

# Women and austerity: Beyond 'Make do and mend'

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Contributors to the roundtable: **Erica Burman** (Manchester Metropolitan University); **Sharlene Hesse-Biber** (Boston College); **Suriya Nayak** (University of Salford); and **Liz Sayce** (Disability Rights UK).

## Introduction (Erica Burman)

This year the POWS conference examined women and austerity. It denaturalised austerity by highlighting it as a discourse and a practice, and one that not everyone is subject to; the rich continue to get richer. Building on these discussions, Erica posed four questions for contributors to consider:

- In what ways is austerity a psychological issue?
- In what way is it a gender(ed) or feminist issue?
- What might a POWS arena contribute to the analysis of austerity?
- What might POWS do about current conditions of austerity?

Erica highlighted that austerity is gendered. This is evident from daily reports about how many children live in poverty and that women are more likely to be in low paid, insecure, casual jobs and are, therefore, more dispensable. On a global level the labour of women and children is increasingly tapped as a new form of exploitation of the poor. However, Erica also challenged, are women only austerity's victims or are they also its agents and beneficiaries? She argued that we need to consider which women we are talking about when we discuss women and austerity, without oversimplifying the issue. We need to move beyond the paradigm of women and austerity to a more deeply gendered analysis of contemporary economic conditions and relationships, as well as considering class, racialisation, and other intersecting positionings.

Erica then offered two opposing images that connect modes of femininity with political and domestic economy, the first being 'make do and mend': the traditional affiliation between modes of femininity and women's domestic labour with conservation. 'Make do and mend', which is one of the signifiers of austerity from World War II campaigns, contains a suspicion of consumption that is very contemporary. She posited that the thriftiness, the resourcefulness, and the skills that are part of women's survival strategies, are a part of the desire to harmonise with rather than wastefully expend natural resources, which is being given a new kind of ecological twist.

Erica continued to say that there are obvious changes that we need to be wary of in the potential drift from conservation and being conservative. As many are aware, the context of austerity and economic recession has dramatically increased racism, xenophobia, and cultural chauvinisms. We have to think about how the alignment of some traditional forms of femininity can feed into and support this hostile climate. The second issue then, is about ways in which contemporary neoliberalism mobilises and privileges a feminised set of skills and modes of relationships in a service sector. This is within a knowledge society rather than one based on industrial, manufacturing and male muscle power. Whether we are talking about out placement counselling that gives people the bad news about redundancy, or communi-

cating the intensification of workload in the nicest way, it is feminised skills of relationship management and emotional labour that has become central to contemporary forms of capitalism. So, feminisation works as a contemporary mode of psychologisation. This psychologisation objectifies, subjectifies, and alienates people even more through its cosy, friendly, and individualising allure. But Erica concluded that, feminisation isn't feminism and psychologisation isn't necessarily the kind of psychology we have to practice.

### **Disability (Liz Sayce)**

Disabled people are twice as likely to live in poverty as non-disabled people. The changes in the benefits system, in particular the rhetoric of scroungers, and the impact on attitudes is horrendous. We ought to have an accumulative impact analysis of the cuts by gender and disability as well as other characteristics. Liz focused on recent developments within Government policy starting with what the Government plans to do about social care within the context of austerity (Department of Health, 2012a). She argued that while the Government had pulled together a legal framework with a more national framework (and less of a postcode lottery), they had not come to any resolution about the funding issues in social care. For instance, Liz informed attendees that Worcester Social Services announced that they are capping funds at the level of what it costs to be in a care home. So, rather than saying there is an average and some people's care in their own home might be more expensive, there is a limit which will result in many people going into institutions as a consequence of austerity measures.

She also highlighted how leading up to this development, there had been a surge of horror stories about how social care was in crisis. These included a progress report that showed little change since the Winterbourne View, which was a case where people with learning disabilities were abused (Department of Health, 2012b). There were also

reactions to the Equality and Human Rights Commission Inquiry (2011) showing that older people might be visited twice a day for 15 minutes, which isn't enough time to make a cup of tea, have a conversation, or bathe somebody. Liz also described the legal case of Elaine MacDonald, who was a ballerina living in Kensington and Chelsea (one of the richest boroughs in the country), who was assessed as needing night-time care as she needed support to go to the toilet several times in the night. However, the local authority decided that it was not affordable and she was given incontinence pads instead, despite not being incontinent. Elaine said, 'I have to lie in my own urine and faeces for 12 hours at a time. I do not think even prisoners have to suffer such indignities'. This case initiated a legal discussion regarding the threshold for dignity. Lord Justice Munby challenged the suggestion that considerations of physical safety came before dignity, despair, and a sense of self-shame. He stated that a person's welfare extends beyond safety and physical health in the European Convention on Human Rights. Liz went on to query if the concept of dignity was relevant to psychologists, as services get stripped back and what is considered an acceptable level of service for a woman become increasingly dire.

