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Minority Women, Austerity and Activism

Akwugo Emejulu
Leah Bassel

Abstract: Based on our study of minority women's activism in the context of the economic crisis in Scotland, England and France, we question how well third sector organisations, policy-makers and social movements have responded to minority women's perspectives and needs arising from austerity and racism. Apart from being disproportionately affected by the cuts, minority women are also undermined by dominant discourses which can (mis)represent them as either 'victims' or 'enterprising actors'. There appears, from our excerpted interviews, to be a disconnect between minority women's experiences and analyses of their precarity, their desire to take radical action and the compliant and domesticating projects and programmes that are currently being offered by some of their third sector 'allies'.

The 'invisible' crisis for minority women

Even before the 2008 economic crisis, minority ethnic groups and minority women in particular in France and Britain were experiencing persistent economic and social hardships. Regardless of educational outcomes, minority groups were disproportionately more likely to be unemployed or underemployed.[1] Those in the labour market had to negotiate an 'ethnic penalty' which depresses wages and concentrates minority groups in low paid, temporary and unstable work.[2] The economic and social impacts on minority groups were stark. In pre-crisis France, 21 per cent of 'descendants of immigrants' are poor, which was double the number of French people who have French parents.[3] In pre-crisis Britain, the poverty rate for minority ethnic groups was 40 per cent, double the rate of the white population.[4]

Compounding these experiences is the way that particular intersections of race, ethnicity and gender are seen as 'problematic' in political and policy debates. Minority groups' experiences do not inform policy discussions unless they are discussed on racialised and gendered terms as social problems. For instance, the high rates of minority groups' unemployment usually feature in public debates only when linked to periods of urban unrest such as the riots of 2005 in Paris and 2011 in England. Minority groups' persistent poverty and unemployment is typically only highlighted as a policy problem in the context of moral panics about 'failed' state strategies, whether in relation to multiculturalist (British) or assimilationist (French) policies. Thus routinised unemployment and poverty are defined as the private problem of the racialised poor and only become a public issue when the everyday social order is disrupted. The very 'ordinariness' of their disadvantage combined with the construction of some racial, ethnic and gender intersections as problematic tends to exclude minority groups, and in particular minority women, from the European public sphere and undermine how they are included in wider social movements and struggles.[5]

Britain is undergoing the most extensive reduction and restructuring of its welfare state since the Second World War The Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government have presided over a 27 per cent cut to local government—the key mechanism for delivery of public services—and a 68 per cent cut to the social housing budget.[6] A further £12bn reduction in social welfare spending will be implemented if the Conservatives are returned to power in May 2015. Even in the midst of a general election, the main issue between the two major parties—Labour and the Conservatives—is not whether to cut the social welfare state but rather *how much* and *how quickly* the incoming government should further roll back the state. Whilst France is not implementing as stringent austerity measures in comparison to Britain, a key aim of the *Parti Socialiste* government is deficit reduction and cuts to public spending. François Hollande's troubled government missed a 2013 budget commitment to cut the deficit to 3 per cent of GDP[7] and his controversial revenue generation plans of a 75 per cent 'supertax' on households with incomes over €1million and a new 45 per cent tax for households with incomes over €150,000) is currently under judicial review. The Socialist government is not implementing sweeping cuts to all areas of state spending but is opting to concentrate reductions via a freeze on all government spending which amounts to an estimated €10bn cut in public spending. However, under further pressure from the European Central Bank, Hollande is planning to extend austerity measures further.

