of immigrant women who have experienced VAWG. Some participants' often unquestioned reliance on the law for resolving instances of domestic and sexual violence led them to demand increased police powers and harsher punishment policies for perpetrators of VAWG. Yet these demands are being made at a time when the rightwing forces behind the austerity agenda seek to disinvest from poor urban communities and shred the safety net while building up the states incarcerating and policing powers (Newman 2017). Most participants did not directly consider or acknowledge this tension, but those who did were highly critical of the Coalition government's decision to increase the incarceration, policing and punishment of perpetrators in place of public investment

in rehabilitation, education and welfare support. They were also critical of feminists who promoted criminalisation in this context. For the most part, the activists who framed VAWG primarily as a criminal matter tended to lack a critical awareness of the physical and structural violence perpetrated by states against women; contrastingly greatly with those activists who were actively involved in campaigns to shut down Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre. Efforts to shut down Yarl's Wood are part of a much broader critique of the carceral turn in neoliberal states but are also a clear engagement with normalised structural violence against women in the UK. Whilst this issue cannot be resolved simply by shutting down Yarl's Wood, these resistance efforts weave issues of gender, race, neocolonialism, neoliberalism and violence together to create an effective resistance politics that picks apart dominant discourses about carceral approaches to social justice.

### 3.2.3 Lobbying the UN CEDAW Committee

Anti-VAWG activists in North East England used the international framework of CEDAW to hold the Coalition government to account for the disproportionate impact of its austerity measures on women in Britain. In the build up to and aftermath of CEDAW the regions anti-VAWG activists were engaging in grassroots organising in an attempt to make the structural and economic violence of austerity visible. At the CEDAW examination they used the government's alleged commitments to VAWG as a signatory to CEDAW as a means of challenging their reproduction of VAWG through their austerity measures. In doing so they were at once pointing to the ongoing structural violence of the British state's economic policies while demanding protection from that state for individual acts of violence that emanate from these structural

relations. Hall explains that “this is not a contradictory position, but rather a complex one that must be pursued for the safety and dignity of the women most marginalised by state violence” (2015: 404).

We see in Chapter Six that the NEWN activists who attended the CEDAW examination were particularly concerned about cuts to Legal Aid and the ‘no recourse to public funds’ stipulation and its implications for survivors of VAWG with insecure immigration statuses. The materials they disseminated while at the examination and the information they provided the CEDAW Committee were clearly important because the Committee, in their Concluding Observations, requested that the UK government report back on the Legal Aid situation within two years rather than the usual four years. The Committee also asked that the government consider extending the Destitute Domestic Violence Concession to all women who experience gender violence, including all women with insecure immigration status. However, one of the greatest weaknesses of CEDAW is that it is not legally binding. Activists may use the Committee’s observations to apply pressure to the government but the government does not have to comply. Furthermore, CEDAW does not offer a framework for questioning or critiquing the structures around which social and political relations are currently organised – namely because its reformist approach to gender equality is based on the assumption that “maleness” is the norm. This ultimately prevents women from pursuing change on their own terms (Brooks 2002; Raday 2012). Finally, CEDAW is also limited in its potential to challenge the transnational structures of inequality that facilitate violence against women. This point is address in further detail below.

## 4.0 Reincorporation

The majority of the analyses and resistance strategies outlined above are strategically focused on the immediate short term need to improve local responses to VAWG and reverse the most damaging austerity policies affecting the lives of women survivors. During my time in the field the majority of anti-VAWG efforts unrelated to these goals were not prioritised in the same way. Yet this focus on liberal welfare reform is of course understandable. In Britain the ideological and political-economic imperatives of welfare reform are reproducing and maintaining poverty and inequality and exacerbating women's exposure to violence. Efforts to improve police responses to this violence are necessary and important, as are activists' efforts to utilise CEDAW to hold the government to account for its impunity around VAWG. Whilst there are clear limitations to both of these strategies of resistance, as outlined above, they have nevertheless enabled activists to challenge local and central government about their inadequate responses to VAWG and to expose the structural violence inherent in neoliberal austerity policies that disproportionately burden women and render them more vulnerable to violence. Activists' efforts to protect specialist women-only and BME-led services and defend state welfare provision are also vital. The anti-VAWG movement in Britain gained prominence in the era of the welfare state, and feminists continue to rely on the political space opened up by the welfare state to transform responses and services to VAWG. Protecting these spaces and resisting competition and the erosion of solidarity is now an important element of their activism, as is raising and educating the next generation of feminist anti-VAWG activists to question the implications of state-sanctioned and structural violence against women.

