



Re-thinking equality for post-crisis times: a focus on gender

Milton Keynes Fawcett Discussion Paper 1

Summary

The Covid-19 crisis has prompted reflection on what and who is important in our communities, on how we measure contributions to society, and on how we reward them. It has raised questions about how well our social structures and priorities align with the values of fairness, justice and equality widely considered fundamental to society. Against this background, we review the current state of gender equality in the policy and practice of Milton Keynes Council (MKC). We revisit an earlier observational study conducted by the Milton Keynes Fawcett Society group to see whether women's participation in MKC has changed since 2015. We then focus on how gender equality analysis is used in decision-making, with reference to Equality Impact Assessments, the availability of gender-disaggregated data, and the use of gender analysis and data in the planning process. We conclude with a summary of issues to be addressed, and some proposals for change.

May 2020

Milton Keynes Fawcett Discussion Papers

- 1 *Re-thinking equality for post-crisis times: a focus on gender* (May 2020)
- 2 *Women's participation in local politics: Milton Keynes Council 2015/16 and 2019/20* (June 2020)

Discussion Paper 1 *Re-thinking equality for post-crisis times: a focus on gender* was prepared by the following members of Milton Keynes Fawcett:

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Milton Keynes Fawcett

The Fawcett Society is the [UK's leading membership charity](#) campaigning for gender equality and women's rights at work, at home and in public life. Our vision is a society in which women and girls in all their diversity are equal and truly free to fulfil their potential creating a stronger, happier, better future for us all.

Since 2014 Milton Keynes Fawcett has been working to give voice and visibility to women in the City. Our projects have included: street action to encourage women to vote in the 2015 general election; research on the participation of female and male councillors on MK Council (2015/16; follow-up research in 2019/20); an exhibition in MK Central Library and other parts of the city on *Women Who Made Milton Keynes*, to celebrate MK50 (2017-18); contributions to an exhibition in MK museum on *HERstory in Objects* (2019); starting in 2020, a series of discussion papers to explore gender equality in Milton Keynes.

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CONTENTS

1. Covid-19: inequalities laid bare

2. Equality in Milton Keynes: aspiration or reality?

3. Women in Local Politics: 'we need women In the room'

Women in the room: Milton Keynes Council 2015

2019-2020: More women in the room?

What has changed, and what is important?

4. Equality Analysis in MK Planning and Decision-Making: how well is it working?

Equality Impact Assessments in Milton Keynes – difficult to locate and to evaluate

Lack of clarity on how Equality Impact Assessments feed into planning and monitoring

A case study: the Transport Infrastructure Delivery Plan

Making Equality Impact Assessments more accessible and useful

5. The Public Sector Equality Duty and Disaggregated Data

Health – scattered data, confusing presentation

Housing and Homelessness – a gender data vacuum?

The website as a research tool

6. Effective Equality Analysis: a way of thinking

Neglect of gender analysis in evidence studies – some examples

'Not thinking' – a form of unintended discrimination

Challenging conventional thinking

7. Re-thinking Gender Equality

End Notes

“The gender data gap is not generally deliberate. Quite the opposite. It is simply the product of a way of thinking that has been around for millennia and is therefore a kind of not thinking. ... When we are designing a world that is meant to work for everyone we need women in the room.”

Caroline Criado Perez 'Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men', pp. xii-xiii. London: Chatto & Windus, 2019

1. Covid-19: inequalities laid bare

In March 2020 the Gender and Covid-19 Working Group published an article in the medical journal *The Lancet* criticising the absence of any gender analysis of the coronavirus epidemic by health institutions or governments. The article made three important points.

- For the response ‘to be effective and not reproduce or perpetuate gender and health inequities, it is important that gender norms, roles, and relations that influence women’s and men’s differential vulnerability to infection, exposure to pathogens, and treatment received, as well as how these may differ among different groups of women and men, are considered and addressed.’
- Without detailed sex-disaggregated data (i.e. data broken down by sex/gender), it would be impossible to create effective, equitable policies and interventions.
- Although women’s voices and knowledge could improve both preparedness for and response to the epidemic, women were inadequately represented in national and global Covid-19 policy spaces¹.

