LSE Research Online

Armine Ishkanian

Neoliberalism and violence: the Big Society and the changing politics of domestic violence in England

Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)

http://eprints.lse.ac.uk

Neoliberalism and Violence:
The Big Society and the Changing Politics of Domestic Violence in England

By Armine Ishkanian,
London School of Economics and Political Science
Department of Social Policy
a.ishkanian@lse.ac.uk

Abstract
Focusing on the domestic violence sector as a case study, this article examines how the Big Society agenda, coming alongside public spending cuts, is affecting the independence and ability of the women's organisations to engage in progressive policy shaping. By situating the analysis of the Big Society agenda within the broader context of international civil society strengthening programmes, the article considers how the processes currently unfolding in England, share certain similarities to what has happened globally wherever neoliberal policies aimed at instrumentalizing civil society for service delivery have been implemented. It contends that the policies of the Big Society agenda, which are aimed at strengthening the "capacity" of civil society, are instead creating a situation where the independence and ability of civil society organisations to engage in progressive policy making is weakened.

Key words: Big Society, civil society, women's organisations, domestic violence

8091 w/o abstract and key words

Introduction

The Big Society, which was part of the Conservatives election platform, became a central plank of the UK Coalition Government's policy agenda once they came to office in May 2010 (the Coalition Government is comprised of members from the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties). Since its launch in 2010, there has been confusion and debate over what Big Society means (Albrow, 2012) and how its ideas will be translated into practice. One of the objectives of the Big Society, which is not a "self-contained project" but rather "a set of principles underpinning the Government's policy agenda" (House of Commons, 2012), has been to "create new opportunities and challenges for civil society across the UK" and to harness its innovation in addressing social problems (OCS, 2010, 4). The Big Society agenda is comprised of three main areas of action: 1) opening up public services; 2) empowering local communities; and 3) promoting social action through greater volunteering and civic participation.

Some have argued that if correctly implemented, policies inspired by the Big Society agenda could 'fix broken Britain' and lead to civic renewal (The Conservative Party, 2010, Blond, 2010, Norman, 2010, Edwards, 2012), while others have raised questions about the probity of the concept and its impact on social welfare (Corbett and Walker, 2013, Levitas, 2012, Rodger, 2012, Sage, 2012, Szreter and Ishkanian, 2012, Taylor-Gooby, 2012). The Big Society agenda is the latest in a long line of policy approaches introduced by successive governments since the 1980s aimed at defining the relationship between the statutory and voluntary sectors and the role of the voluntary sector in welfare delivery. Scholars have examined the different models that have emerged since the 19th century, highlighting continuities as well as shifts in approach and direction (Harris, 2010, Harris et al., 2001, Lewis, 1999, Kendall, 2010).

Policy makers have been very keen to avoid the impression that the Big Society is a continuation of Thatcher era neoliberal policies of privatisation, instead preferring to emphasise the communitarian aspects of the concept (Sage, 2012). However if we understand neoliberal policies to be those which are focused on rolling back the State, supporting the infiltration of market-driven calculations in the design and implementation of social policy, and propounding the emphasis on individual initiative, enterprise and responsibility (Harvey, 2007, Ong, 2006, Pratt, 2001) then the Big Society agenda should be seen as a neoliberal type of policy or one which has a clear family resemblance to neoliberal policies that have been introduced globally over the past 25 years. As Kaldor argues, since 1989, neoliberal policy makers promoted civil society as a way of restraining state power, "stabilising" the status quo of liberal democracy, and delivering public services rather than serving as the realm of public debate and political emancipation (Kaldor, 2003, 9).

In this article, by focusing on the domestic violence sector as a case study, I examine how the Big Society agenda, coming alongside public spending cuts, is affecting the independence and ability of the women's organisations to engage in progressive policy shaping. Progressive social policies are those that aim to improve the status and opportunities of historically disadvantaged groups, such as women (Htun and Weldon 2012). By situating my analysis of the Big Society agenda within the broader context of international civil society strengthening programmes, I examine how the processes currently unfolding in England, share certain similarities to what has happened globally wherever neoliberal policies aimed at

instrumentalising civil society for service delivery have been implemented   (Howell and Pearce, 2001, Kaldor, 2003).

While there is much debate around its definition, I understand civil society to be "the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values" (Centre for Civil Society, 2010). According to this definition, registered charities, community groups, faith-based organisations, professional associations, trades unions, self-help groups, and social movements are all part of civil society. I argue that although the Big Society rhetoric appears to provide a central place and role to civil society (OCS, 2010, Women's Aid, 2010, Hurd and Maude, 2010), the policies of the Big Society agenda, which are aimed at harnessing the innovation of civil society and for strengthening its "capacity" through increased professionalisation and the development of "entrepreneurial" and "business skills" (Cameron, 2010, OCS, 2010), are creating a situation in which the independence and the ability of civil society, specifically voluntary organisations, to engage in progressive policy making is weakened. I concur with Corbett and Walker's analysis that neoliberalism is the "main driver" behind the Big Society in which the imperative to "down-size the state and open up public services to market competition" overrides its potentially progressive elements (Corbett and Walker, 2013, 452).

To be clear, I am not claiming that prior to 2010, the relationship between the statutory and voluntary sectors was unproblematic, indeed there have always been concerns of how a reliance on statutory funding and the increasing delivery of welfare services affects the independence and the ability of voluntary organisations to shape or critique policy (Lewis, 1999, Kendall, 2010, Harris et al., 2001). That said it is important to recognise that the current policy context is distinct in a number of ways. First, since 2010, the level and scope of public spending cuts has considerably increased. Not only is public expenditure forecast to fall by £20 billion in real terms from 2009/10 and 2015/16, but the voluntary sector stands to lose £2.8 billion from 2011-2016 (Kane and Allen, 2011). Second, in the context of the global financial crisis, there has been a reduction in individual giving which further diminishes the funding available to voluntary organisations (Clark 2012). Finally, the opening up of services and the growing emphasis on value for money in the commissioning of contracts has created challenging working conditions for voluntary organisations. These factors combined, and not the Big Society agenda alone, have created what the Independence Panel, which is comprised of "authoritative individuals" with a great deal of experience in the voluntary sector, describes as "a difficult climate" where the survival of voluntary organisations and the independence of the sector are "at risk" (Independence Panel, 2013).