Liz described recent Government announcements regarding changes in disability and employment programmes. These include an expansion to the access to work programme. They have protected the budget for this; therefore, the £320 million will not be reduced. They plan on extending the programme to young people doing internships. This is a positive development, but it is limited. They are also planning to close 27 Remploi factories, which is where some of the money is coming from. Interestingly, Remploi factories are over 70 per cent men and Liz stated that nobody was talking about the gendered issue here either.

Liz also argued that while the care debate has been analysed in gendered terms, further scrutiny was needed. Initial analyses

identified women as mainly the providers of informal care, which resulted in arguments that women needed breaks, financial support, information, training on how to lift and so on. However, what was missing from this narrative was that a lot of disabled women (and men) provide care and support. The figures are extraordinarily high and are yet to be discussed. For example, two-thirds of older carers have experience of disability or a long-term health condition themselves (Princess Royal Trust for Carers, 2011). Carers Scotland (2011) listed 68 per cent of carers having physical problems: 37 per cent had arthritis; 45 per cent had long-term ill health because of depression or diabetes; and 13 per cent had respiratory problems. This is used in one overwhelming narrative: care is bad for your health. Consequently, we need to reduce the stresses of caring. However, this ignores that most of these carers had conditions before they became carers. So, while caring is stressful, we also need to look at the needs of disabled carers. Liz put forward a plea that we look at the disability and gendered nature of care, and also that we look at the reciprocity of relationships. For instance, some gendered work on care assumes there is a carer and a cared for. However, there is a lot written by disabled people rejecting this simplistic division between the carer and the cared for. This can be particularly confusing for when funding comes in; we don't just want to be cared for, shipped off to a home for somebody to have respite, let's look at it in a more integrated way.

### **Violence against women (Suriya Nayak)**

Suriya drew on the 'make do and mend' image and brought together the department store John Lewis, psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, and feminist activism, to confront violence against women and to reject the ideological garments we have been forced to accept. She argued *not* to make do in order to mend. She also acknowledged that the title of the roundtable could be reworded to state, 'Don't make do and mend, and please

can we have a new wardrobe? I find black feminist suits me and fits me very well, and I'm quite partial to vintage pieces.'

Suriya described a publication produced by the department store John Lewis. Wilson (2009), a BBC reporter, stated, 'Now 70 years since the outbreak of World War II high street department chain John Lewis is getting in on the act by turning the clock back on the days of the blitz. It is publishing what it calls a modern reworking of the famous 1943 Ministry of Information Government booklet (issued across Britain) on making the most of minimal resources: *Make Do and Mend*' (paras. 3 and 4). It offered all sort of hints about eking out the clothing ration to the maximum. Originally issued by the Ministry of Information the wartime edition offered tips on how to reinvigorate old clothes by darning and fixing frayed edges and how to keep moths away. John Lewis say this *Make Do and Mend* booklet will help people make the best of what may be increasingly straightened personal circumstances. As a feminist activist engaged in the rape crisis movement, women's refuges and women's grassroots organisations, the discourse of 'make do and mend' interested Suriya. In the John Lewis extract she was struck by the phrases 'darning and fixing frayed edges', 'how to keep the moths away', 'minimal resources', 'eking out the ration', and 'straightened personal circumstances'. Suriya noticed that these words capture the essence of the straightened personal circumstances of women survivors of physical, emotional, and sexual violence: violence against women. The word 'straightened' means 'restricted, narrow, made very difficult'.