Published just before the UK went into Covid-19 lockdown on 24 March, *The Lancet* article was prescient. Initially, as some high profile individuals including the Prime Minister contracted the disease, Covid-19 was widely described as a ‘great leveller’, which did not discriminate. Yet as the patterns of the contagion emerged, it became clear that the disease was affecting segments of the population very differently. This was not simply in terms of fatalities² but in the less obvious ways that the epidemic was amplifying pre-existing inequalities and vulnerabilities³.

The UK’s largest domestic abuse charity, Refuge, reported that calls to its Helpline rose by 25% in the first week of the lockdown⁴: The closure of schools and childcare services put new pressures on parents and carers, particularly women. The charity Working Families reported a quadrupling of contacts to its Legal Advice Service almost overnight, with nearly 100% of the queries relating to Covid-19⁵. Two weeks into the lockdown, concerned by the invisibility of women in the public debate on Covid-19, the Fawcett Society and 60 other organisations launched a campaign to ensure that women were not left behind in policy and decision-making. The campaign called on Government to take immediate action in nine specific areas to support women and girls during the outbreak⁶. The Women’s Budget Group summarised evidence showing that, due to pre-existing inequalities, different groups of women would experience Covid-19 in distinct ways, and made recommendations for gender-sensitive improvements to the Government’s response⁷. In April the Women and Equalities Select Committee launched an enquiry into the impact of the coronavirus – and measures to tackle it – on different communities⁸. All this (and more) was the result of an initial lack of gender analysis in planning for, and response to, the epidemic – a perfect example of ‘**not thinking**’⁹.

As the Covid-19 epidemic began to unfold, Milton Keynes Fawcett was in the final stages of a review of how equality – and particularly gender equality - is reflected and pursued in planning and decision-making in Milton Keynes. Although the initial impetus for this work pre-dated Covid-19, the pandemic has

prompted discussion on highly relevant equality issues, including how we define and remunerate ‘key’ workers, the role and status of female-dominated sectors such as health and social care, the vulnerabilities created by poverty, the need for women’s involvement in policy and planning, and much more. To deal effectively with the aftermath of COVID-19, robust data, equality assessments and decision-making procedures will be needed in Milton Keynes. These concerns are central to our review.

2. Equality in Milton Keynes: aspiration or reality?

Milton Keynes aspires to be a place where equality, diversity and inclusiveness are nurtured and can flourish. In the many documents setting out plans and strategies for the city’s growth and future these goals are regularly invoked. For instance the January 2020 draft *Milton Keynes Strategy for 2050* aims for ‘affordable homes for all’, ‘an inclusive economy’, a ‘diverse cultural offer’, ‘mobility for all’¹⁰. The vision of the *Milton Keynes Council Plan 2016-2022* is to ensure ‘a fairer, hard-working and more equal Milton Keynes for all’¹¹.

Equality – specifically gender equality - is fundamental to the Fawcett Society’s vision of society. Since 2015 MK Fawcett has been exploring how gender equality in MK is being pursued. To what extent are women’s lives and priorities reflected in the decisions and plans to achieve ‘a fairer, hard-working and more equal Milton Keynes for all’? Is the ‘all’ so frequently referenced in policies and strategies sufficiently understood and addressed in terms of its constituent groupings? If it is not, can the aspiration to equality actually be achieved in reality? Although our review focuses on women and gender equality, these questions are relevant to all groups protected by equality legislation. Good practice in relation to one group will usually be beneficial for all. Obviously, gender is not a stand-alone marker of identity; it intersects with other protected characteristics such as age, race, disability and so on.