METHODOLOGY

I draw on an extensive literature review of policy documents, think tank publications and fifteen in-depth, semi-structured interviews with representatives from second-tier national level women's voluntary organisations in England. Second-tier organisations, which are also known as umbrella organisations, provide support to frontline organisations. Since my objective was to examine how current policies are affecting the independence and ability of voluntary organisations to engage in policy shaping, I focused on national level organisations because they engage in policy dialogue and consultations with civil servants and ministers, and also serve as linking organisations which advise and provide voice to smaller organisations on policy issues throughout

the country. The interviews were conducted from September 2012 – February 2013 with organisations based across London. My criteria for selecting organisations was that they work at the national level and engage in policy advocacy through research, consultations and publications. I anonymised all interviews and refer to respondents by the date of the interview. Individual interviews lasted approximately one hour and were recorded and transcribed. Additionally, I interviewed a UK Uncut organiser in order to learn more about its Refuge Against Cuts campaign which I discuss later in the article.

My reasons for selecting the domestic violence[1] sector are due to my previous research on this issue internationally (Ishkanian, 2007, Ishkanian, 2012) and because it is a complex issue which requires multi-stakeholder involvement and cooperation between various government agencies as well as voluntary organisations. While voluntary organisations, particularly women's groups, played an important role in putting domestic violence on the UK policy agenda (Htun and Weldon, 2012, Lovenduski and Randall, 1993) and continue to be recognised as "leaders in the field of domestic violence" (Jarvinen et al., 2008, 49), they continue to heavily rely on statutory funding, therefore, as I explain later, it is important to examine how current policies are affecting their independence and ability to influence and shape policy.

This article contributes to studies of the voluntary sector that have examined the dynamic relationship between the State and voluntary sector and its role in social policy at the level of policy framing, formulation and implementation (Lewis, 1999, Lewis, 2005, Billis and Glennerster, 1998, Deakin, 2001, Kendall, 2010). By also drawing on studies of civil society strengthening programmes internationally, the article seeks to serve as a bridge between these two areas of knowledge (i.e. the voluntary sector in Britain and international studies of civil society). Because while the neoliberal policies of marketisation and the instrumentalisation of voluntary organisations for service delivery, which I discuss in this article, have been implemented globally, despite recent attempts at bridging, studies of the voluntary sector in Britain and international studies of civil society still remain largely isolated from each other (Deakin, 2005, Lewis, 2010).[2]

Instrumentalising Civil Society: Home and Away

Over the past 25 years, bilateral and multilateral donors working in both developing and transition countries (i.e., the former socialist countries in Eastern Europe and the USSR) used an exceedingly normative conceptualisation of civil society to identify civil society as the source of "good" and distinct from the "bad" state (Bebbington et al., 2008, 6) and subsequently spent large sums of money strengthening the institutions of civil society, as a means of promoting democracy, good governance, poverty reduction, human rights, and the rule of law. In the context of development, government was characterised as inefficient, hampered by bureaucracy and in thrall to self-interested politicians (Robinson, 1997). It was believed that the public sector's inflated bureaucracies and inefficiencies would be corrected through greater

---

[1] Domestic violence is but one form of violence against women. Other forms of violence include rape, female genital mutilation, etc.

[2] It is encouraging to see that in April 2013, the Social Policy Association held a joint conference with the Development Studies Association titled "Meeting Emerging Global Policy Challenges: What can social policy and international development studies learn from each other?" (27 – 28 April, 2013).

involvement of non-state actors – such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and private companies. NGOs in particular came to be seen as "magic bullet" solutions in that they would "bring alternative ideas to poverty reduction and provide improved and more cost-effective service provision compared with states" (Lewis, 2010, 333).

There is a vast literature both within development studies and in studies of post-socialist transitions which examines the impact of civil society strengthening programmes. Scholars have argued that the emphasis on creating professionalised NGOs which could take over service provision, came at the expense of their potential emancipatory and oppositional roles and resulted in de-mobilising and de-politicising civil society organisations and silencing diverse voices (Howell and Pearce, 2001, Mandel, 2012, Glasius et al., 2004). In Britain, efforts aimed at instrumentalising the voluntary sector for service delivery have been around since the 1980s and there has been much debate over how this affects the sector's independence and ability to voice criticisms of government policy (Deakin, 2001, Kendall, 2010, Lewis, 2005, Lewis, 1999). Beginning with Thatcher in the 1980s, successive governments have attempted to roll back the State, privatise services, and to engage more voluntary organisations in service provision (Harris, 2010). The *Compact* initiative, which was signed in 1998, was intended to "create a new approach to partnership" and "an enabling mechanism" for 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).

Until 2010, however, the term 'civil society', which had gained traction within British academic circles since the 1990s (Deakin 2001), was not commonly used within official discourse. Shortly after taking power in May 2010, the Coalition Government changed the name of the Office of the Third Sector to the Office of Civil Society (OCS) and the term "civil society" began to replace the "third sector" in Government usage (Alcock, 2010). These are not simply semantic differences. On the contrary, as Lewis argues, these terminological constructions are highly ideological and reflect a long-standing distinction, dating back to British colonial history, in which the World is divided between "at home" and "out there" (Lewis, 2010, 338).

