Young people, family, sex and education policies: a feminist reflection

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I reflect upon the changing socio-economic contexts for the development of UK/British/English education policies for young people over the last 50 years. I do so from a feminist perspective and focus on the waves of development from social democracy through to neo-liberalism, and its current form as a crisis of capitalism and an age of austerity. There has been a changing trajectory for policies about young people and sexuality over the post-war period, from occlusion and invisibility to one in which young women's sexuality is now both the subject of a policy gaze and the processes of marketisation of sexualisation. Under the era of post-war social democracy, education policies developed in partnership with family policies: 'the family-education couple'. The emphasis was not on the social or emotional development of young people, but rather on their educational opportunities. Under coalition government policies, in an age of austerity, developing from neo-liberalism of Thatcherism, young women in families are beginning to bear the brunt of policies of individualisation and sexualisation.

Keywords: feminism; sex education; young mothers; misogyny; personalisation; sexualisation

Introduction

My aim is to provide an overview of the official and public approach to children and young people, in the UK, through education and linked family and social policies, over the last 50 years. As a feminist, my focus is on the relations between men and women, boys and girls as both gendered and sexual beings, and in both public and private life. How are sexual and gendered relations learned and taught? In other words, I want to consider the gendered and generational dimensions of so-called youth policies in the UK, for indeed youth is itself a particularly gendered concept. This is a critical illustration of policy-making in Europe and shows how austerity policies exacerbate rather than erode gender inequalities linked with socio-economic inequalities.

Current UK policies are remarkable for their lack of reference to issues of sex, sexuality or gender as important general questions. Sex and gender have developed as separate and differentiated concepts over the last 40 years as feminists, as political campaigners and academic activists have raised the issues for public policy concern. As the naming of questions of women’s or sexual equality has developed in public rhetoric and policy, it has slowly transformed into questions of gender equality, and gender has been differentiated from sex. So too have the questions of sex been narrowed to a set of unspoken questions, occluded from a public policy concern, despite feminist campaigns together with both feminist and social science research evidence.

Under the UK coalition government policies, in an age of austerity, young women in families are beginning to bear the brunt of cutbacks in public and social policies, especially around caring for children and yet not being cared for. This continues the policies of previous
governments, and despite gender moving onto a policy agenda, responsibilities of women and girls remain different and unequal from those of men across all classes. This is especially true of disadvantaged families and the girls and women within them (e.g. Shain, 2013). This is also despite recent international and UK debate about child sexual abuse (CSA), sexual bullying, exploitation and harassment, and general violence against women (VAW). All these debates demonstrate the silences and denials about the extent of the inappropriate treatment of children and young people, notably girls, in the past, and are still continuing. These public discussions do not touch upon the official social, familial and educational contexts of children and young people’s upbringing but rather sensationalise and objectify the issues as about ‘stranger-danger’. VAW generally is rarely mentioned, and domestic violence (DV) as the name for violence against girls and women in families and households is still seen as exceptional rather than as usual. Questions of power relations between men and women, for example, are rarely raised as part of patriarchal social relations, and where they are discussed, they have been more about generic adult–child relations rather than the more complex issues of sex, age and gender.

There are two particularly stark examples in the UK which illustrate the paradoxical nature of these issues of youth policies and gender or sexuality. It seems clear that the lessons learnt are indeed contradictory and affirming of ambiguity in sex and gender relations. The first is the revelations and legal action about the late BBC children’s entertainer, Jimmy Savile, for his sexual abuse of underage children. He inaugurated a television programme for children and young people called Jim’ll Fix It inviting them onto his shows. Under the media gaze for more than 50 years, until his death in 2011, he managed to play a double game of popular entertainer and charitable fund-raiser, whilst at the same time using his position to abuse the very children and young people he claimed to campaign for. Since these revelations there have been other instances of male abuse of young people, girls especially, but these remain as contested questions and forms of sexism and misogyny still pervade public debates. There have, however, been some serious sober appraisals of the Jimmy Savile issue, for example, Professor Susie Orbach, the renowned feminist psychotherapist, made a radio documentary about paedophilia, focusing on analysing the child sexual offender (10 December 2012, Radio 4); and Natasha Walter, a renowned ‘third-wave’ feminist journalist, wrote in The Observer (13 January 2013, p. 31) on addressing the need for cultural changes titled ‘It’s time to concentrate our anger on a culture that turns men into rapists’, arguing that ‘[last week’s] sexual violence figures prove that young men need to be taught how to engage with women (my emphasis)’.

Second, there is the example of violence against women and girls worldwide with Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani schoolgirl who was shot in the face by a Taliban gunman in October 2012 for campaigning for girls’ education in the Swot valley region. She was brought to hospital in Birmingham, UK, and miraculously survived. As a result, on Friday, 12 July 2013, her 16th birthday, she spoke at the UN and handed over a petition, inaugurating the Malala movement for girls’ education worldwide. This builds upon women and feminists campaigning for global education for girls and women. Nevertheless, whilst there has been global attention to her campaign, embarked upon over four years ago, through the BBC too, the more general question of VAW and how to teach men worldwide not to wage war against women and young girls remains a side issue. Indeed, the former UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown and his wife Sarah Brown, behind much of the Malala Movement, have turned it into a question of Education for All (EFA) rather than a more specific one of dealing with gender and sexual violence through schools and informal education.

This then is a welcome but belated and limited shift in public emphasis and is more to do with changing women’s positions in employment than with policy developments. Yet it is at
the cultural rather than policy level. There is still no debate about economic inequalities and, in a time of austerity, means that these are exacerbated, impacting particularly on girls and young women in families. The debates within the media also do not impinge upon the ways in which young people learn about sexuality, sexual abuse and bullying through education and social policies, as well as the media being an educational resource. What they learn from the media, nowadays, is more about sexualisation, objectification of women’s bodies and its commodification or marketisation, than about women’s equality, rights and feminist critiques – what Ringrose (2012) calls Post-feminist education.