In many ways, the anti-VAWG activists I studied appear to be heeding the call from feminist scholars such as Fraser (2013) and Walby (2012) for a return to a socialist politics grounded in questions of redistribution. The austerity context appears to have provoked greater receptivity of socialist feminist approaches to socio-economic justice. However, this final section questions whether a return to social democratic politics is enough to avoid reincorporation back into the austere neoliberal system that anti-VAWG activists are so clearly attempting to undermine. To do so I have drawn on the work of scholars who argue that neoliberalism and social democracy must be understood as representing two variants of the same liberal governmental rationality (see, for example, Oksala 2013; Dean 2009). This argument is based on the Foucauldian notion that a socialist governmentality has never existed. Rather, the socialist welfare policies that emerged in Europe following World War II “had to operate within the dominant framework of liberal governmentality that had been developing and spreading since the 18<sup>th</sup> century” and thus assumed the role “of merely compensating for the harmful social effects of the free market” (Oksala 2013: 36). From this perspective, social democracy cannot legitimately oppose the current neoliberal governmentality without challenging the underlying regime of truth that informs contemporary capitalism, according to which (1) the economy is politically neutral and (2) the health and prosperity of the population is dependent on economic growth (Oksala 2013).

Foucault traces these truth claims to the birth of a new liberal form of governmental reason in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century that, for the first time in history, established scientific truth claims about the economy. This new science stipulated that the state should not interfere with market mechanisms because these mechanisms spontaneously follow their own laws and establish their own truths in pursuit of the



common good (Burchell et al. 1991). It was therefore nonsensical to place them under political regulation, which meant that economic truths could not be argued against politically without falling into irrationality. Consequently, “once something was defined as an economic question—such as the magnitude of the income gap between the rich and the poor, for example—it was moved out of the realm of justice to the realm of truth” (Oksala 2013: 37). This made holding government to account for inequality much more difficult. Nevertheless, the welfare of the population was still important, but according to this rationality only economic growth, a continuous increase in productivity, could deliver the highest living standards. Thus welfare could only be provided by the means of economic growth.

Today, a stable capitalist economic order, both in its neoliberal or social democratic variants, is understood to be structurally reliant on economic growth. The problem, however, is that neoliberal policies of economic growth (e.g. low wages, precarious zero-hour contracts and welfare state retrenchment) currently dominate this rationality. Oksala (2013) therefore argues that feminists need to develop new ways of thinking about economic growth that are less violent and less exploitative of women’s productive and reproductive labour, rather than simply relying on the welfare state to compensate for the harmful effects of the free market. At this point it is important to highlight that several activists acknowledged how women are expected to perform flexibility by adjusting to the “triple burden” of productive, reproductive and community work in order to facilitate economic growth and some of these activists even questioned their own role in reinforcing gender inequality by conforming to this expectation. Yet most activists have nevertheless struggled to incorporate this understanding into their strategies of resistance, which is problematic given that inequality of resources and political rights between men and women is not an

unfortunate by-product of capitalism but is rather one of its strongest forces for progress (Harvey 2005). The neoliberal project actively pursues policies and promotes ideologies that suppress women's rights and freedoms across race and class divides because this is what helps fuel capital accumulation – especially in the aftermath of economic crises (Duggan 2003). Whilst feminist resistance is by no means straightforward in such an environment, anti-VAWG scholarship and activism in the global South demonstrates that resistance is possible in the long-term if activists are willing to make sacrifices and compromises in the short-term.