Of course there are differences in the levels of institutional development and the capacity of civil society sectors among countries, and Britain has been and continues to be a leader in this regard. However, if we examine the policies aimed at instrumentalising civil society "at home" and "out there", we find some striking similarities. In the context of Big Society, the official discourse around civil society bears many similarities to the ways in which civil society was promoted internationally. These include the normative conceptualisation of civil society as well as the manner in which civil society is expected to professionalise, become more "entrepreneurial" (Cameron, 2010) and "to have a much greater role in running public services" (Hurd and Maude, 2010). This approach to civil society continues, and I would add intensifies the process of "technocratic expansion", which began in the 1990s, and which prioritises partnership, cooperation and "problem solving", whilst de-emphasising struggle and confrontation (Kendall and Deakin, 2010). As Kendall writes, while voluntary organisations in Britain have always been keen to preserve a distance from "politics", independence has repeatedly been proclaimed as a desirable aim (Kendall, 2010, 244). Independence in the context of the voluntary sector is

understood as the independence of voice, mission and action. It is this independence, I argue, which is currently under threat.

The OCS 2010 strategy document, *Building a Stronger Civil Society,* sets out the Government's plans for the new relationship between the sector and the state (OCS, 2010). The document describes voluntary organisations as being "at the heart" of the Government's ambitions to create a Big Society and the aim of "building a stronger civil society" is described as a means by which government can "harness [civil society's] power to find better solutions to our social problems" (OCS, 2010, 3). In November 2010, the OCS sent an open letter to the voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations stating, "…civil society has an enormously important role to play in supporting people; helping people find a voice and in shaping and delivering better public services. That is why we invite you to be the key partners in building the Big Society" (Hurd and Maude, 2010).

In a speech delivered at the 2010 Women's Aid conference, Home Secretary Theresa May echoed the above position and described the women's sector as "a model of the Big Society we wish to build". The Big Society was a society, May argued, in which "we all work together to address problems, conscious that government has a role to play but that it does not have all the answers, and [recognises] the role played by charities [and] voluntary groups" (Women's Aid, 2010).

While Government rhetoric regarding civil society is highly normative and focused on how various types of civil society organisations can play a role in "shaping and delivering" public services, giving "voice" to people, and addressing social problems, recently prominent Conservative politicians have publicly rebuked voluntary organisations for daring to criticise Government policies while receiving statutory funding (Grayling, 2013, Rees-Mogg, 2013). Furthermore, the introduction in July 2013 of the Transparency of Lobbying, Non-party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Bill has led to much public debate as some charities have labelled the proposed bill the "gagging law" (38 Degrees, 2013), arguing that if passed, it would have a chilling effect on freedom of expression and would negatively affect the ability of civil society organisations to campaign around policy issues (Last, 2013).

Big Society and Domestic Violence: The Policy Framework

Domestic violence in Britain is addressed by various government departments and agencies including the Home Office, the Police, Crown Prosecution Service and the National Health Service, as well as voluntary organisations. According to the latest British Crime Survey findings, at least 1 in 4 women in Britain will experience domestic abuse in their lifetime (Home Office, 2012b); domestic violence accounts for 18% of all violent incidents; and the cost of providing public services (including health, legal and social services) to victims and their lost economic output runs to billions of pounds annually (Home Office, 2012a). However stark these figures appear, they only represent the tip of the iceberg as data collection on domestic violence is hampered by underreporting by victims and the absence of a statutory definition (Strickland, 2013). Moreover, a focus on individuals doesn't capture the fact that the impact is much broader and not limited to the individual victims of the

abuse (House of Commons, 2010). Indeed, in 75% - 90% of incidents of domestic violence, children are in the same or adjacent room (Department of Education, 2011, 26). There is evidence that children who live with domestic violence are at an increased risk of behavioural problems, emotional trauma and mental health difficulties in adulthood (Walklate, 2008, Gadd, 2012, Department of Education, 2011). It is important to recognise the impact on children and to invest in educational and preventative services because as research demonstrates, when investment to these services is cut, this only ends up storing challenges for the future (Kane and Allen, 2011, 5). (For more on how domestic violence is reflected in child protection policy see Department of Education 2011).

In 2011, the Government launched the *Call to End Violence Against Women and Girls* action plan and central government has committed more than £40 million to reduce domestic violence over a five year period from 2010-2015 (Prime Minister's office, 2012, Home Office, 2011, Home Office, 2013, Home Office, 2012a). This funding is not ring fenced and since the budget to fund domestic violence services is set at the national level, but provision occurs at the local level, despite Home Office exhortations, public spending cuts are having a "dramatic and uneven" impact across localities and there is a pronounced loss of specialist services (Towers and Walby, 2012, 3, Southall Black Sisters, 2011). Freedom of Information requests lodged by voluntary organisations have shown that between 2009/10 – 2012/13, £5.6 million in cuts were made to domestic violence refuges and other women's services across England (Bennhold, 2012). This loss in funding has meant refuges have begun turning women away (Topping, 2012).

Therefore, while recognising the importance of local participation, we must consider who holds power locally and how that power is used. If local communities are to take over the running of services, a certain level of expertise, knowledge and commitment to addressing domestic violence, is required which may not exist in all locations. Reports by charities have highlighted the patchy provision of existing services (Women's Aid, 2011, EVAW, 2007, Rights of Women, 2010) and pointed to the dangers of a "tyranny of the majority" in which minority rights, including women's rights, may be overlooked in populist decision-making at the community level (V4C and WRC, 2012, One East Midlands, 2011). Presently, at the local level, there is low representation of women in Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) which has meant that the area in which a woman lives can directly influence her experience of and access to remedies in respect of domestic violence (Rights of Women, 2010). LSPs bring together representatives from the local statutory, voluntary, community and private sectors to address local problems, allocate funding, and discuss strategies and initiatives. Representation of women's organisations in LSPs is important so that their views are heard. But as one respondent explained,

> …women's organisations don't have the capacity to engage in local decision making. And yet, the important decisions about the scarce funding are being made at the local level through LSPs. Without having women's voices at the local level, how do you ensure that their needs are being met? (5 December 2012)

Women's organisations working on domestic violence have historically been underfunded and have heavily relied on statutory funding and lack a diverse income

base (Jarvinen et al., 2008, Kail, 2011, EVAW, 2007). Alternative sources of funding are difficult to come by as domestic violence charities are not generally popular with individual donors (Pharoah, 2012, Clark et al., 2012). According to the National Council of Voluntary Organisations, the majority of individual donations in 2010-2011 went to medical and hospital charities (64%) and children's charities (24%). Women's organisations did not even receive 1% of the individual donations (Clark et al., 2012). Moreover, people tend not to give to causes that are paid for by statutory bodies, such as "women's refuges or advice services" and attempts by such organisations to substitute statutory funding with donations can be a "long, and possibly futile exercise" (Kane and Allen, 2011, 29). Given this reliance on statutory funding, loss of this funding compromises the work of women's organisations. At present, the existing patchwork provision is being exacerbated by the cuts as well as the discord between the national policy framework and local implementation. These factors combined point to the dangers of the Big Society's focus on local communities and raise questions whether national commitments to fighting violence are effectively being transmitted to and addressed at the local level.