Under austerity, minority women are disproportionately disadvantaged due to their already existing precarity compounded by their particular relationships with the social welfare state. Minority women are more likely to be employed in the public sector (as teachers, nurses and social workers, etc), more likely to be sub-contracted to the state via private sector organisations (as care workers, cleaners, caterers, etc) and are also more likely to be connected to the local state (through accessing public services) because of gendered caring responsibilities. Therefore, austerity measures clearly increase minority women's unemployment whilst simultaneously reducing the scope, coverage and access to public services.[8]

We believe that to take minority women seriously as competent and active agents requires a radical shift in the public understanding of 'crisis' and a concerted effort to extend political and social solidarity to minority women's experiences and particular social actions. To that end, from September 2011 to May 2014, we conducted fifty-five semi-structured interviews and focus groups in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Manchester, Coventry, London, Paris and Lyon with: minority and migrant women activists; directors, policy officers and development workers in anti-poverty, housing, migrant rights third sector organisations[9]; and civil servants and local government officials with briefs for the third sector and/or equalities. Additional material was collected from a separate research project[10] and three knowledge exchange events[11]. The third sector organisations in our study included: traditional welfare service providers, advocacy and campaigning groups, those offering crisis relief and political organising for destitute and/or undocumented migrants and militant organisations that resembled social movements. For the minority women participants in our study, they included those who self-identified as 'Black',

refugee, migrant or of 'immigrant origin'. The types of activism our participants were engaged in ranged from self-help and community organising to trade unionism and social movement mobilisations.

Minority women face the cuts
In material terms, the crisis has taken a toll on everyday life and the personal and collective resources for minority women's activism. Some minority women are particularly disadvantaged due to precarious employment, legal status and/or greater reliance on dwindling public services. The seemingly prosaic and routine hardships that some women experience have profound impacts on their activism – for instance, a lack of affordable childcare; diminished core funding for minority women-led organisations; the withdrawal of funding for transport costs to attend meetings in rooms that are no longer freely provided. We argue that minority women need to navigate *both* material *and* discursive obstacles -- about whose crisis counts, who is a legitimate interlocutor, and who can mobilise for social justice. As Janet Newman argues, it is increasingly difficult for women activists to find time or resources for 'creative political work' because 'cuts in public and welfare services are intensifying the time pressures...making it more difficult to reconcile care work, paid employment, casual work, study, voluntary or charitable contributions and political activity.'[12] (Janet Newman 2013: 217).

For example, a Scottish Pakistani woman volunteering at a minority women-led community organisation in Glasgow stated:

> We've got a lot of stuff we have to do. Like the kids' breakfast and stuff, it's mainly us women that are doing it. Bringing and dropping them off at schools, even at the mosque, that's mainly women that's doing that. So it [cuts to services] does [have an impact], it quite tires a woman out. When it comes to the weekend when you want to spend time with the kids more, you're more reluctant, [you want] to be staying in bed.

A Black activist in London agrees that the cuts are having a detrimental effect on minority women's activism:

> If you've got a family, you're a single parent, you're a Black woman who is probably working two jobs [with] unsociable shifts, you've got tyrant-type bosses who if you're one minute late they're ready to sack you and you're not in secure employment where they can just sack you and get you of the door and get somebody in the next day, then you really haven't got time and you're probably too tired to get up and start campaigning around things.

The severity of the cuts, however, acts as a double-edged sword, according to this activist. She identified the ways in which these tough times also galvanise minority women to action:

> Having said that, I've also seen Black women who were not activists before now involved because of how high the stakes are against us, stacked up

against us, and what we're encountering, that it's forced them to become active, so there's that aspect of it as well.

As we can see, economic insecurity creates real dilemmas for minority women's activism. The personal costs of activism are high and some women, quite rightly, make the choice to focus solely on their family's survival under austerity. However, our data also indicate that other women seek to subvert their precarity by using it as a springboard for organising and mobilising in their communities[13].