In developing countries subjected to structural adjustment policies that have bolstered a system that keeps people poor and dependant, there have been risings not just against corporations but against the whole system that keeps women poor and more vulnerable to violence (Wilson 2015; Erickson and Faria 2011; Marchland and Runyan 2010). Activists have, for example, refused to align their efforts to obtain employment for survivors of VAWG within the structures of an exploitative labour market that in the end may contribute to the feminisation of poverty, if not the perpetuation of domestic and sexual violence (Weissman 2016; Mason 2013). Whilst women's financial autonomy is often viewed as an indicator of their ability to leave an abusive relationship or escape an abusive situation, anti-VAWG movements in the global South have highlighted that women's participation in the economy is complex and contradictory (see Chapter One). Violence against women in the workplace, financial abuse, violence as the result of changing gender roles, and women's exposure to violence when migrating out of economic necessity, are all intrinsically linked to the globalised economy and to neoliberal strategies of economic growth (True 2012). For this reason, some anti-VAWG movements in the global South have also rejected the idea that welfare services and feminist projects can only be financed by a growing

economy, because they oppose the ways in which economic growth is currently being achieved (Erickson and Faria 2011). This contrasts with anti-VAWG activists in North East England who, in demanding that welfare cuts are reversed and funding for VAWG services restored, are arguing for a return to “business as usual” rather than a change to the way in which business is conducted. As Oksala (2013) highlights, if feminist activists subscribe to the argument that welfare services and feminist projects – such as refuges and rape crisis centres – can only be financed by a growing economy, and our current neoliberal governmental rationality indicates that economic growth is only possible via the implementation of neoliberal economic policies, “then women’s welfare and neoliberalism are not so obviously opposed anymore” (Oksala 2013: 321).

Several studies have shown how anti-VAWG movement organisations ran by-and-for women of colour are rejecting the professionalised corporate models imposed by their funders and are instead finding ways to self-fund their political activities and service delivery models (see INCITE! 2007). Many of these organisations were initially accepting money from foundations whose profits are made at the expense of millions of people struggling against the very capitalist system that grossly exacerbates structural and interpersonal violence against women. Recognising that their work was ultimately reproducing the conditions they sought to eradicate, the organisations decided to make a change. For example, Guilloud and Cordery (2007) write about how Project South – an organisation that works for the elimination of poverty and genocide in the global South – now integrate fundraising into organising so that those who fulfil fundraising positions in Project South are trained organisers, not fundraisers. In a similar vein, Tang (2007) writes about the importance of creating and sustaining autonomous anti-VAWG movements. While she believes that women’s charities have a role to play in supporting the movement (e.g. serving as buffers that

protect autonomous movements from government repression) she argues that they cannot be an end unto themselves. Nurturing grassroots anti-VAWG efforts that are detached from mechanisms of state governance and control is thus something she now invests her time in. Perhaps women's organisations in North East England also have a role to play in championing this kind of autonomous activism in the future? To be sure, if Jones de Almeida (2010) is correct in her assertion that feminist activists have promoted a separation between feminist discourses and a broader class and capitalist analysis precisely because they cannot afford to seriously question the capitalist institutions that fund their work, autonomous self-funded movements may hold the potential for transforming the analyses and strategies of the anti-VAWG movement going forward.