Challenges in Policy Shaping

For the past forty years, feminist organisations around the globe have played an instrumental role in getting domestic violence on the policy agenda (Dobash and Dobash, 1992, Keck and Sikkink, 1998). In England, the first domestic violence refuge was opened in London 1971 and the original refuges were constructed on a feminist ethos where the aim wasn't simply to provide food and shelter, but to empower women (Lovenduski and Randall, 1993, 305). Although the feminist ethos was somewhat neutralised in the 1980s due to greater professionalisation and increased reliance on statutory funding for service delivery (Lovenduski and Randall, 1993, 308), nonetheless, women's organisations played an important role in helping mainstream the issue of domestic violence while keeping a focus on the gendered aspects of violence (Kelly, 2005).

Globally, the UK has been and continues to be a leader in this area (Rights of Women, 2010, STADV, 2012), but in the current policy context, which is dominated by austerity policies and an almost overriding concern with cost savings, voluntary organisations working on domestic violence are having to dilute, if not entirely abandon, the human rights and gender equality focus and instead replace them with approaches that have a cost-savings focus. Moreover, as I discuss below, ever shrinking pots of money and growing competition over resources within the sector has led to caution and in some instances, self-censorship, as organisations fear that vocal criticism of government policies may lead to loss of statutory funding.

Value for Money or Human Rights?

Policy makers believe that larger, generic providers offer more value for money than specialist providers (Kail, 2011, Towers and Walby, 2012). While cost-savings are undoubtedly attractive to officials, a number of leading domestic violence charities and experts have expressed concerns that the emergence of generic providers will lead to "the potential loss of specialist knowledge, skills and experience" in delivering services (Towers and Walby, 2012, 28) and that the opening up of services and commissioning "might be prompting a downward spiral in the stability and sustainability of these [women's] organisations" (Kail, 2011).

This preference for generic providers is also informed by the "gender neutral" stance in the commissioning of services in the health, welfare and criminal justice sectors, which questions the gendered basis of domestic violence (Nixon and Humphreys, 2010, 142). Indeed, while surveys show that men can and do experience domestic violence, as Walklate (2008) argues, we should not lose sight that domestic violence remains a gendered crime. A recent report by the UN states that globally, "women aged 15-44 are more at risk from rape and domestic violence than from cancer, car accidents, war and malaria" (United Nations, 2013). Studies demonstrate that "many more women experience domestic violence than men" and they are more disproportionately at risk of spousal homicide than men (Walby and Allen, 2004 , Nixon and Humphreys, 2010). As one respondent stated:

> What is happening locally is that organisations have to dilute their gender specificity and are asked to deliver more for less. Of these, the gender neutral approach is the most problematic because it ignores the real dangers and compromises the safety of women and children. (30 January 2013)

Another respondent stated:

> In the past, domestic violence services were informed and shaped by feminist thinking. Now, by placing value on gender neutrality and thinking that 'anybody can deliver', the policy landscape has been completely altered. It's becoming more corporate and you have the big players, the generic providers who may have a social purpose but who operate like a business. In the area of refuges, there are massive housing associations that don't have that ethos, history or expertise of working on domestic violence, but they are very good at winning contracts. These organisations become the gatekeepers who win the big contracts and then subcontract to smaller organisations. Smaller organisations, which have more expertise, but less experience winning contracts are forced into subcontracting. What happens is that they have less autonomy, but if they didn't subcontract they'd be out of it entirely. (31 January 2013)

The focus on efficiency and generic providers existed under the previous Labour government, but has intensified in the current context. But the meaning of effectiveness will vary depending on the perspective of the funder or user of the service. For instance, in the context of domestic violence, effective services aren't just about providing a bed for the night, but also supporting the recovery and empowerment of survivors, investing in educational and prevention programmes as well as working with perpetrators of violence (Gadd 2012). It is important to keep in mind, as one respondent stated, that contracts are not given based on "ethos" but on which organisation provides the lowest, most competitive bid (8 February 2013) and another stated "officials want to hear about cost-savings, not human rights" (8 January 2013). As one respondent said:

> The competitive tendering process is allowing large generic providers to win contracts as cost becomes the main focus. The feedback from our national partners shows that generic providers such as housing associations are using care workers to drive down cost and make their bids competitive. This downgrades the skills base because care workers have fewer skills than specialist staff. But refuges aren't only about providing food and care, you

need specialised skills to help women recover and rebuild their lives (30 November 2012).

Given that on average specialist staff working in the voluntary sector are paid between £27,052 – £37, 371/annum, whereas the average annual salary for care staff is £14,453 (Clark et al., 2012, 70), it is clear why employing care staff makes sense from a financial perspective. Whether and how this affects quality of care requires further research.

The focus on savings has also engendered criticism of existing equality and human rights legislation as policy makers have argued that certain measures in the 2010 Equality Act are placing "unnecessary or disproportionate burdens on business" and that changes to the Act are needed to "use tax payer's money wisely" (Home Office 2012). In the area of domestic violence, this aversion to human rights became quite apparent when during discussions on the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, the Government objected to and proposed removing Article 3(a) of the Convention which describes domestic violence as a "violation of human rights" and replacing it with the phrase that it constitutes "a serious obstacle to women's enjoyment of rights". According to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Government's reservations were based on "difficulties with certain articles which would require a significant change in Government policy and/or legislative reform in the UK" (FCO, 2011). Amnesty International criticised the Government's position arguing that this amendment, should it pass, would "significantly weaken" the legal basis of this treaty and would undermine the importance of the problem (Amnesty International, 2011). Despite the Government's initial resistance and due to pressure from women's and human rights organisations, the Government signed the Convention in June 2012, but has yet to ratify it.