Disabling discourses of minority women
Minority women also experience 'discursive crises' that further problematise the spaces available for their activism. In Scotland, England and France, there appear to be two lenses through which the claims of minority women are viewed. There is a long-standing tendency to cast minority women as 'victims' and for them to be listened to selectively when they are making their claims. However, in the context of neoliberalism, minority women are, paradoxically, also being recognised as 'enterprising actors' at the same time.[14]

As a Scottish Asian worker at a minority women's organisation in Edinburgh observed, it was only around issues of victimhood that her organisation was consulted by policymakers:

> If they [policymakers] wanted to listen to us they would come to us when they've written zero of their policy not when they've written 99% of it. So when it comes to minority women's issues or minority people's issues more widely, we are the afterthought, always…The only time that they have involved us from zero is when there's policy that disproportionately affects minority ethnic communities. For example, the forced marriage legislation—everything else, we're an afterthought.

In London, a migrant woman who works at a migrants' rights organisation acknowledged the importance of funding to combat issues such as forced marriage and female genital mutilation. However, for her, the problem was trying to move beyond this victim category to obtain funding for minority women's other social welfare interests and needs. As she observes:

> It's much harder to find that sort of funding in grants that will mirror the actual need…Women need training. They need education.

Similar issues are at play in France with minority women becoming visible and audible only as domestic violence victims or rendered invisible if they do not conform to this identity. As a white jurist who advocates on behalf of minority women in Paris described it, the victim angle works and is difficult to refuse:

> One thing that's certain is that the prism of foreign women [as] victims of violence. We're able to have more of an impact with politicians because no one supports violence. So it's an angle of attack that's interesting [and] useful.

In Scotland, England and France, constructing minority women as victims is a way for some activists and their advocates to bring minority women into the public sphere and highlight their inequalities as a public issue requiring policy action. However, minority women pay a very high price for this victimhood identity in that they must accept the role of a passive and vulnerable object in order to be seen and heard by policymakers. We name this identity construction as a discursive crisis for minority women activists because it foreclose opportunities for activists to construct their identities on their own terms and undermines their ability to develop and sustain solidarity as equal citizens struggling for justice.

Alongside this discursive construction of minority women as victims is a new identity of 'enterprising actors'—we found this identity to be more prevalent in Scotland and England rather than France. In Scotland in particular, we found that minority women activists are being recast by some of their third sector allies as enterprising actors. Activists' critical analyses of their complex inequalities are being reshaped and channelled specifically into social enterprises such as community cafes, crèches and sewing groups.

For example, a white policy manager at an anti-poverty organisation in Glasgow used the language of empowerment to justify the embedding of neoliberal ideas and practices among activists with whom she worked. She argues that social enterprises create:

> A more of a level playing field [with the state]. It's somebody commissioning a service and it's somebody providing a service…The balance of power in that is always really interesting…They're [minority women] more business partners than they are donor and recipient and that is an angle we would definitely like to try.

Several of the minority women activists we interviewed in Glasgow and Edinburgh expressed deep scepticism of this approach because they were unconvinced that micro-level enterprising work could have a meaningful impact on the inequalities they experienced such as discrimination within the asylum system, everyday racism in their neighbourhoods and labour market discrimination. As a West African migrant activist in Glasgow noted:

> The problems that minority ethnic women face are more structured in nature and therefore beyond the power of the community themselves to actually change.

There appears to be a disconnect between minority women's experiences and analyses of their precarity, their desire to take radical action and the compliant and domesticating projects and programmes that are currently being offered by some of their third sector 'allies'. Particularly in Scotland, we found that many minority women activists were not being listened to and their views about the meaning and purpose of their activism did not seem to be taken seriously by their third sector partners.

In England, however, we found a different process at play regarding activist women's identities as enterprising actors. It seems that some minority women are able to subvert the enterprise culture and use it as a tool for advocacy and activism. In London, one activist chose to establish a social enterprise because she perceived it to be a less bureaucratic and more responsive space for intervention. Being a social enterprise, she argues:

> Gives me the independence that I need. We need to earn our money through the expertise we deliver…and [we] then [get] to decide [how] to spend the money on the services that we feel are needed. So it gives me that independence, not only that, although I have an advisory role I make the decisions so it gives [organisation's name] power to decide on its own.