Sex and sexuality are still treated as difficult topics within schools, whilst the UK policy advisors treat gender equality as being accomplished (Alldred & David, 2007; Leathwood & Read, 2009; Morley, 2011; Ringrose, 2012). Indeed the so-called ‘feminisation debate’, as articulated by policy-makers and organisations such as the UK Higher Education Policy Institute, claims that gender equality is accomplished since equal numbers of men and women now participate in higher education (Bekhradnia, 2009). The ‘feminisation thesis’ is a gloss on the wider changes taking place, in which women remain relatively sub-ordinate. For example, it ignores the impact of caring on women’s identities (Leathwood & Read, 2009; Morley, 2011). On the other hand, much public policy debate remains blind to the evidence about the shifting gender balance in either education or employment and the relatively modest moves towards gender equity (David, 2009; Hey & Morley, 2011). A patriarchal system remains within education and public policies, despite the claim that gender equality has been achieved. Indeed, the debate has been hijacked by the political class.

Illustrating the paradoxical approaches to gender equality, Willetts (2010, p. 208), the UK Minister for Higher Education, commented that ‘feminism had trumped egalitarianism’. His argument in 2010 was that the women’s movement of the 1970s had been so successful that it had managed to accomplish getting more women into university than men and, moreover, that these middle class women had also benefited through their marriages, such that subsequent generations were the poorer. He was blaming middle class women of the feminist movement for the subsequent problems of social policy, in this case the lack of sufficient funding for their children’s education and social provision. He recently repeated this argument as a basis for developing new education and social policies that the gender balance in higher education should be righted, by ensuring that working class men take precedence over women, and maintaining his patriarchal views about the power relations between men and women. In fact, of course, educated women become middle class by virtue of their education. The majority of women to whom he was referring were the first-girls-in-the-family or simply the-first-in-the-family to go to university, illustrating the achievement of individual and social mobility for women as well as men through university education. Most recently Willetts’ assertions, like many others, have also come to be seen as misogynistic, as raised by the then Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard. Indeed, it was rampant misogyny that led to the vote of no confidence against Gillard as Prime Minister in June 2013, and her decision to leave not only her office but also politics. Since her adversary in the Labour party – Kevin Rudd – lost the election in September 2013 to the right-wing Tony Abbott, she has further reflected on how misogyny and patriarchy continue to rule.

As part of the process of transforming public policy concerns about children and young people, education and social services have in the twenty-first century been brought closer together in complex forms of management and administration, both locally and nationally. The UK government has created a special position of Children’s Commissioner to oversee concerns about the treatment of children and young people in growing up through
education and family life: a kind of ombudsman/woman. Maggie Atkinson, the current Children’s Commissioner for England appointed her deputy, Sue Berelowitz, to provide an official report on ongoing concerns about CSA and harassment, and the interim report on child sexual exploitation in gangs and groups was published in November 2012.

Whilst this is important, it does not deal with how to make the questions of sex, sexuality and gender mainstream in schooling and education more generally. At present, the UK policy-making remains stubbornly in a Conservative patriarchal and, indeed, misogynist mode. Alan Milburn, a former Labour minister, was appointed the social mobility tsar under the Coalition government (2010). He had chaired two inquiries for the Labour government in 2009 that had pointed to continuing discrimination against women in graduate professions, as well as the more general question of lack of fair access to higher education (David, 2009). Under the coalition government he has focused again on social mobility and access to higher education in two further reports (2012). As a result, he was appointed to chair a new statutory commission on social mobility and child poverty (2012), and in the first annual report the focus was squarely on social class and individual mobility. Gender and women’s issues had been completely obliterated from his concern, illustrating the contradictory approaches within public policies in an era of austerity. It is clear from this that, through youth and child policies, girls and women continue to bear the brunt of such retrenchment. Although policies have changed the gender imbalance continues and inequalities remain.

A feminist reflection and critique

I will present this brief review of the development of educational and social policies for young people from my personal and feminist perspective. This kind of reflective, narrative and biographical approach has developed within the social sciences as part of the wider turn towards more qualitative and reflexive approaches, away from more positivist and quantitative methods. It is an attempt to develop in-depth and deeper understandings of the social processes, lying behind the headline stories. This is also sometimes seen as an insider qualitative perspective or an auto-ethnography. My own reflection stems from my own involvement as a social researcher and academic in British higher education from the late 1960s, whereby I have undertaken social research on families, gender and education, at all levels of the system. During this time, in concert with other academics, I have changed my personal perspective, and become more consciously involved in research ‘from the standpoint of women’ (Harding, 1975) and desirous of social change from a feminist perspective. These changes have related to wider sociopolitical and linked economic transformations, to reduce social and gender inequalities.

Looking back on my own life as a feminist academic, interestingly, I remember that Jimmy Savile, the BBC entertainer (mentioned above) was launching his media career on the public stage when I was becoming a student of sociology at the University of Leeds. Among my friends and acquaintances in Leeds were young women who did encounter him – and around the same time other women friends were beginning groups as part of the early stirrings of what is now often described as ‘second-wave feminism’. It was in these consciousness-raising (CR) groups that women began to talk personally about intimate sexual relations, but in the relative safety of the privacy of groups of like-minded women, reaching out towards some understanding of sexual power relations, and how they were not only individual but also political. Yet they were certainly hidden from the public gaze.

The phrase ‘the personal is political’ was then coined, leading into discussions about the sexual division of labour, women’s rights and women’s work, and, more importantly,
the rise of intellectual curiosity about how these structured gender relations had come about. Through the women’s movement, based, as it tended to be, around young women as students or new graduates, feminists began to develop new ‘knowledge’ and new approaches, including feminist pedagogies grounded in personal experience. At the same time, higher education was expanding and opportunities for women not only as students but also as researchers and academics were opening up: women, including feminists, quickly began to enter academia. Feminism became an essentially educational project to change women’s lives in the direction of gender equality, based on generating the research evidence for this (see my forthcoming book, David, 2013).