The tools of regulation and control in this racist patriarchy we live in, leaves women worn out, frayed at the edges, tattered, unravelled, in pieces, undone, with minimal resources and trying in vain to keep the moths away. The patriarchal creation, abuse, mutilation of holes, tears, all in the service of the control of women; the broken hymen, the sewing up of the vagina in female genital mutilation, episiotomies, cosmetic surgery,

convenient caesareans, and the list goes on. This situation is not particular to an economic recession. The violation of women happens whether you are rich or poor; indeed one of the myths of rape is that it happens in particular circumstances to particular women. Women supported at rape crisis centres from all socioeconomic backgrounds and contexts speak of being damaged, contaminated, dirty, used and dishevelled. Consciousness-raising in order to position blame and shame is an undoing of the 'making do'. These women have been convinced that they have to make do, or that they may not even be worthy of making do. Suriya posits, surely feminism is a 'do not make do' movement. A movement that rejects the ideological and actual garments of inferiority and restriction, clothes that objectify women and turn this objectification against them by holding them responsible for their own subjugation.

Suriya then moved from John Lewis to Freud. She stated that trauma literally means 'a piercing of the bodily envelope'. Freud used it to denote the piercing of the psychic shield where trauma is the gapping hole in the protective filtering function against excessive excitation. Caroline Garland (2004) writes, 'Once the catastrophic breach in the protective shield has taken place, and mental functioning is in turmoil and disarray, the problem is one of mastering the amounts of stimulus that have been broken in and of binding them' (p.18). Freud frequently used the language of the 'make do and mend' discourse, such as 'a fair number of analyses have taught us that the delusion is found applied like a patch over the place where originally a rent had appeared in the ego's relation to the external world' (Freud, 1924, p.151). So there is a hole, a breach, a piercing, and there is the binding, the attempt to repair the psychic shield. Psychology has clear ideas about resilience and what makes a psychic shield (or the psychic sock jumper) more or less able to weather the wear and tear of life and its traumas. For example, attachment

theory puts forward ideas about who may be in need of mending or darning and why.

Suriya then examined the concept of darning, a method of patching over or making good that which is thread bare, making good the hole, tear, or rip in clothes. Thread is woven in rows across in and out of each other in different directions to create a weave. In its simplest form, darning consists of anchoring the thread in the fabric on the edge of the hole and carrying it across the gap. It is then anchored on the other side usually with a running stitch or two. If enough threads are crisscrossed over the hole, the hole will eventually be covered with a mass of threads. Tracing the word 'darn' back to middle English (the origins of the word) we get to, to keep secret, hide, to conceal a hole. At this point Suriya returns to violence against women; what we do know is that physical, sexual, emotional violation of women and girls is concealed, hidden, kept secret, and silenced. Garland (2004) says, 'By creating links with what is already there, by joining up what pours in with an existing feature or function of the mind, (the darning) the ego is attempting to create once more structures of some permanence in which ego functioning is possible... The central difficulty with a disaster lies, I believe, right here; the very intensity of the struggle to deal with the flood of unmanageable *material in the absence of the apparatus for thinking itself* (the hole in the garment) locks that material powerfully and precisely to whatever has been released by the breaking down of internal barriers and structures' (p.18). Here Garland is talking there about the process of trauma and the breakdown of what needs darning.

Feminist analysis and methods of consciousness-raising such as the Dolores' Power and Control Wheel, the Women's Aid Freedom Programme, the work of Leeds Interagency Project, the Rape Crisis movement, *The Courage to Heal* (Bass & Davis, 1988), and Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* (1997), firstly examined what it is we are 'making do' with and secondly how to

undo this. These feminist approaches enable women to unpick the making do with and the darning over of the worn out holes that is made visible through clever practiced weaving of the threads of a racist patriarchy. I contend that there is a mending to do because racist patriarchy does wear us out, but the making do will not mend. It cleverly masks the holes and frayed edges of our very being as women; making do prevents the mending.

Staying with the discourse of making do, let us not waste the feminist scholarship, experience, and writing that we have as an amazing resource. For example, the concept of intersectionality can be the crisscross weave of threads that can mend. On this note Suriya quotes from Audrey Lorde (2004), who talks about historical amnesia, 'We find ourselves having to repeat and relearn the same old lessons over and over that our mothers did, because we did not pass on what we have learned or because we were unable to listen' (p.376).