This participant uses 'information sessions' organised by her social enterprise as an opportunity to move beyond explaining to people how they will be affected by austerity measure to raising awareness (particularly in single female-headed migrant households) of their rights to contest sanctions and evictions.

In Manchester, a British Asian social entrepreneur is also channelling her activism through an enterprise model. She argues that social enterprises are an important form of grassroots activism for minority women and it is through her social enterprise that she experiences political agency:

> I think its [social enterprise] a very important and effective tool in achieving change, activism, justice, increased economic growth…You'll find that people who work in social enterprises have…a greater sense of belonging and feel they have the power to make change.

However, as the Scottish data suggest above, taking an enterprising approach does not necessarily always match minority women's interests and priorities. We question the extent to which enterprising approaches are open to being shaped by minority women and their interests rather than a neoliberal logic dictating the terms of minority women's activism. What is important to note about both the Scottish and English cases is how enterprising identities and practices appear to be inescapable for minority women and that they are compelled to position their interests and activism within—rather than against—this neoliberal process.

Solidarity in radical spaces?
Looking beyond the third sector, it is important to also explore the extent to which anti-austerity social movements recognise minority women as legitimate political actors and make common cause with them.

Returning to the Black activist in London, she argues that the structure of anti-austerity social movements exclude minority women's concerns from the outset. She reported experiences of racism *and* sexism in the articulation of claims and in the representation of activists in these ostensibly radical spaces:

From the perspective of Black women who perhaps are political, who do want to campaign … if they look at the face of the anti-cuts movement and see it's quite male-dominated that may put them off getting involved, may not give them the confidence to get involved and just because it's an anti-cuts movement doesn't mean to say there's not racism within it.

In this participant's view there is a particular category of white activists to whom:

You have to explain it and spell it out to them. Now these are supposed to be people that are supposed to understand the history… about the context, about what true equality means and what oppression is, and they will say they know that and they will give you all the good headlines or put the good quotes out there but the reality is they don't really understand it because otherwise you wouldn't have to remind them over and over again, and you wouldn't have to spell it out, so it is quite a struggle, it's quite tough…They get very defensive because they don't want to actually admit they've got it wrong.

In a slightly different vein, several minority women activists in Glasgow and Edinburgh experienced their neighbourhoods as hostile territories punctuated by everyday racism and segregation that undermined any potential for solidarity work with their white working-class neighbours on issues related to austerity. As a West African migrant activist observed:

I could kind of see that the fact that, you know, people are in crisis could also mean that they will be more hateful towards migrants. Migrants are quite easy targets because … they [white Scots] don't feel they [migrants] belong to this country… So it's very easy to target migrants and I'm one of them.

Because some of the women we interviewed do not experience a real sense of belonging and mutuality in their neighbourhoods, this appears to be a significant barrier to building solidarity. This is particularly significant in Scotland where the minority population is much smaller than in England and France[15].

In France, however, some participants argued that austerity had spurred new solidarities, particularly in the field of migrants' rights and did not voice concerns about exclusion. On the contrary, one migrants' rights advocate in Paris argued that the cuts have had:

A positive effect on militant action … This [action] isn't achieved by those financed by the state… People, refugees, asylum seekers, will turn more toward solidarity in the receiving country, basic solidarity.

Thus, it remains an open question as to whether militant spaces are also inclusive spaces and can support and sustain solidarity with minority women's interests and activisms.

Conclusions

Minority women are negotiating material and discursive crises that undermine and problematise their activism. Civil society spaces—in the form of third sector organisations and social movements—oftentimes appear incapable of recognising and taking seriously minority women's demands. Pluralist democratic societies purporting to generate social and political solidarity should have real and meaningful spaces for the politics of minority women who choose to articulate intersectional social justice claims. When heard outside of the scripts of victimhood or neoliberal agency, minority women have the potential to challenge dominant representations of the crisis and austerity measures enabling new political imaginations and solidarities for social justice.