The initial phases of development of a feminist perspective within the social sciences drew on a wider ideological commitment, in the post-war period to equal opportunities, or equality of opportunity, and especially including education as part of an array of social policy concerns. This period of development has often been named as social democracy. In my intellectual biography Personal and political: Sociology, feminism and family lives (David, 2003), I reviewed the post-war phases of sociopolitical developments as contexts for socio-economic changes. I named this initial phase as the ‘wave of social democracy’, followed by a wave of ‘economic liberalism’ moving into the current ‘wave of neoliberalism’. Whilst the wave analogy may be contested, the ideological underpinnings of sociopolitical developments have shifted over time, and in relation to economic transformations towards a global knowledge economy, or what Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) have called ‘academic capitalism’. Thus, there have been moves from an overarching bipartisan political commitment to social equality to a more contested set of political commitments to economic competitiveness and marketisation, underpinned by a greater degree of individualisation, increasingly played out on a global canvas, leading to increasing inequalities not only between individuals and institutions but also between countries and nations and their geo-political locations, with distinctions between the ‘global north’ and the ‘global south’.

During the phase or ‘wave of social democracy’, the women’s liberation movement was on the ascendance in campaigning for women’s rights to be put on the public policy agenda. There was, then, an interweaving of the women’s movement and campaigning for social and political changes, and the emerging so-called ‘second-wave feminism’ from late 1960s and into 1970s about women and the ‘family’. At the first major national women’s liberation conference, held at Ruskin College, Oxford, in 1970, because of the preponderance of women involved who had recently been university students, and linked as they were with social, civil and human rights campaigns, a series of campaign goals were articulated as ‘demands’ upon the state or government. The original four demands were all around the question of transforming women’s position in relation to work, either in the family as forms of domestic labour and care or in the labour market. Thus, one was for equal pay, a second was for forms of subsidised childcare (and what were then called 24-hour-day nurseries), equal educational and employment opportunities, and abortion and contraception. In other words, these were all aimed at freeing women from the burdens of family care and work. During the late 1970s, two further ‘demands’ were added: women’s legal and financial independence and the right to define one’s own sexuality. Whilst some public policy attention was paid to questions of education and employment, linked childcare and health matters, none of these demands were met in full or to the satisfaction of feminist campaigners. Sexuality has become a more public issue, especially in the twenty-first century, with changes to the law about both definitions of sexuality, and the provision of civil ceremonies for same-sex or same-gender couples.
During the ensuing period, with the rise of Thatcherism, and moves towards economic and neo-liberalism, questions of women’s rights were complexly transformed, into feminist issues, and yet increasingly marketised and individualised. Importantly, issues around sexual equality transformed into gender in official discourse, and, into the twenty-first century, questions of gender equality in education have become highly contested over whether they have been accomplished, as already noted.

At the same time, feminist political demands have recently been reasserted as a new wave of thinking, albeit relying on past waves of feminism. Caitlin Moran’s (2011) *How to be a woman* sparked enormous interest in new forms of feminist discourse. There are a multitude of new groupings including, for example, *Feminist Fightback* which is developing a feminist form of sex education and the Feminist Library which has developed a programme of studies and activities called *Women’s Studies Without Walls. UK Feminista* brought together an amalgam of women’s organisations (October 2012). They have formulated five revised demands that illustrate both the continuities in feminist concerns and the changing contexts: ensuring that every school plays its part in preventing violence against women and girls; taking action to end the stereotyping, objectification and sexualisation of women in the media; taking a stand for urgent investment in childcare for all; taking action to ensure justice for women seeking asylum; protecting reproductive rights and supporting an abortion law for the twenty-first century. What is clear is that at least three continue the earlier demands about education, childcare and reproductive rights, whilst others raise the previously silenced questions of the sexualisation of and VAW. Importantly, the role of the school in educating about sex, sexuality and abuse, bullying and exploitation is now high on the feminist agenda, although this does not translate into policy specification, given the UK’s coalition government (Brooks, 2013). Girls remain occluded (Shain, 2013).

The emerging feminist perspective on ‘the family-education couple’

The feminist approach developed in academia at the time when I, too, was developing my research and teaching interests around families, education and social policies, and I was one of the pioneering group of social scientists, whose aims were to produce research evidence to transform official and governmental policies to change sexual and social relations. Looking back, what is most remarkable is the lack of historical and social evidence about women’s and girls’ positioning in the public worlds of work, employment or even education at that time. This was a lacuna that feminists and feminist researchers have attempted to fill. Sheila Rowbotham’s (1971) book aptly titled *Hidden from history* revealed a strong story about women’s absence from official accounts. It, together with other emerging international feminist radical critiques (e.g. Figes, 1970; Firestone, 1970; Friedan, 1963; Greer, 1970; Millett, 1970; Rich, 1977), provided the impetus for the development of more sustained feminist scholarship to uncover evidence in a range of fields.

As a member of the *Bristol Women’s Studies Group (BWSG)* which eventually produced *Half the sky: An introduction to women’s studies* (1978) we began to gather together stories and ephemera about women and girls in and through education and families. In piecing together these narratives and accounts, we wanted to build up what became known as feminist pedagogies: a commitment to sexual or gender and social justice, through an educational project. This was very broad ranging, for teaching and learning both within and outside the walls of the university. In the case of BWSG the material was first used for continuing education, especially through the Workers’ Educational Association, and was consciously to enable women of all ages to think about their lives in a relatively safe
and educational environment. It became one of the several ways in which women’s rights and women’s liberation came onto the public agendas, although questions about sexuality and sexual relations were not then uppermost. They may have been of intense interest within the confines of the growing spate of so-called CR groups, with concerns about sexual intimacy and relations an integral part of their life-blood. Whilst CR groups were gathering strength, the fact that women talked intimately about sex and relations became a threat and a barrier to some women’s involvement, since they were not necessarily seen as safe places. Nevertheless, the CR groups did spawn into Rape Crisis Centres, and other initiatives in the 1970s (see, for example, The Guardian, 12 December 2012, G2).