3. Women in Local Politics: ‘we need women in the room’

Research has shown that, as more women move into positions of influence and decision-making, women’s experiences and perspectives are more likely to be taken into account – for example in policy development, planning and resource allocation¹². That being so, the Fawcett Society at national level continues to highlight concerns about women’s representation in local government. A 2017 report - the result of a year-long study led by Fawcett in partnership with the Local Government Information Unit - asked ‘*Does Local Government Work for Women?*’¹³. It found that since 1997 women’s representation on Councils has almost flat-lined; at the current rate of progress it will take 48 years to reach equality.

Women in the room: Milton Keynes Council 2015

In 2015 the MK Fawcett carried out a study of women’s participation in Milton Keynes Council. We looked at the gender ratio of Councillors overall and on Council committees, and we observed contributions to Council meetings: full Council, Cabinet and a range of committees (15 meetings in all).

At the time, women made up 20 of the 57 MK councillors (35%). This was slightly above the average for England (32%). Overall, women were proportionately represented across the main committees, including as committee chairs. But they were not evenly distributed across different types of committee. Women were over-represented in traditionally ‘female’ areas: Corporate Parenting, Health and Adult Social Care, Health and Wellbeing. They were under-represented in traditionally ‘male’ areas: Audit and Budget Scrutiny. Of the eight members of Cabinet, only two were women. And across the Council meetings we observed, despite variations between committees, women contributed proportionately less than men to discussion¹⁴.

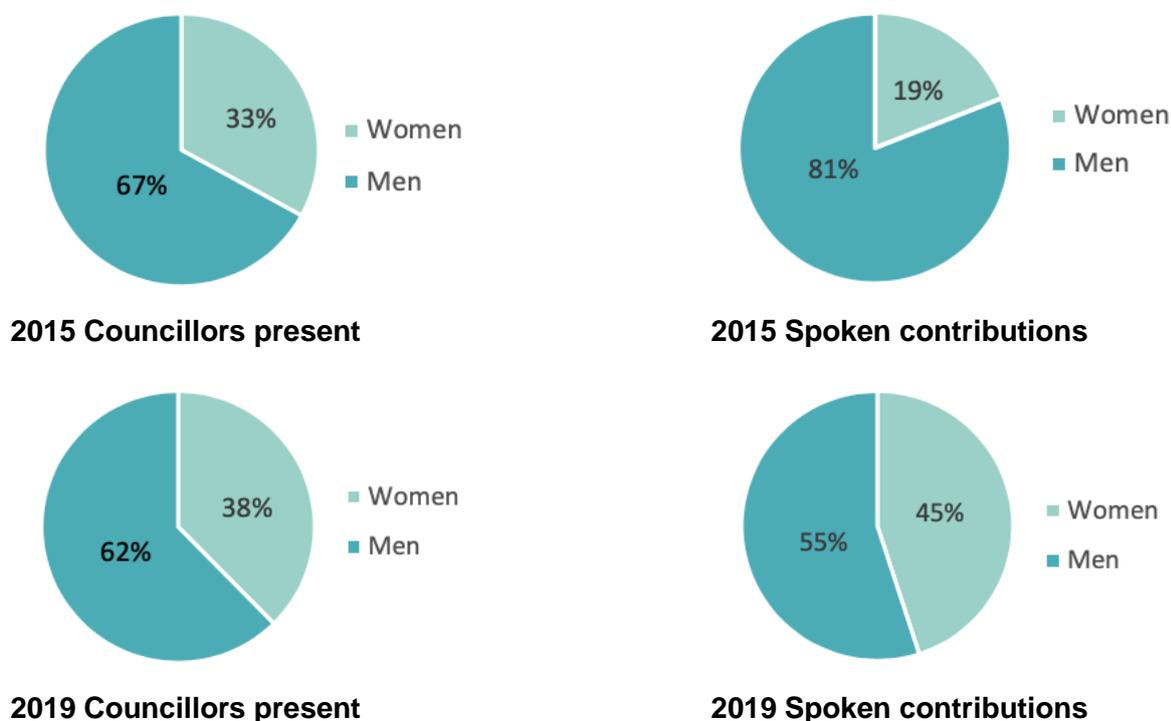
2019-2020: more women in the room?

