

## Chasing the dream gender equality in public services

by Hazel Conley and Margaret Page

A book launch +

“The whole [of] equalities work is like  
that really. Running around with a  
butterfly net!”

Equality advisor, local government

## Where we began.....

*From the 1880s, thought interacted with action in a whirl of speculation, proposals, policies and utopian visions. Exploratory and adventurous aspirations were expressed not only in books and articles, but through movements, organisations, local groups and projects. Women, along with men, were swept up in the impetus of changing everyday life.*

(Sheila Rowbotham, 2010:1):

## Feminist change- local democracy Bringing the outside inside ..

1980s – 90s- left labour LAs in opposition to conservative government

- Women’s equality committees + Independent feminist organisation + trade unions in local communities
  - Redistribution of public funds – equal pay, socialization of care, women’s equal participation in decision making
  - Self organisation- campaigns leading to legislation and policy and self managed services
  - extended local democracy- direct representation of diverse communities on council committees
  - Weak internal processes – backlash against politically led change

## Feminist change .. By performance management

Late 1990s and 2000s – new labour government

- Women’s equality promoted through performance management
- Gender mainstreaming –internal procedures to enforce and reward compliance- Labour LAs, New Labour government
- Gender equality duty (2007) – requirement to promote gender equality on the basis of consultation with diverse local communities.
- Weak external organisation, weak and contested content to gender mainstreaming

## Whats new? The changing landscape

- Weakened equality legislation
- Undermining of welfare and cuts to public services
- Hybrid governance and funding of public services
- Complex commissioning processes and accountability
- Upsurge of feminist activism
- Challenge to austerity narrative from feminists and labour leadership/ research evidence of unequal impacts
- Equality practice based on expert knowledge and evidence of effectiveness
- Established activist and expert networks

### How do we make a feminist future now?

- Research to support activists, evidence what works
- Strong networks- feminists working across our different roles - activists, equality experts, trade unions, elected politicians, researchers, academics
- Practice that prefigures the future we are trying to make
- Engages with change - opportunities and challenges in the new landscape that is emerging.