Another aspect of this process was the more academic gathering of evidence within the walls of the university. As a new and relatively young academic I was tasked with developing innovative courses in sociology and social policy with other similar colleagues, especially Hilary Land and Jackie West. Together, we began to teach a course that we titled Family and Social Policy, and in which we searched for both historical and contemporary evidence about what we, and others, then called the sexual division of labour (see, for example, Barker & Allen, 1976a, 1976b). Land’s interests were with families, women and the public policies around income maintenance and social security (e.g. Land, 1976), whilst West’s were with women and work or employment, linked to motherhood and family life. My specific interests were with the development of educational policies and the school system as they related to families and family life.

Using the notion of the ‘family-education couple’, drawn from the French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, I developed a sustained analysis of women’s and girls’ positioning in home–school relations. I pieced together historical evidence on the one hand of the relations between the family, schooling and the economy, and on the other what I called ‘the familial ambience of schooling’. Finally, I drew together some then contemporary issues in the family-education couple, namely about linking education to economic competitiveness, and developing policies on sex discrimination within schools and curricula. This analysis eventually emerged as The State, the Family and Education and was published in a Routledge series on radical social policy (David, 1980).

My focus was indeed on government policies, and how these underpinned the development of a national and state-funded and locally managed education system. This system drew upon traditional notions of women’s [unpaid] work in the home and the family, rather than in public forms of employment. However, an early source of women’s employment was in schooling and education, although rarely on an equal basis with men. Indeed, I noted that for at least a century, if not more, an informal ‘marriage bar’ operated to exclude women from continuing in teaching on marriage, although this was waived in those local authorities that had teaching shortages, for example in times of war. Similarly, the ideologies underpinning education and the curricula of schooling remained about what could then be called ‘sexual difference’. So girls and boys were often taught different subjects, and separately, although what became known as the core curriculum of ‘reading, writing and arithmetic’ (the 3Rs) were taught equally, and together, to girls and boys. An example of these distinctions can be found most evidently in an official report of the Government’s Board of Education (1923) titled clumsily Differentiation of the curricula between the sexes in secondary schools. In particular, this report stipulated differences between boys and girls in terms of both physical training and home-based subjects for girls versus employable skills for boys. I argued that the state education system was built on a series of distinctions between males and females in terms of family and employment roles (what mothers and fathers separately and together were expected to do) that changed slowly over the course of the previously century.
What I ignored or failed to notice, as with many others, were the even more occluded issues of sexuality, such as sexual bullying, and harassment or abuse – what are known today as VAW, or DV and CSA. There were some extremely lucid and critical accounts, such as the American feminist Susan Brownmiller (1975) and the British feminist Erin Pizzey’s (1975). As the broader analysis was developed within social policy and sociology, a more sophisticated and in-depth study of aspects of schooling and education began to emerge and accumulate. New insights and theories abounded about the underpinnings of the education system, and linked with social care and social policies, but with relatively little attention to what was deemed to be a relatively small social problem. On the other hand, the emerging questions of women’s work, in relation to marriage and family, including the issue of teenage or school-age motherhood, were moving onto the political agenda. Over the 50-year period there was a clear shift in policy concern from panics about the ‘unmarried mother’ of the 1950s and 1960s to the focus on ‘teenage pregnancy and motherhood’ of the late 1990s and twenty-first century (Alldred & David, 2007).

The main focus of policy attention was about how to ensure equal educational opportunities for boys and girls to enable them to participate in employment (and not necessarily higher education). However, the assumption remained that there were different roles for men and women in adult and working life. Women were not assumed to be involved in full-time employment throughout their adult or working lives, as they would become housewives and mothers and responsible for rearing the next generation. Questions of childcare for children of working mothers were highly contentious matters, as there was very little and inadequate provision of these for women working full-time. The thread of schooling was that it was mothers who did the work of supporting the schools through helping both inside and outside the schools with homework and involvement in the classroom on an informal basis.

The question of the appropriate age for women to marry and become mothers was critical in these educational processes. So, on the one hand, schools were educating girls that their ‘proper place’ was to marry and have children, rearing them and not working outside the home; on the other hand, very little attention was given to sex education but rather to domestic subjects such as cookery. Moreover, school subjects remained central, despite the fact that girls were not expected to work throughout their adult lives. Even more critically, girls who ‘broke’ these unspoken ‘rules’ and became pregnant whilst schoolgirls or teenagers, were seen as behaving inappropriately and were quietly removed from schools.

Exploring a feminist perspective on mothers and education

The question of women’s working lives was indeed changing during this period of time, with more and more women continuing to work after marriage and, eventually also after having children. Critiques were developed of the pressures on women as wives and mothers and the pressures of what the American feminist and poet, Adrienne Rich, called ‘compulsory heterosexuality’. She also wrote evocatively of the forms of motherhood, and becoming a mother in Western societies, in her ground-breaking work Of woman born: Motherhood as experience and social institution (Rich, 1977). In Half the Sky we used quotations from this book for teaching materials. Questions of childcare became highly contentious, as provisions for working women were extremely limited and were divided between education in the form of nursery education or social services as nurseries. These became matters of both personal and political concerns for women becoming mothers during this period. Furthermore, there were also questions about changing patterns of
sexual relationships with growing numbers of people cohabiting rather than marrying. All of these issues were slowly emerging onto the public policy agendas as well as being topics for social research.

Thus, having completed the two largely pedagogical studies, namely with BWSG and The State, the Family and Education, I turned my attention to pressing personal questions, that first related to becoming a mother and searching for appropriate childcare. Titled For the Children’s Sake: making childcare more than women’s business, I developed, with a friend and colleague Caroline New, an analysis of the ideologies underpinning childcare and the practices of providing different forms of care for children whilst their mothers worked. This began the process of considering emotional questions underpinning education and childcare as well as a consideration of the more material contexts of such policies and provisions. Whilst we focussed on women and children we did not concentrate on issues about sex or sexuality, preferring a critique of the contemporary practices of child rearing. However, our feminist approach was being developed as the wider political context was changing in complex ways towards a more conservative one.