As it currently stands, these kinds of conversations between feminist anti-VAWG activists about the economy, its morality and the role of the welfare state in reproducing and sustaining inequality and VAWG are rarely documented in contemporary feminist literature in the global North (for exceptions, see Pearson and Elson 2015; MacLeavy 2011). The success of Thatcher in co-opting feminist critiques of welfare state paternalism and the family wage in order to justify welfare retrenchment and exploit women's cheap labour (Sudbury 2006; Eisenstein 2009; Fraser 2013) is still remembered, and has rendered many feminist activists sceptical about outlining the limitations of the welfare state. To be sure, the challenges of reinstating such a critique in a survival context are not to be taken lightly. However, at the same time, anti-VAWG activists cannot continue to rely on the state for protection from the negative effects of global capitalism. The global imperialist project of capital accumulation is built on and sustained by a range of powerful non-state transnational institutions and global market regimes, and so transforming this structure

is not a straightforward task. Take the UN CEDAW examination as an example. Despite its impressive resources and position of international authority, the UN itself is deeply limited in its ability to challenge human rights violations committed by global corporations or that are functions of the international movement of capital and labour (Ackerly 2000). The challenge for feminist activists drawing on international law and the human rights principles of CEDAW is thus to find a way of using this framework to challenge domestic injustices and increase women's access to social and economic power while continuing to think in more long term and transformative ways about the national and transnational structures upholding and reinforcing women's oppression (Otto 2009). This is especially necessary considering that the Coalition government, its predecessors and current successor, ignore how violent practices against women are perpetuated and exacerbated by uneven globalisation, imperialism, neo-colonialism, immigration and the securitisation of borders (Mason 2013).

I argue that without thinking about this bigger picture, anti-VAWG activists are at risk of nurturing a form of "crisis governance feminism" (Griffin 2015) that is so focused on alleviating the impact of the cuts in the short term that it fails to sufficiently target the structures that gave rise to these cuts in the first place. For this reason, feminist anti-VAWG politics need to be about more than merely preserving the social protections of the past and influencing social policy around VAWG. Continuing to view the state as the primary site of women's resistance to violence against women will severely limit the radical potential of the anti-VAWG movement going forward because it will prevent activists from fully challenging the global structures and ideologies sustaining VAWG. Perhaps the consciousness raising and critical education currently taking place in local communities across the North East is a good place to begin addressing this omission; though in the long term it is likely that

this will necessitate an active collaboration with other social justice movements and with women transnationally – something that several participants recognised but were yet to actualise. These participants spoke about social media as a powerful tool for kick-starting a transnational movement of resistance yet due to limited time and resources they were unable to take this any further. This tension once again points to the need for anti-VAWG organisations to disinvest from the state and find new ways of funding and sustaining their VAWG services and political activism (INCITE! 2007).

## **5.0 Conclusion**

This thesis has revealed the double-sided effects of neoliberal structural adjustment and dispossession for women in austerity Britain. The data show that in many ways, anti-VAWG activists are experiencing acute processes of depoliticisation and polarisation as feminist agendas for social change are derailed by neoliberal economic reforms. Yet it is clear that this context has also presented opportunities for anti-VAWG activists to develop new forms of collective struggle against the violence of austerity politics. As the poorest and most vulnerable women continue to bear the brunt of austerity, anti-VAWG activists are reimagining new, potentially radically transformative ways of challenging this structural and state-sanctioned violence.

However, despite these ongoing efforts, austerity policies continue to dominate in Western democracies, and vulnerable demographic groups, vulnerable geographies and vulnerable organisations continue to bear the brunt of austerity measures. The Home Office's *Ending Violence Against Women and Girls 2016-2020* action plan acknowledges the added barriers that certain groups experience in accessing support

for escaping domestic violence, such as BME women, and has pledged money to support these populations. Yet the policy remains remarkably silent in terms of developing a sustained and encompassing approach to address the structural inequalities that affect women experiencing domestic and sexual violence. Likewise, criminalisation strategies continue to dominate the government's VAWG action plan; strategies that do not and cannot address these structural inequalities, and that ultimately risk further marginalisation of already vulnerable groups.