Pragmatism or Self – Censorship?

According to a number of respondents, the current policy environment is becoming "more cutthroat" (31 January 2013), "highly competitive" (11 December 2012) and their dependence on ever shrinking pots of money has led to greater caution and in certain instances, self-censorship. As one respondent said:

We very much shape our campaigning activities around the approach of the Government. We are quite pragmatic in that respect. When the Big Society agenda was announced, we conducted a study with our members to help them demonstrate the economic as well as the social value of their work. …it's always been a struggle for women's organisations to get funding, but now we are so desperate for funding that we are really having to market what we do according to what matters to decision makers and that is money, cost saving (5 December 2012).

Another respondent stated:

We are walking on a thin double edged sword. We can't be too vocal in our criticism of policies because we rely on statutory funding, so we have to operate with tact and diplomacy. (30 November 2012).

Another respondent agreed that it was important for an organisation to not appear to criticise government policy too vocally (11 December) and cited the example of the Poppy Project as an instance where outspoken criticism was perceived as leading to the withdrawal of statutory funding. Since charities have historically played an important advocacy role, the fear of losing funding and the self-censorship it engenders will be detrimental to their effectiveness and independence.

In 2003, Eaves established the Poppy Project which was an initiative providing support, advocacy and accommodation to women who had been trafficked to Britain. In February 2011, Denise Marshall, the chief executive of Eaves, announced she was returning the OBE[3] she received for services to disadvantaged women stating that government cuts and the Big Society agenda were impeding Eaves' ability in supporting vulnerable women. Criticising the Big Society, Marshall said:

> To be told that we are all in this together and must make cuts like everyone else isn't right, because we didn't have enough money to begin with...Domestic violence victims don't go and storm the local town hall to demand more help; rape victims don't go to the local paper to complain that there isn't a good service for them. They are invisible (Gentleman, 2011).

In April 2011, just a few months after Marshall's outspoken criticism, Eaves lost the £6 million Poppy Project contract. The contract went to the Salvation Army, which had no previous experience of working on trafficking. The reason given by Government for the change of service provider was that the Salvation Army was able to offer "victims a more diverse range of services" and that its services would be open to both men and women (Butler and Travis, 2011).

My point is not to prove whether or not Eaves lost the contract because of Marshall's criticism, but rather to highlight how examples such as this, as well as a case in which an organisation was prevented from publically launching a critical report about the Big Society (5 December 2012), have served to discipline and silence criticisms from voluntary organisations. One respondent argued:

> The dynamics of the statutory and voluntary sector partnerships in the domestic violence field mirrors the dynamics of an abusive relationship with the voluntary sector in the role of the victim. Voluntary organisations are over-ruled, ignored and often even threatened. I have sat in a meeting and witnessed how a voluntary sector representative was trying to take the local authority to task for failing to follow its own policy only to have the strategic lead for domestic violence stare her in the eyes and say 'Do you want funding for next year? Then I suggest you shut up.' (11 January 2013).

The National Coalition for Independent Action has urged voluntary organisations to be bolder in their criticism and argued that by "declining to highlight the ideologically noxious thinking behind the 'big society', voluntary organisations are colluding in their own demise, allowing the government to turn all activity that used

---

[3] 'OBE' is the Order of the British Empire which recognises distinguished service to the arts, sciences and public services outside the Civil Service.

to be called 'charity', 'voluntary' or 'civil society' into business" (NCIA, 2011).

While there are national level women's organisations that continue to challenge current policies, the majority of my respondents cited the pressure to avoid confrontations and to be seen to be working in "partnership".

Civil Society beyond the Voluntary Sector

Civil society has always been about more than the voluntary sector and service delivery and the potential of civil society to challenge the status quo and drive social change remains. For instance, the Refuge Against Cuts demonstrations, which were held on 8 December 2012 at Starbucks shops across England, were organised by the activist group UK Uncut to protest against how "women's services [are] being destroyed by the government's unnecessary cuts" (UK Uncut, 2012). According to a UK Uncut organiser, the idea for direct action developed out of a dialogue between UK Uncut and experts from women's organisations and feminist groups (13 December 2012). While some of these groups, such as Southall Black Sisters, made their participation public, there were many other organisations, including some of my respondents, that were involved 'behind the scenes'. A UK Uncut organiser said:

> In October 2012 we were contacted by women's groups who raised the issue about the impact of the cuts [on women]. We are aware of the institutional constraints on charities. The tactics we [UK Uncut] use go beyond traditional methods of campaigning and we don't want to take away from the great work that charities do. But there was so much anger and we felt people need to be shocked into action (13 December 2012).

Such forms of direct action have long been used by civil society organisations, both in Britain and globally, to spark debate and action around social issues (Oliviero and Simmons, 2002). The Refuge Against Cuts protest had two very important results. First, fearing a boycott and further bad publicity, Starbucks, took the 'unprecedented' step and agreed to pay £20 million in tax over the next two years (BBC, 2012). Second, this action, which was widely covered by the mainstream media (Grierson, 2012), led to debate about the gendered impact of the cuts.

Clearly, direct action is not a strategy which can or indeed should be utilised by all voluntary organisations, but in this context it is important to ask whether the role of civil society should be to become ever more 'business-like', 'entrepreneurial' and to take over the running of public services or whether it is, as Howell and Pearce argue, to provide the intellectual and associational space in which to "reflect openly and critically and to experiment with alternative ways of organising social, economic, and political life" (Howell and Pearce 2001, 237). These are not necessarily mutually exclusive; civil society organisations have played and will continue to play an important role in providing services, but if they are to maintain the high levels of trust they enjoy from the public (Hilton, 2012), they should re-evaluate their strategies and ask themselves what it is they ultimately seek to accomplish and whether in a bid to demonstrate value for money, they are sacrificing their mission for money.