Interestingly, Margaret Thatcher was elected to office as the first woman leader of the Conservatives in 1976, and in 1979 she came to power as the first woman Prime Minister. Initially, the characteristics of Thatcherism with respect to the ‘family’ were deeply contradictory, and there was no attempt necessarily to rescind earlier (Labour) legislation which had promoted equal opportunities for women, but there was an immediate ideological commitment to family values and being ‘morally right’ (Levitas, 1986; Lewis, 1983). The ideology of the family was also expressed as a commitment to ‘Victorian values’ or virtues and it is these ideas that underpin Conservative thinking today, and especially the ideas articulated by David Willetts.

The notion of the family lay at the heart of the social policies of the welfare state as it developed in post-war Britain, although it was being critiqued from social and feminist perspectives (Moroney, 1978, Wilson, 1977). However, from the foundations of the welfare state in the mid-1940s until Thatcher became Prime Minister, there was a bipartisan political consensus about the partnership between the state, or government, and families for meeting social needs and providing social care (see Mishra, 1984).

For Thatcher, the traditional heterosexual married couple as a nuclear family was the cornerstone of society (Mount, 1982). This idea was developed in government, by appointing the Conservative writer, Sir Ferdinand Mount to advise the Family Policy Group, a secret Cabinet cabal, in 1982–1983. This group was nicknamed ‘the Family Patrol Group’ by the late Labour MP, Malcolm Wicks, who had been the Director of the Family Policy Studies Centre (from 1983 to 1992), in direct opposition to Conservative values and policies (David, 1986, p. 154).

It was Mount’s (1982) book, The subversive family: An alternative history of love and marriage, which set out most clearly both a Conservative ideology and an approach to family policies. It was both an attack on feminist approaches to the family and on those who argue for state intervention to sustain family life. His thesis was that the family is a ‘natural’ unit, which has survived the vicissitudes of hundreds of years, and is best left unfettered by government regulations. Nevertheless, he articulated a clear view of the right and ‘proper’ family form – a heterosexual union, formed by marriage and nourished by children and grandchildren. He assumed that it is only this family that should be allowed free rein.

The defenders of the family … assert always the privacy and independence of the family, its biological individuality and its rights to live according to its natural instincts. It is for this
reason that, even in societies where male supremacy is officially total, the family asserts its own maternal values (my emphasis). (quoted in David, 1986, p. 154)

The family was to be responsible for looking after itself and its own without interference from the state, a return to the situation that prevailed in the nineteenth century Victorian era. It was seen by many key Thatcherite thinkers as standing as the bulwark against the encroachment of the ‘nanny state’.

The first Thatcher administration cutback public expenditure in such a way as to resuscitate the ‘traditional’ family by penalising lone families. However, such efforts were counter-productive (David, 1990), and coupled with wider shifts only served to encourage more women, especially as lone mothers into the labour market. Policies in social services (including the freezing of child benefit) ultimately only served to impoverish families, especially lone-mother families and increase young people’s dependency on them during this period. Other legislation during this time imposed new burdens on families by, for example, making parents responsible for their children’s criminal behaviour (Lister, 1996, p. 361). These were indeed aspects of changing youth policies for poor and disadvantaged, usually young lone-mother families.

In line with many other European and North American countries, the UK saw decreases in rates of marriage with attendant increases in rates of cohabitation as a growing new family form under Thatcher. The proportion of women aged 18—49 years who were married fell from 74% in 1979 to just over 60% by 1990 (Lister, 1994). Cohabitation for women in the same age group rose from 11% in 1979 to 22% in 1990, with a commensurate rise in the number of births outside of marriage. For example, the proportion of births to single women, as a proportion of all births, rose from 5% in 1945 to 27% in 1987 (Lister, 1996, p. 53). Similarly, with the changes in the divorce law, divorce rates increased dramatically trebling in a 20-year period (1970–1990) (Lister, 1996, p. 127) and the number of children living in reconstituted or lone-parent families inevitably increased during this same period.

In 1979, 12% of families were headed by a lone parent, but by 1990 this had risen to 20%, with the biggest increase being amongst single, never-married mother (Lister, 1994, pp. 352–353). Haskey (1998) has shown the cumulative percentages of marriages that ended in divorce between 1951 and 1989, including a hypothetical marriage cohort (p. 42). He also demonstrated the growing percentages of all families with dependent children headed by lone mothers and by lone fathers between 1971 and 1995 (Haskey, 1998, p. 43).

What was abundantly clear was that the vast majority of such families were headed by lone mothers, but that there was a dramatic shift from widowed lone mothers (3% in 1971 to 1% in 1991) to single lone mothers or divorced lone mothers (5% each in 1991), with separated lone mothers accounting for 3% in 1991. Altogether, the proportion of lone-parent families with dependent children doubled from 8% in 1971 to about 20% in 1991, with the proportion of lone fathers remaining relatively constant at about 2%. Thus, the period also witnessed the rise of lone-mother families, or what the USA called, female-headed households.

Alongside these trends ‘at home’ or in changing the family form, there were similarly dramatic changes in the labour market. For example, in 1979 64% of females aged 16–59 years were economically active, but by 1994 this had risen to 72%. The greatest take-up of work appeared to be amongst the younger generations (youth); of those aged 18—24 years in 1979, 52% were economically active, whilst by 1994 this stood at 73%. Those with young children also saw increases in economic activity, rising from 31% to 52% over this same period (albeit it working mainly part-time). Yet the trends reversed for some groups,
with the percentage of lone parents in work declining from 47% in 1979 to 42% in 1992 (Lister, 1996, p. 353).

During Thatcher’s periods of office as Secretary of State for Education (1970–1973) and as Prime Minister (1979–1990) there were a number of policy changes with respect to equal opportunities for women with caring responsibilities. As Secretary of State for Education, Thatcher was responsible for improvements in the public provision of nursery education and the subsequent opening up of opportunities for combined childcare and education during the early period of her time as Prime Minister. Whilst these provisions of forms of public care and education enabled some mothers of preschool children to think about forms of paid employment, the public ideological commitment remained to early childcare and preschool within families, by mothers. Women’s role within the family remained little different from hitherto despite the extension of public forms of care.