We returned to this issue in 2019/20, when the composition of the Council had changed following three local elections. There were now 21 women councillors out of 57 – 37% compared with the national average of 35%. However with just one additional female Councillor since 2015, parity was still a distant destination.

An important difference in 2019/20 was Cabinet membership. Five of the nine members, including the Deputy Leader, were women. Across the main committees, the situation varied. Women were still proportionately represented overall (37%), the number of women chairing main committees held steady at 4 out of 14, and a slightly higher number of women now held Vice Chair positions. However, women were still over-represented in Corporate Parenting, and in Children and Young People, and under-represented on the Audit Committee. In some respects the situation had apparently worsened. The Joint Negotiating Committee had lost one of its female members, as well as its female chair, and only one of the 11 members of Development Control was female (compared with 3 out of 12 in 2015).

In our follow-up study we could not observe such a large number of meetings as in 2015. However, as in our earlier study, we observed three full Council meetings. We deemed these to be particularly important as occasions where all councillors potentially have a voice, and which also have high public visibility.

Patterns varied across the three meetings observed, with women’s largest share of contributions occurring at the October 2019 meeting¹⁵. The charts below compare the pattern found in October 2019 with that in October 2015, when women’s share of contributions was much lower. Specifically, in October 2015, women represented 33% of those present but made only 19% of spoken contributions, whereas in October 2019 they represented 38% of those present but made 45% of spoken contributions.



A comparison of attendance levels and spoken contributions by female and male councillors at Milton Keynes Council meetings in October 2015 and October 2019

What has changed, and what is important?

At the October 2019 meeting, compared with the one in October 2015, there were two more female councillors and two fewer male councillors present. But of much greater significance was the increase in the number of women Cabinet members since 2015; all five of these were present at the meeting. All spoke at least once, with three of them making a relatively high number of contributions. Importantly, the Deputy Leader (female) was deputising for the Leader (male), who was absent from the meeting.

Women were therefore in more prominent positions at this meeting than they had been at the 2015 meeting. This may have given them more confidence to speak, but it also gave them greater speaking rights and indeed obligations - for example presenting reports from Cabinet, dealing with questions from councillors and members of the public. It was clear that having women in senior roles gave them positions of authority from which they could speak.

Working backwards, this implies that more women need to be selected by all parties and that those who are elected need to be given opportunities to gain experience, for example by taking on a role of responsibility or by presenting an issue in the Council chamber on behalf of their group.

Furthermore, so that female councillors can extend their experience, and so that female perspectives are more fairly represented across all areas of the Council's work, it is important to ensure a greater gender balance - in both the membership and the chairing of committees.

4. Equality Analysis in MK Planning and Decision-Making: how well is it working?

For the past decade the Local Government Association's Equality Framework for Local Government (EFLG) has been the main measure of performance around equalities work in local authorities. Updated in 2018, it stresses the importance of data in guiding policy development and actions: 'Unless equality-related data is collected and analysed, there is a danger that local authorities will base their work on assumptions or stereotypes rather than hard facts. ... A "one-size-fits-all" approach is no longer enough'¹⁶.

The Framework proposes five performance areas, starting with 'knowing your communities'. It provides a detailed set of questions for self-assessing or peer-assessing three levels of achievement. Level 1 ('developing') calls for *understanding the importance of equality*. Level 2 ('achieving') means *delivering better outcomes*. To achieve Level 3 ('excellent') organisations must demonstrate that their equalities work is *making a difference*. Some local authorities publish regular peer or self-assessments – for instance Manchester City Council¹⁷. This does not seem to be the case in Milton Keynes. The most recent reference to the EFLG we found in MK Council documentation was in July 2014¹⁸.

Equality Impact Assessments (EqIAs) are integral to the EFLG. The Framework poses a series of questions to assess the extent to which EqIAs are integrated into planning and decision-making¹⁹. For instance:

- Are equality analyses/impact assessments accessible, robust and meaningful?
- Are the findings shared effectively?
- Are mitigating actions identified where appropriate?
- Has equality analysis/impact assessment been used to identify needs and improve outcomes/reduce inequality?