### **Summary (Sharlene Hesse-Biber)**

Sharlene reflected on the contributions from Erica, Liz and Suriya. She began by picking up Erica's point that not everyone is subjected to austerity and some are benefiting from the discourse. She stated that one of the tropes of austerity is that we are all in this together because we are all suffering, however she reminded attendees that as feminists it is important to question these categories and statements by examining such generalised notions. Within this kind of questioning, we get new knowledge. With regard to feminist methods, she highlighted how Liz's work made use of subjugated knowledge as a powerful social action and how Suriya's analysis reminded us to position discourses in their historical context to further understand the nostalgia that is being encouraged in contemporary narratives or products.

Sharlene argued that a potential positive outcome of austerity could be an increased awareness of consumption, which could

include an appreciation that there are those who do consume and those who cannot due to poverty. However, while this divide is not limited to times of austerity, Sharlene described a feminisation of the workforce prior to cuts in funding where women were increasingly moving into higher paid professional jobs in the service sector. Although, once the cuts were introduced (in the US) men began moving from employment usually dominated by men into professions which have a predominately female work force (such as health care and nursing), something she describes as a 'masculinisation' of female jobs. She drew on William's (1992) concept of the glass escalator phenomenon, that is 'subtle mechanisms' that 'enhance men's position in these professions' (p.264). Sharlene used the example of teaching, where female teachers dominate the profession, but men hold the majority of top-level positions.

### **Discussion**

#### ***Redefinitions***

Initially discussion centred around changing definitions or meanings of austerity, with challenges to the promotion of 'thriftiness' and the subsequent reframing of consumerism as 'tacky', 'bad' and irresponsible. This was linked to the redefining of the word 'essential', with understandings of what people 'need' changing to incorporate items that previously would have been considered desirable. For instance, one contributor stated that cameras were considered a desirable item and not necessarily essential, whereas now people are more likely to argue that certain situations happen only once and, therefore, it is essential for those moments to be recorded. The term is also used by corporations (like John Lewis) who produce 'essential' ranges that are marketed and branded in particular ways.

This rebranding of essentials, 'thriftiness' and austerity, was seen as part of a broader glorifying of poverty. The 'make do and mend' discourse that has been adopted by mainstream organisations to promote

products glamorises a nostalgic notion of austerity that is marketed to those who can afford to participate in it. As another contributor described, poverty in India was commodified in an advertisement where a fashion designer created a new range based on clothing worn by those in the poorest areas of Bombay. The argument that such a lifestyle and appearance reflects anti-consumerism, heightened spirituality, and 'thriftiness' overlooks the stark exclusion of these communities from participating in consumerism.

There was also an appreciation that certain classes of people were positioned differently within this discourse. For example, Erica responded that riots in the UK in August 2011 could be understood as a response to being incited to want things you can't buy and then engaging in criminal behaviour to attain them. However, she also noted how the term 'austerity' is more active than the passive word 'poverty'; it implies a sense of constraint that isn't only external but does things to us internally. She argued that another important part of feminist and psychological engagement in critiques of austerity is to consider how the condition of precariousness and the casualisation of labour is getting inside people, in terms of feeling insecure and lacking in confidence. She concluded that austerity is getting inside us and impoverishing not only our internal lives but also our relationships with others and our capacities to make change.

### ***Policy***

Discussions related to intersectional analysis and requests to move beyond simplistic binaries, also spurred debate regarding how feminists could influence policy and make practical changes drawing on wider issues related to feminist academia and social action. Liz argued that social policy has to be

simplistic or have definitive outcomes in order for it to work. Policy requires you to have a solution that outlines a clear cause and effect. However, she also stated that you needed to build in complexity over time. Liz used the example of lesbian and gay equality over the last decade in the UK, with legislation changes related to the age of consent, the end of Section 28, civil partnerships and so on. She argued that it is about having a clear rhetoric in the initial stages to get the policy established, but at the same time to be analysing the complexity. Liz also cautioned about the potential destructiveness of simplistic narratives, such as the current framing of disabled people as either a 'real' disabled person who is pitied and offered no support for independence, or a scrounger; both are damaging. Suriya added that there isn't a clear distinction between academic complexity, and simplistic policy, as academic work can be equally simplistic particularly when you consider feminist conferences and who attends. She challenged attendees to consider who is excluded from such spaces, and how we could make such spaces more accessible to more people affected by these issues. Another contributor highlighted the overreliance on academia and the decreasing role of social action within feminist courses and conferences. There was discussion around the possibility of forming a POWS social action committee to address this.

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This summary has recorded the discussion as closely to the participant's original contributions as possible.

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