Moreover, and far more significant for the implementation of equal opportunities were the fiscal and economic policies set in train by the government which shored up inequalities between families of different socio-economic backgrounds and also on the grounds of parenthood. Motherhood continued to be a strong concept for the caring work in families, whilst fatherhood had little material significance within families but more as ‘the breadwinner’ (Land, 1976). Cutbacks to social welfare benefits fell more heavily on mothers of dependent children, especially from poor families and usually youthful families. Moves to support fathers on the birth of a child, or when they had young and dependent children, were frustrated by the lack of Conservative commitment. During this period of office the European Union (EU) was moving towards giving paternity and parental leaves for sick children but the British commitment to taking these policies forward and implementing the EU directive was opposed by the then relevant Minister, Michael Portillo, in 1994, illustrating the weak commitment to equal opportunities. One of the key changes as a more welcome development rather than legacy is that there is less hostility to men being involved with childbirth and childcare than it was 30 years ago.

Throughout Thatcher’s terms of office, there was an array of ideological and substantive conflicts especially over what was later, in 1998, called the ‘fragmenting family’. Drawing on a review essay about women, family and ‘work’ that I wrote for a collection of critical essays about a decade of Thatcherism (David, 1990, p. 117) three different approaches were identified:

The 1979–1983 Thatcher administration tried to reduce ‘the nanny state’ by cutbacks in public expenditure on social services aimed at supporting the traditional nuclear family (and penalising lone-mother families). However, as noted above, the initial effects were the reverse – increasing forms of part-time employment. The 1983–1987 Thatcher administration attempted to change the governmental infrastructure for the delivery of social services and to reduce social services supports for families (by shifting the responsibility from statutory to voluntary organisations). This became known (in 1986) as ‘care in the community’. Edwina Curie (then a junior Health Minister) tried to ensure ‘self-help’ schemes for families as part of the project of helping the community to care, adding to the already burgeoning voluntary ‘helper’ projects. The 1987–1990 administration sought to develop more explicit alternative social policies to those of the social democratic era. These, too, were particularly significant for women’s lives inside and outside the family, although all were expressed in gender-neutral terms. The two most significant acts – The Education Reform Act 1988 and the Children Act 1989 – mark the apotheosis of Thatcher’s social policies, in that the Education Reform Act demonstrated how far the Thatcher government had moved away from any commitment to equal opportunities in that parents were given a major involvement in running schools, thereby accentuating the
differential resources available to schools. This was later modified under the Blair government but is being re-differentiated again under Michael Gove, as the Conservative Secretary of State for Education in the Coalition government.

Furthermore, the Children Act (1989) did not try to reduce social or economic inequalities between parents. What became the Children Act (1989) was only about children in non-traditional families in need of ‘care’ and it contained no provisions for universal early childhood education (despite the decade-earlier commitment to nursery education that Thatcher had when she was Secretary of State for Education). The immediate twin-effects of the implementation of free market policies for social welfare were the ‘privacy of the (genderless) family, coping on its own . . . private businesses for schemes of childcare for under fives . . .’ (David, 1990, p. 136). In addition, the form of the changes made has been to increase sexual and social inequalities both in families and the labour market, at that point, reversing trends of the previous three decades. It would be difficult to gainsay these as lasting effects of the Thatcherite legacy, and well into the twenty-first century.

When Thatcher resigned in November 1990, there began to emerge a series of theoretical and methodological perspectives to consider the long-term effects on various political administrations. From my own feminist perspective, there arose an array of both changing feminist and socialist critiques and, at the same time, moves to examine changing socio-economic and political contexts. For example, Fraser’s (1977) Post-socialist condition was taken up with vigour by many analysts of the growth of economic liberalism and its becoming what has now been seen as a major economic system – neo-liberalism. The attempt was to consider the rupture of traditions and additions of proliferation of post-theories, i.e. post-structuralism, post-modernism and growth in political sphere of ‘personal responsibility’.

This was seen as the slow shifting trajectories from the personal is political and the social or cultural or biographic turn to the newly coined term ‘personalisation’. In my analysis (David, 2003) I showed that the Major administrations (1990–1997) were in effect a continuation of Thatcherism but in rapidly changing economic times and financial crises. There were more moves towards the free market through, for example, the introduction of vouchers for public services. This was a signal of further privatisation and the rise of neo-liberalism (David, 2003, p. 133). The growth of Conservative policies had particularly significant effects on women and the family (David, 2003, p. 142).

For example, the American Neo-Conservative pundit Charles Murray was invited to comment on changing British family life under Thatcher by the Conservative think tank – the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA). His original article titled The emerging British underclass was published in The British Sunday Times in 1989 and it was subsequently reprinted as an IEA pamphlet in 1990 (Murray, 1990). What Murray argued was that the effects of free market policies were to produce not just inequalities between families in social class terms but an underclass of dependent men and women who were either the [young] women raising children on their own or [young] men who were feckless and not in gainful employment. This essay caused an enormous controversy amongst social scientists and commentators. In 1994, Murray was invited to comment again. Given the furore, four of us were invited to make further commentaries: two of us as social policy analysts (Pete Alcock and myself), with two political commentaries (by Melanie Philips and Sue Slipman) (Murray, 1994).

I argued that Murray’s argument was fundamentally flawed (1994, pp. 53–58) as he had distinguished only two groups of working class women or [young] mothers with dependent children – the so-called New Victorians and the ‘New Rabble’. His argument added up to being about how the underclass is made up only of [young] women with
illegitimate children living in poverty. Such was the success of his appeal to Conservative
family values that the pamphlet was expanded and republished in 1996, edited by the now
Labour peer, Ruth Lister (1996). There was also a particular focus on the changing trends
in divorce and illegitimacy and especially the increasing numbers of women rearing
children alone. However, it was clear and obvious that these women did not have suitable
suitors (those available were not attractive as potential partners). This kind of argument
about the ‘underclass’ with the moral undertones of disapprobation about their
fecklessness continued in yet another publication from the IEA which was a largely
positive commentary on the virtues of the free market in social welfare (apart from my
critique – David, 1998).

