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Steam: The Politics of Diversity

**Revisiting Jewson and Mason: the politics of gender equality in local government**

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Jewson and Mason’s (1986) analysis of the different discourses used to both promote and obstruct doing equality in organisations is one of the most influential papers on the politics of equality. Their paper considers the politics of equality from a number of different perspectives. Firstly, there is a political philosophy discourse on the nature of radical and liberal approaches to equality of opportunity that frame the paper and which have been extensively cited since. Secondly, there is an empirical exploration of the organisational politics that seeks to use liberal and radical discourses to either advance or to block efforts to put equality into practice. Lastly, the timing of their research at the height of Thatcherism and the location of one of their case studies in local government meant that party politics could not be escaped. Our paper revisits Jewson and Mason’s seminal theoretical framework by applying it to our research on the implementation of the Gender Equality Duty in local government. Our paper charts the implementation of the Duty between April 2007, when the duty came into force, and 2011 when the duty was combined with 5 other equality strands to form the single public sector equality duty under the Equality Act 2010.

Since the anti-discrimination legislation of the 1970s jolted UK organisations into taking the concept seriously, local government has often led the way both in terms of developing new approaches and sometimes in highlighting the disturbing extent of inequality in British society. The services provided by local authorities are important to changing gender relations because state funded public services free women from unpaid care in the family, provide substantial opportunities for paid caring work and provide safe environments for women to live. However, as Jewson and Mason’s paper and numerous research papers since then have indicated, local government is an inherently politically contested organisation. Public services are most often the first casualties of government financial austerity and for most of the past 30 years central government has applied funding pressure that has inevitably impacted on gender equality either through persistent pay inequality, the loss of women’s jobs or the loss of services on which women depend. Resisting attacks on equality has therefore been a longstanding and sometimes demoralising project for feminists in local government.

By the end of the 1990s the slowed progress on equality and concerns about embedded institutional discrimination in public authorities prompted a new approach to how they are regulated. The Gender Equality Duty, was part of this new approach and was hailed as the most important advance in women’s’ equality in Great Britain since the Sex Discrimination Act 1975. Drawing on qualitative research in 5 case study local authorities our paper assesses change and continuity in the influence of the three types of politics of equality identified above. Our findings indicate that all three types of politics continue to be influential in equality work in local government. Equality advisors in each of our 5 case study authorities skilfully used both radical and liberal discourses to cajole and encourage their less enthusiastic colleagues to implement the Gender Equality Duty. However old political tensions remain and our paper considers why the early hopes for the gender equality duty have not been met in the Equality Act 2010.

**Reference**

Jewson, N. and Mason, D. (1986) ‘The Theory and Practice of Equal Opportunities Policy: Liberal and Radical Approaches’ *Sociological Review*, 34 (2): 307-334