Project website
http://www.minoritywomenandausterity.com/

References

[1] See A. Emejulu, 'The Intersection of Ethnicity, Poverty and Wealth' in T. Ridge and S. Wright (eds) *Understanding Inequality, Poverty and Wealth*. Bristol (Policy Press, 2008) and L. Bassel, *Refugee Women: Beyond Gender versus Culture* (London, Routledge, 2012).

[2] All Party Parliamentary Group on Race and Community (APPG), *Ethnic Minority Female Unemployment: Black, Pakistani and Bangladeshi Heritage Women First Report of Session 2012-2013* (London,The Runnymede Trust, 2012).

[3] P. Lombardo and J. Pujol, *Le niveau de vie des descendants d'immigrés,* Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques, 2008. Accessed on internet on 15/6/13 http://www.insee.fr/fr/ffc/docs_ffc/ref/revpmen11f.pdf

[4] L. Platt, *Poverty and Ethnicity in the UK* (York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2007). Accessed on the internet on 3/6/13 http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/poverty-and-ethnicity-uk

[5] Lest we attribute the privatisation of public issues as solely a problem for minority groups, it is important to note how the experiences of white working-class men and boys, in particular the sharp declines in their educational and economic outcomes, are also classified as a private trouble of cultural dysfunction brought on by the (unsubstantiated claim of) intergenerational transmission of fecklessness, low aspirations and a lack of self-responsibility.

[6] Taylor-Gooby, P (2011) 'Root and Branch Restructuring to Achieve Major Cuts: The Social Policy Programme of the 2010 UK Coalition Government', *Social Policy and Administration*, 46(1): 1-22.

[7] *L'Express* (28/9/12) 'Les principaux points du Budget 2013'
http://lexpansion.lexpress.fr/economie/le-gouvernement-renonce-a-atteindre-l-equilibre-budgetaire-en-2017_341359.html

[8] See Women's Budget Group (2010) *The Impact on Women of the Coalition Spending Review 2010.* http://www.wbg.org.uk/RRB_Reports_4_1653541019.pdf ; Seguino, S. (2010) 'The Global Economic Crisis, its Gender and Ethnic Implications, and Policy Responses', *Gender & Development*, 18(2): 179-199; and Theodoropoulou S. and Watt A. (2011) *Withdrawal Symptoms: An Assessment of the Austerity Packages in Europe.* Working Paper 2011.02. Brussels: European Trade Union Institute.

[9] The 'third sector' is notoriously difficult to define, but for the purposes of our study, we define it as the collection of civil society organisations positioned between, and strongly influenced by, both the state and the market. The third sector used to mean the voluntary or not-for-profit sector. It is a term which came to prominence as local government services were outsourced since the 1980s and the voluntary sector became the third sector--after the public and private ones-- and encouraged to tender for contracts to deliver public services.

[10] See Sosenko, F., Netto, G., Emejulu, A. and Bassel, L. (2013) *In It Together? Perceptions on Ethnicity, Recession and Austerity in Three Glasgow Communities.* Glasgow: Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights. http://www.crer.org.uk/Publications/inittogether.pdf

[11] See 'Whose Crisis Counts? Minority Women, Austerity and Solidarity in France and the UK', 11th June 2013, Centre for Education for Racial Equality in Scotland, University of Edinburgh.

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[12] Newman, J. (2013) 'Spaces of Power: feminism, neoliberalism and gendered labour', *Social Politics* 20, 2: 200-221.

[13] Bassel, L. and Emejulu, A. (forthcoming 2017) *The Politics of Survival: Minority Women, Activism and Austerity in France and Britain.* Bristol: Policy Press.

[14] The concept of social enterprise, ie business solutions to social problems, has gone hand in hand with neoliberal policies taking hold in Britain since the 1990s.

[15] Emejulu, A. (2013) 'Being and Belonging in Scotland: Exploring the Intersection of Ethnicity, Gender and National Identity among Scottish Pakistani Groups', *Scottish Affairs,* 84(3): 41-64.