Conclusion

In this article I examined how the policies of the Big Society and public spending cuts are affecting the independence and ability of women's organisations to engage in progressive policy shaping. I situated my analysis within the broader context of neoliberal civil society strengthening programmes internationally. There are several shared tendencies and processes between "home" and "out there" including the normative conceptualisation of civil society and the pressures placed on civil society organisations to professionalise and become more entrepreneurial and business-like. In practice, the neoliberal policies of the Big Society agenda, together with the public spending cuts are creating a highly competitive, cutthroat environment. Apart from the closure of specialist services and increasing participation of generic providers, which have come about as a result of the cuts as well as the Big Society's opening up of public services, I argued that the independence and ability of organisations to engage in progressive policy shaping has been negatively affected.

In the current policy context which prioritises cost-savings, women's organisations are shifting their campaigning focus around domestic violence away from human rights and gender equality towards highlighting how their work provides good value for money and cost savings. Women's organisations argue that they are shaping their campaigning strategies and discourses around the approach of the government out of strategic consideration. Yet, what implications will this strategy have on their ability to engage in progressive policy shaping? In other words, in diluting the human rights and equality frames, can organisations change the terms of the debate and challenge the status quo, or are they simply working within the model and parameters set by government? Although I only examined the domestic violence sector, there is evidence that these findings apply to the voluntary sector more broadly. The 2013 Independence Panel report found that in the absence of "effective safeguards for independence", self-censorship was "increasingly common" and that the conditions in the voluntary sector, from the perspective of independence, had "deteriorated" from 2011 to 2013. They argue that when independence is lost, diverse voices will become increasingly silent, debate will narrow, and voluntary organisations will look "to their contract terms rather than their mission when vulnerable people turn up on their doorstep for support" (Independence Panel, 2013, 10). This, they contend, will mean that the trust and public support which voluntary organisations now hold may be eroded.

Domestic violence remains a serious problem in England and addressing it requires hard political work and participation which cannot necessarily be left to market providers (Gadd 2012: 510). Moreover, studies show that increased public spending on domestic violence services actually **lowered** the wider cost of domestic violence from £23 billion in 2001 to £16 billion in 2008 (Walby, 2009). That decrease in wider cost was achieved, in part by the development of and increased utilisation of publically funded services (Walby, 2009), which are today being dismantled and lost. Thus the current policies, which focus on short-term cost-savings and the shift towards marketisation, may actually end up costing the state more money in the long run.

While policy makers focus on short-term, cost-effective and gender neutral solutions, the underlying causes of domestic violence which include gender inequality and stereotypes as well as public attitudes towards tolerating violence, require long-term approaches which focus on prosecution, prevention, education, and protection.

Women's organisations, as discussed in this article, continue to heavily rely on statutory funding. Given this dependence, it is vitally important that their independence of voice, mission and action is safeguarded. Otherwise, the ability of women's organisations to engage in progressive policy shaping and campaigning on behalf of vulnerable people, such as victims of domestic violence, will be threatened.

References

38 DEGREES. 2013. *Fighting the UK Gagging Law* [Online]. Available: https://secure.38degrees.org.uk/page/speakout/gagging-bill-write-to-mps [Accessed 19 September 2013].

ALBROW, M. 2012. 'Big Society' as a rhetorical intervention. *In:* ISHKANIAN, A. & SZRETER, S. (eds.) *The Big Society Debate: A New Agenda for Social Welfare?* Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

ALCOCK, P. 2010. Building the Big Society: a new policy environment for the third sector in England. *Voluntary Sector Review,* 1**,** 379-389.

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL 2011. Time to Take a Stand: Amnesty International opposes amendments that will weaken the Council of Europe Treaty on Violence Against Women

BBC. 2012. *UK Uncut protests over Starbucks 'tax avoidance'* [Online]. Available: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-20650945.

BEBBINGTON, A. J., HICKEY, S. & MITLIN, D. C. 2008. Introduction. *In:* BEBBINGTON, A. J., HICKEY, S. & MITLIN, D. C. (eds.) *Can NGOs Make a Difference: The Challenge of Development Alternatives.* London: Zed.

BENNHOLD, K. 2012. Cuts in U.K. Raise Risks for Women. *The New York Times*, 17 April 2012.

BILLIS, D. & GLENNERSTER, H. 1998. Human Services and the Voluntary Sector: Towards a Theory of Comparative Advantage. *Journal of Social Policy,* 27**,** 79-98.

BLOND, P. 2010. *Red Tory: How Left and Right have Broken Britain and How we can Fix It* London, Faber.

BUTLER, P. & TRAVIS, A. 2011. *Sex trafficking charity loses out to Salvation Army over £6m contract* [Online]. Available: http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2011/apr/11/eaves-housing-trafficking-salvation-army?CMP=twt_gu.

CAMERON, D. 2010. David Cameron's Big Society speech from 18 May 2010 re-published in Supporting a Stronger Civil Society *In:* SOCIETY, O. F. C. (ed.).

CENTRE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY. 2010. *LSE Centre for Civil Society "What is civil society?"* [Online]. Available: http://www.webarchive.org.uk/wayback/archive/20100820110538/htt

p://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/introduction/default.htm [Accessed 5 August 2013].

CLARK, J., KANE, D., WILDING, K. & BASS, P. 2012. 2012 UK Civil Society Almanac. London: NCVO.

CORBETT, S. & WALKER, A. 2013. The big society: Rediscovery of the 'social' or rhetorical fig-leaf for neo-liberalism? *Critical Social Policy,* 33**,** 451-472.

DEAKIN, N. 2001. *In Search of Civil Society,* Basingstoke, Palgrave.

DEAKIN, N. 2005. Civil society and civil renewal. *In:* ROBB, C. (ed.) *Voluntary Action: Meeting the challenges of the 21st Century.* London: NCVO.