Yet the data analysed in this thesis show that anti-VAWG activists in North East England stand poised to resist these challenges. It is clear that activists are becoming increasingly alert to the limitations of anti-VAWG strategies that lack an analysis of racism, patriarchy, capitalism and structural violence. They are also rising to face new forms of sexism, austerity, conservatism and xenophobia, all of which are nurturing and reproducing violence in the lives of women across the region and country. While it is important to bear in mind that this thesis provides only a snapshot of anti-VAWG activism in a particular location and in a particular historical moment, it nevertheless provides an important insight into the everyday lived experiences and meanings of political engagement among this group of activists. Further research like this is needed to inform and support anti-VAWG activists in their continued efforts to end violence against women and girls. Supporting movement aims and goals is, after all, one of the most fundamental and rewarding aspects of feminist social research.

## Appendix 1: Consent Form



### Participant Consent Form

*To be completed by participant and researcher before interview starts*

Name of project: Feminist Anti-Violence Activism in North East England  
Researcher's name: Clare Wiper  
Organisation: Northumbria University, Department of Social Sciences  
Participant's name:

#### **FOR PARTICIPANT:**

1. I confirm that I have been supplied with and have read and understood an Information Sheet for the research project and have had time to decide whether or not I want to participate.
2. I understand that my taking part is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason.
3. I agree with Clare Wiper recording and processing this information.
4. I understand that this information will only be used for the purposes set out in the information sheet.
5. I have been told that any data generated by the research will be securely managed and disposed of in accordance with Northumbria University's guidelines.
6. I am aware that all tapes and documents will remain confidential with only the research team having access to them.
7. My consent is conditional upon the University complying with its duties and obligations under the Data Protection Act.



Participant's signature:

Date:

**FOR RESEARCHER:**

I can confirm that I have explained the nature of the research to the above named participant and have given adequate time to answer any questions concerning it.

Researcher's signature:

Date:

## **Appendix 2: Information Sheet**



### **PhD Research Project**

### **‘Feminist Anti-Violence Activism in North East England’**

Thank you for showing an interest in participating in this research project which is being completed at Northumbria University. Before you agree to be interviewed as part of this study, it is important that you know what this will involve. Please take the time to read the following information and feel free to discuss this information with your colleagues, myself or my supervisor. The decision to participate remains with you and you can withdraw from this study at any time.

#### **What is the purpose of this study?**

The aim of this study is to explore the implications of the current austerity climate for anti-violence activism in North East England. The interview will explore the impact of austerity cuts on VAWG services and how this is affecting your service provision and social change agendas.

#### **What will happen if I decide to take part?**

If you agree to participate in this research, we can then arrange a time convenient to you to meet up for an interview. The interview can take place at your preferred location: within your home, within a quiet room at your place of work, or within a quiet café. The interview will last approximately 1 hour and questions asked will elicit information about your experience of working as an anti-violence activist.

At the beginning of the interview you will be asked to sign a consent form and will be given a copy to keep yourself. Interviews are normally voice recorded; however, if you do not wish to be recorded then written notes can be taken instead. What you say during the interview will be transcribed and any names and places discussed will be altered to ensure that you are unidentifiable. A copy of this transcript can be made available if you so wish. The interview can be ended or postponed at any time. Should

you decide that you wish to withdraw from the study following the interview, you may do so.

### **What are the possible problems or risks of taking part?**

This research project explores sensitive topics that may not always be easy to talk about. If you experience any discomfort or distress during the interview, please let the researcher know and we can decide on an appropriate course of action (e.g. change the topic, discuss sources of support).

Whatever you say during your interview is confidential unless you tell the researcher that you or someone else is in immediate danger of serious harm, or the researcher sees or is told about something that is likely to cause serious harm. If that happens, the researcher will raise this with you during the interview and tell you about what could happen if you continue to talk about it and explore how you would prefer to deal with the situation. In an extreme case where a child is at serious risk and you choose not to seek help/advice, the researcher has a duty to disclose this to the relevant agencies.

### **Contact Information**

If you have any enquires or concerns regarding this research or your participation with it, please contact me and I will be happy to discuss any aspect of my research:

Mobile:

Email:

Should you require any further information or verification regarding taking part in this research, please contact my research supervisor, Dr. Ruth Lewis, who will be happy to answer any questions or concerns you may have:

Mobile:

Email:

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