This kind of perspective on the marketisation of social welfare has become so
completely accepted that it is no longer seen as a cause for public concern, and at the same
time, feminism has become completely occluded. The process of shifting discourses was
also exemplified by yet another IEA pamphlet (David, 1998). However, given the more
sober and analytical approach with articles by John Haskey from Government Social Service
and Kathleen Kiernan of LSE, this collection was not as sensationalist as previous ones had
been. However, Patricia Morgan provided a rather dramatic piece with evidence of diverse
family types, including lone mothers, and the figures on divorce. Throughout the 1990s there
was an escalation of debate about the changing figures on divorce and lone motherhood,
laced with commentary about the moral degradation of such families.

Over a decade later, and well into the second decade of the twenty-first century, there is
now a much more clearly analytical approach to the changes for women around
motherhood. For example, the Economic and Social Research Council has funded a
number of social research projects that do not moralise about the changing demographic
evidence (which has certainly been a dramatic legacy of the Thatcherite era) but take a
more sociological and analytical perspective. One major effect of the Thatcherite period is
the changing demography of families, and the increasing trends towards fragmentation,
social diversity and multiculturalism (Shain, 2011). However, these trends do not
necessarily lead to a cause for concern, unless they increase inequalities such that families
cannot participate on an equal basis in economic activities, or that the burden of care
remains largely with mothers, with little access to economic support or resources.

In another sober analysis of the key changes in women’s lives in the post-war period,
linked to both social and educational changes, Arnot et al. argued that, despite
Thatcherism and attempts to maintain social inequalities, there was a secular trend towards
gender equality in education and forms of employment. We focused on the gender gap in
girls’ educational achievements at school from the 1980s, looking at first the closing and
then reversal of the traditional gender gap. We argued that:

in the UK schooling appears to have broken with the traditions of the gender order. It is this
decisive break with the social and educational past that lies behind the closing of the gender
gap. (1997, p. 156)

Using our own positioning as feminists and part of education feminism, we also showed
the contradictions around Thatcher herself in her values and ideologies and educational
policies of individualism. Drawing on her own autobiography we argued that she found
herself in a contradictory position, and found it very hard to impose Victorian family
values (Arnot, David, & Weiner, 1997, pp. 42–47) and indeed singularly failed (p. 47).
She appeared to accomplish the very opposite and to enhance the advancement of
women’s educational and public achievements such that ‘ordinary’ girls began to desert
the traditionally female educational avenues directed towards family life.
A feminist critique of the politics and practice of sex education

During the twenty-first century, under New Labour administrations, there appeared to be yet further twists and turns towards a more personalised and yet socialised set of social policies. After an almost 20-year period of Conservative rule, with Thatcher (1979–1990) followed by Major (1990–1997), it was expected that there would be reversals of the highly individualised and personalised policies under a New Labour government. Tony Blair on coming to power as Labour Prime Minister in 1997 argued to put education at the heart of social policies, with his ‘Education, Education, Education’, and also appeared to have a commitment to transforming both women and young people’s lives. Another of his initial projects and policies was to consider the question of poverty and linking it with teenage pregnancies and motherhood.

With Pam Alldred, I undertook a study of the changing policies and practices, funded by a local education authority (LEA) to develop the evidence to transform the policies and to reduce the rates of schoolgirl and young women’s pregnancies, as set out by the then New Labour government’s Social Exclusion Unit in its first annual report titled aptly Teenage pregnancy. Our findings were published as Get real about sex: The politics and practice of sex education (Alldred & David, 2007). We reviewed the changing policy contexts and the silences around sex and sexuality, and then embarked upon a study of both schoolgirls and schoolboys in an array of the LEA’s secondary schools, as well as girls and boys excluded from school, and in special units. We were particularly interested in the pedagogical aspects of the issues, as to whether school curricula such as Personal Social and Health Education (PSHE) or Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) could impact upon the students’ behaviour and practices. It was remarkable that, despite several decades of concern, there remained so little explicit practice around these issues. We wrote:

The context for learning and teaching about sex, sexuality and gender has been changing in Britain and in post-colonial societies, as the troubled implementation of the UN’s (2000) Millennium Development Goals of gender equity illustrates (Aikman and Unterhalter 2005). This policy context has altered the curriculum in ways that have reduced the perceived importance of PSHE and contribute to the split between different approaches to teaching or understanding young people’s development. Broadly this split is represented by an emphasis either on academic success or on personal well-being… PSHE as a ‘social’ rather than academic subject, and SRE, by association with the body, have been relegated to the educational sidelines as cross-curricular themes and asides to the school’s main business. The mind/body split unravels when examined closely and has long attracted feminist critique for its gendered hierarchical assumptions. (Alldred & David, 2007, pp. 171–172)

We were concerned that in a growing period of austerity these splits would continue to be felt, rather than enhancing children’s education and gendered learning about their sexuality in a supportive environment. So our final conclusion, pre-figuring the public concerns of the second decade of the twenty-first century, was that:

... we want to question the acceptable role for schools in implementing government policy concerning contested values, in particular to prioritise welfare budget reduction over education. We make a plea for a more compassionate schooling that values relationships above all and therefore questions the reliance on market forces to improve education. A supportive environment would allow committed educators to facilitate young people to see themselves as sexual subjects, to recognise the pressures of a culture awash with profit-driven sexual imagery, and to resist the extension of the capitalistic logic to emotional and sexual relationships. Students learn from the culture of a school as much as the curriculum content. Schools are delivering their most powerful lessons about relationships and sexuality in the degree to which they respect the diverse bodies, desires and emotions of both teachers and pupils. The real challenge in schools lies in the practice of compassionate relationships that are both sustaining and sustainable. (Alldred & David, 2007, p. 191)
Conclusions

It is clear that over the last 50 years or so, the question of women’s position in relation to the family, education, employment and sex or sexuality has been changing. There remains very little agreement on the direction of these changes and there has been a strong backlash against women’s and girls’ entry in public life, with the most recent and tragic example being the shooting of Malala for her campaign for girls’ education. Whilst the feminist movement has been successful in getting questions of what were once called sexual divisions or sexual relations onto the public policy agenda, these are now mainly about gender equality in relation to education and employment: part of a traditional liberal approach to social mobility and equal opportunities, and what is still a sexist or patriarchal approach to the wider power relations between men and women. They also remain deeply classed and highly contradictory.