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION 2011. The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report - a Child-centred system. London.

DOBASH, R. E. & DOBASH, R. P. 1992. *Women, Violence and Social Change,* London, Routledge.

EDWARDS, J. 2012. Introduction: Retrieving the Big Society. *The Political Quarterly,* 82**,** 1-8.

EVAW 2007. Making the Grade? the third annual independent analysis of UK Government initiatives on violence against women. London: End Violence Against Women Coalition.

FCO 2011. EIGHTH REPORT FROM THE FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE OF SESSION 2010-12 THE FCO'S HUMAN RIGHTS WORK 2010-11. *In:* OFFICE, F. A. C. (ed.). London.

GADD, D. 2012. Domestic abuse prevention after Raoul Moat. *Critical Social Policy,* 32**,** 495-516.

GENTLEMAN, A. 2011. Women's refuge chief returns OBE in protest over cuts. *Guardian* 15 February 2011

GLASIUS, M., LEWIS, D. & SECKINEGLIN, H. 2004. *Exploring Civil Society: Political and cultural contexts,* London, Routledge.

GRAYLING, C. 2013. The judicial review system is not a promotional tool for countless Left-wing campaigners. *Daily Mail*, 10 September 2013.

GRIERSON, J. 2012. *Ground down: Starbucks pledges to pay £20 million tax over next two years* [Online]. Available: http://www.independent.co.uk/news/business/news/ground-down-starbucks-pledges-to-pay-20-million-tax-over-next-two-years-8389887.html [Accessed 5 December 2013].

HARRIS, B. 2010. Voluntary action and the state in historical perspective. *Voluntary Sector Review,* 1**,** 25-40.

HARRIS, M., ROCHESTER, C. & HALFPENNY, P. 2001. Voluntary Organisations and Social Policy: Twenty Years of Change. *In:* HARRIS, M. & ROCHESTER, C. (eds.) *Voluntary Organisations and Social Policy: Perspectives on Change and Choice.* London: Palgrave.

HARVEY, D. 2007. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism,* Oxford, Oxford University Press.

HILTON, M. 2012. Charities, voluntary organisations and non-governmental organisations in Britain since 1945. *In:* ISHKANIAN, A. & SZRETER, S. (eds.) *The Big Society Debate: A New Agenda for Social Welfare?* Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

HOME OFFICE 2011. Call to End Violence Against Women and Girls: action plan. *In:* OFFICE, H. (ed.). London.

HOME OFFICE. 2012a. *Action Plan* [Online]. Available: http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/crime/violence-against-women-girls/strategic-vision/.

HOME OFFICE. 2012b. *British Crime Survey Statistics 2010/2011* [Online]. Available: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/british-crime-survey-datasets.

HOME OFFICE. 2013. *Funding* [Online]. Available: http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/crime/violence-against-women-girls/vawg-funding/.

HOUSE OF COMMONS 2010. Domestic violence statistics SN/SG/950. London.

HOUSE OF COMMONS 2012. The Big Society: Further Report with the Government's Response to the Committee's Seventeenth Report of Session 2010-2012. London.

HOWELL, J. & PEARCE, J. 2001. *Civil Society and Development: A Critical Exploration* Boulder, Colorado, Lynne Rienner

HTUN, M. & WELDON, S. L. 2012. The Civic Origins of Progressive Policy Change: Combating Violence agianst Women in Global Perspective, 1975-2005. *American Political Science Review,* 106**,** 548-569.

HURD, N. & MAUDE, F. 2010. Open Letter to Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Sectors. London: Office of Civil Society

INDEPENDENCE PANEL 2013. Independence Under Threat: The Voluntary Sector in 2013. *Panel on the Independence of the Voluntary Sector.* London: The Barings Foundation.

ISHKANIAN, A. 2007. En-gendering civil society and democracy building: the anti-domestic violence campaign in Armenia. *Social politics,* 14**,** 488-525.

ISHKANIAN, A. 2012. From 'shock therapy' to Big Society: lessons from the postsocialist transitions. *In:* ISHKANIAN, A. & SZRETER, S. (eds.) *The Big Society Debate: A New Agenda for Social Welfare?* Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

JARVINEN, J., KAIL, A. & MILLER, I. 2008. Hard Knock Life - Violence Against Women: A Guide for Donors and Funders. London: New Philanthropy Capital.

KAIL, A. 2011. *Why violence against women charities may be vulnerable* [Online]. Available: https://www.thinknpc.org/blog/why-violence-against-women-charities-may-be-vulnerable/ [Accessed 5 February 2013].

KALDOR, M. 2003. *Global Civil Society: An Answer to War,* Cambridge, Polity Press.

KANE, D. & ALLEN, J. 2011. Counting the Cuts: the impact of cuts on the UK voluntary and community sector. London: NCVO.

KECK, M. E. & SIKKINK, K. 1998. *Activists Beyond Borders: advocacy networks in international politics,* Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press.

KELLY, L. 2005. Inside Outsiders: Mainstream Violence Against Women into Human Rights Discourse and Practice. *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 7**,** 471-495.

KENDALL, J. 2010. Bringing ideology back in: the erosion of political innocence in English third sector policy. *Journal of Political Ideologies,* 15**,** 241-258.

KENDALL, J. & DEAKIN, N. 2010. Editorial: Political ideologies and the third sector. *Journal of Political Ideologies,* 15**,** 221-225.

LAST, J. 2013. *Legal adviser backs up NCVO lobbying bill warning* [Online]. Available: http://www.civilsociety.co.uk/governance/news/content/15983/legal_advisor_backs_up_ncvo_lobbying_bill_warning.

LEVITAS, R. 2012. The Just's Umbrella: Austerity and the Big Society in Coalition policy and beyond. *Critical Social Policy* 32**,** 320-342.

LEWIS, D. 2010. Political Ideologies and non-governmental organizations: An anthropological perspective. *Journal of Political Ideologies,* 15**,** 333-345.