There is now a split between sex and gender and paradoxes in the debates about the positioning of women in relation to forms of education and employment. The question of disadvantaged and working class women in access to education and employment remains somewhat occluded. For example, New Labour’s policy of supporting young people, largely poor people leaving school who became known as Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEETs), also ignored the question of gender. However, young pregnant women remained the target of policy disapprobation, continuing the Thatcherite moral reprehension, although not fully counted as NEETs (Alldred & David, 2007).

The more general question of feminisation of employment, and not only professional employment, has also been raised but in a very muted fashion. As mentioned in the introduction, Alan Milburn, a former Labour minister has been appointed to chair the now statutory commission on social mobility and child poverty (2012). It is now focused entirely on the access of working class children, or rather boys, into higher education. This clearly illustrates the continuing tensions between gender and social class, and linked to ethnicity/race.

Under the coalition government, the statutory Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) has also been called into question. The Equalities Act 2010, passed immediately prior to the Labour government being voted out of office, had brought together all the various equalities legislation under one umbrella. This meant that all public sector bodies had duties to consider gender, class, disabilities, ethnicity/race and employment together. In April 2013, the coalition government called for a review of the workings of the PSED, suspending it pending review.

There remain paradoxes in the debates about the positioning of women in relation to forms of employment. And at the other end of the social scale, the question of disadvantaged and working class women in access to employment also remains somewhat occluded. For example, New Labour’s policy of supporting young people, largely poor people leaving school who became known as NEETs, also ignored the question of gender. However, young pregnant women remained the target of policy disapprobation, continuing the Thatcherite moral reprehension, although not fully counted as NEETs (Alldred & David, 2007).

These changes in policies towards education and employment were part of a broader shift in how individuals were treated as part of the changing nature of the now waning welfare state, given the various moves to limit local and community control and government. The notion of individual responsibilities rather than a more general idea of family or social relationships underpinning social responsibilities were increasingly developed as part of the trajectory from Thatcherite economic liberalism. During the Blair period of office they became increasingly
known as *personalisation* and individualisation, whereby individuals were expected to take their own responsibilities, without the traditional sharing with aspects of the welfare state. These were seen as part of the processes of shifts towards a knowledge economy with its attendant exacerbation of social, economic and gender inequalities. This is, therefore, a paradoxical aspect of the Thatcherite legacy with not only the effects of moves towards neo-liberalism and market forces and/or privatisation and voluntarism but also personalisation (David, in press).

More recent generations of women as feminists in the global academy have indeed developed more theoretically informed and gender-sensitive analyses of the relations between families and the wider socio-economic and political systems (Morley, 2011; Ringrose, 2012). They have also explored the longer term effects of socio-economic developments upon increasing inequalities and the growth of increasing individualisation. This theoretical sociological approach draws upon the work of Beck and Giddens, linked as it is with wider analyses of socio-economic change (Clegg & David, 2006; David & Clegg, 2008). However, it has also been imaginatively developed with respect to gender and from a feminist perspective, with increasingly subtle analyses of developments for young women and girls, the so-called ‘sexualisation’ thesis.

There have, then, been complex changes within family and social policies linked to care and work in wider socio-economic and political processes: moves away from a sharp distinction between public and private. This means that huge inequalities between families has continued, especially those with dependent children, despite the fact that women have participated in education and employment on unprecedented levels since the 1980s. Thus, there has been a paradox at the heart of public policies: moves towards sexual or gender equity in employment, education and public life but the burden of care remaining largely on women in families. This paradox for changing family-education policies in an era of austerity remains, especially for those poor and disadvantaged families largely headed by mothers. This has remained both a moral and economic project, with lasting implications: effective moves towards sexual or gender equity in employment, education and public life but with the burden of care remaining largely on women in families, and thus maintaining and enhancing social and economic inequalities or conditions of poverty versus privilege. Indeed, it has been argued that shifting the boundaries between the private family and public policies, through increasing forms of employment for women in families has doubled the burden of family responsibilities. And women and girls remain seen as responsible for emotional and sexual relations.

In times of austerity and recession, women as wives and/or mothers of dependent children are the first to feel ‘the pinch’ or the burden of such economic responsibilities. Willetts’ (2010) polemic about the impacts of changing public policies on families across generations illustrates the continual blaming of women for this. Moreover, his recent suggestion to reverse gender equity in higher education by enticing in working class boys and men at the expense of women illustrates the continuing misogyny in UK social policies.

As Natasha Walter (2013) argues:

> the figures released on sexual violence ... come from the mainstream: they are prepared by the Home Office, the Ministry of Justice and Office for National Statistics ... They suggest that one in five women in the UK experiences a sexual offence in her adult life ... These figures surely undermine the idea that it is some kind of jumpy feminist paranoia to be anxious about the sexual culture that surrounds us ...

She goes on to show that policy-makers and advisors all argue that it is ‘just women, just the children’ and so not critically important. What feminists still assert is that it is vital to change
the culture through education, and schooling especially, about sex and relationships to try to stem the tide of sexual violence. Finding forms of training and education about gender-related violence and sexual abuse or bullying is vital to transform what seem to be gender-neutral policies for youth, and to impact on young women especially. Otherwise, to paraphrase Stevie Smith’s powerful poem [young] women will not be ‘waving but drowning’ in a sea of misogyny.

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