LEWIS, J. 1999. Reviewing the Relationship Between the Voluntary Sector and the State in Britain in the 1990s. *Voluntas,* 10**,** 255-269.

LEWIS, J. 2005. New Labour's Approach to the Voluntary Sector: Independence and the Meaning of Partnership. *Social Policy & Society,* 4**,** 121-131.

LOVENDUSKI, J. & RANDALL, V. 1993. *Contemporary Feminist Politics: Women and Power in Britain,* Oxford, Oxford University Press.

MANDEL, R. 2012. Introduction: Transition to Where? Developing Post-Soviet Space. *Slavic Review,* 71**,** 223-233.

NCIA 2011. Big market: how localism and the 'big society' damage independent voluntary action. National Coalition for Independent Action.

NIXON, J. & HUMPHREYS, C. 2010. Marshalling the Evidence: Using Intersectionality in the Domestic Violence Frame *Social politics,* 17**,** 137-158.

NORMAN, J. 2010. *The Big Society : the anatomy of the new politics,* Buckingham, University of Buckingham Press.

OCS 2010. Building a Stronger Civil Society: A strategy for voluntary and community groups, charities and social enterprises. London: Office for Civil Society.

OLIVIERO, M. B. & SIMMONS, A. 2002. Who's Minding the Store? Global Civil Society and Corporate Social Responsibility. *In:* GLASIUS, M., KALDOR, M. & ANHEIER, H. K. (eds.) *Global Civil Society 2002* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

ONE EAST MIDLANDS. 2011. *Race, ethnicty and the Big Society* [Online]. Available: http://www.oneeastmidlands.org.uk/node/861.

ONG, A. 2006. *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty,* Durham, NC, Duke University Press.

PHAROAH, C. 2012. Funding and the Big Society. *In:* ISHKANIAN, A. & SZRETER, S. (eds.) *The Big Society Debate: A New Agenda for Social Welfare?* Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

PRATT, A. 2001. Neoliberalism and social policy. *In:* LAVALETTE, M. & PRATT, A. (eds.) *Social Policy: a conceptual and theoretical introduction.* London: SAGE Publications.

PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE 2012. PM/DPM statement: Convention on Violence Against Women - Number 10. London.

REES-MOGG, J. 2013. Why should you pay for charities to lobby the Government? *Daily Telegraph*, 4 September 2013.

RIGHTS OF WOMEN 2010. Measuring Up? UK Compliance with international committments on violence against women in England and Wales. London: Rights of Women.

ROBINSON, M. 1997. Privatising the voluntary sector: NGOs as public service contractors. *In:* HULME, D. E., MICHAEL (ed.) *NGOs, States and Donors.* London: Macmillan

RODGER, J. J. 2012. 'Regulating the Poor': Observations on the 'Structural Coupling' of Welfare, Criminal Justice and the Voluntary Sector in a 'Big Society'. *Social Policy & Administration,* 46**,** 413-431.

SAGE, D. 2012. A challenge to liberalism? The communitarianism of the Big Society and Blue Labour. *Critical Social Policy,* 32**,** 365-382.

SOUTHALL BLACK SISTERS 2011. Submission to the UN CEDAW Committee: Recommendation on harmful practices affecting girls under eighteen. London: Southall Black Sisters.

STADV. 2012. *Standing Together Against Domestic Violence - About Us* [Online]. Available: http://www.standingtogether.org.uk/standingtogetherlondonwhat/?no_cache=1.

STRICKLAND, P. 2013. Domestic Violence London: House of Commons Library.

SZRETER, S. & ISHKANIAN, A. 2012. Introduction: what is Big Society? Contemporary social policy in a historical and comparative perspective. *In:* ISHKANIAN, A. & SZRETER, S. (eds.) *The Big Society Debate: A New Agenda for Social Welfare?* Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

TAYLOR-GOOBY, P. 2012. The civil society route to social cohesion. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy,* 32**,** 368-385.

THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY. 2010. *Cameron unveils "Big Society" plan* [Online]. Available: http://www.conservatives.com/News/News_stories/2010/03/Plans_announced_to_help_build_a_Big_Society.aspx.

TOPPING, A. 2012. Cuts force domestic violence refuges to turn victims away. *The Guardian*, 31 January 2012.

TOWERS, J. & WALBY, S. 2012. Measuring the impact of cuts in public expenditure on the provision of services to prevent violence against women and girls. *Report for Northern Rock Foundation and Trust for London.*

UK UNCUT. 2012. *About UK Uncut* [Online]. Available: www.ukuncut.org.uk/.

UNITED NATIONS. 2013. *Ending Violence Against Women and Girls* [Online]. Available: http://www.un.org/en/globalissues/briefingpapers/endviol/index.shtml.

V4C & WRC 2012. Big Society & Equalities: The bigger picture. London: Voice 4 Change and Women's Resource Centre,.

WALBY, S. 2009. The Cost of Domestic Violence: Up-date 2009. *In:* UNESCO (ed.) *Project of the UNESCO Chair in Gender Research, Lancaster University.*

WALBY, S. & ALLEN, J. 2004. Domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking: findings from the British Crime Survey: Home Office Research Study 276. London: Home Office.

WALKLATE, S. 2008. What is to be done about violence against women?: Gender, violence, cosmopolitanism and the law. *British Journal of Criminology,* 48**,** 39-54.

WOMEN'S AID. 2010. *36th Annual Women's Aid National Conference 2010 Theresa May MP Speech* [Online]. Available:

http://www.womensaid.org.uk/landing_page.asp?section=00010001001 5000800040002 [Accessed 14 January 2013 2013].

WOMEN'S AID. 2011. *Topic: Domestic violence services* [Online]. Women's Aid Available: http://www.womensaid.org.uk/domestic_violence_topic.asp?section=00 01000100220037&sectionTitle=Domestic+violence+services [Accessed 4 April 2012].

ZIMMECK, M., ROCHESTER, C. & RUSHBROOKE, B. 2011. Use it or Lose it: A summative evaluation of the Compact. London: Commission for the Compact.