- Is there evidence of equality analysis/ impact assessment having informed decision-making and facilitated different, tailored services?’

Equality Impact Assessments in Milton Keynes – difficult to locate and to evaluate

In our experience, it has proven extremely difficult to analyse the use of EqlAs via the MK Council website. Even those for the Budget, for which there is an established procedure, are difficult to locate, as we discovered during our observations of the Budget Scrutiny Committee meetings in 2018-2019. A link in the Committee papers (December 2018) which ostensibly led to the EqlA for the 2019-20 Budget, actually led to the 2017-18 Budget impact assessment. In subsequent correspondence the Corporate Equalities and Diversity Officer did outline for us the shape of the draft EqlA for the 2019-20 Budget. However, as far as we are aware, it has not been published. At the time of writing (April 2020) only two Budget EqlAs appear on the website: for 2017-18 and for 2020-21²⁰. Each of these lists a small number of areas in which budgetary adjustments are being, or have been, made so as to remove barriers or better promote equality: four areas in 2017-2018, one area in 2020-21. The descriptions are very general. For instance, the 2020-21 EqlA says that in the area of Digital Transformation and Customer Services ‘it will be important to tailor service propositions and maximising (sic) equality of access to meet the differing needs and expectations of diverse customers’. While it is good to know that services will be tailored, there is insufficient detail to reveal which of the protected groups is/are the focus of the adjustment and/or how success in meeting their needs could be monitored/measured.

In other planning and decision-making areas, tracking down Equality Impact Assessments is a laborious task. The MK Council website advises enquirers to ‘find the relevant reports on CMIS, find the relevant meeting or decision or find out the forward plan of the decision in the public documents’. This presents enormous challenges to all but those with limitless time. A search of CMIS (Council Meeting Information System) produces hundreds of documents, many with almost identical content, and often simply *referring to* an EqlA rather than actually *being* one.

Lack of clarity on how Equality Impact Assessments feed into planning and monitoring

To take just one example, *Plan MK 2016-2031* – a major 300-page planning document that sets out a vision for future development in housing, the economy, infrastructure, the environment, climate change, good design, and so on – says that ‘an Equality Impact Assessment was undertaken to consider issues relating to gender, age, ethnicity, religion/belief, disability, sexuality and low disposable income²¹’. However, no EqlA is appended to the Plan and there is no reference to the EqlA in the Monitoring Framework for the Plan’s 17 strategic objectives (Appendix F, pp. 247-255).

There are some specific objectives in which an absence of any gender indicators seems particularly surprising - for instance objective 10: reduction of health inequalities and deprivation (although ethnicity is included as an indicator); objective 11: delivery of housing to meet the needs of all sections of the community; objective 12: smart, shared, sustainable mobility; objective 14: place-making.

The overall impression is that the results of the EqlA have not fed into the detailed substance of the Plan and will not be referred to in any subsequent reviews or adjustments. By contrast, the Monitoring Framework does state that indicators from the Sustainability Appraisal and Strategic Environmental Assessment (a requirement of the National Planning Policy Framework) will be used in the monitoring. And although the Sustainability Appraisal is not appended to the Plan, it *is* explained in the Glossary to the Plan (p. 289), while the Equality Impact Assessment is not – suggesting that it is regarded as less vital to the Plan’s execution.

A case study: the Transport Infrastructure Delivery Plan

Although it may not be intentional, the use of Equality Impact Assessments in MK Council planning appears to be somewhat random and post hoc. In June 2019 MK Fawcett responded to a public consultation on the *Transport Infrastructure Delivery Plan* (TIPD) Our six-page submission provided national data on gender differences in transport use. It argued that, without an EqlA, it would be impossible to prioritise the 103 schemes/options presented in the TIPD in terms of their ability to meet the needs of women and other protected groups in MK. The TIPD Consultation response report (October 2019) takes account of the MK Fawcett submission, though it is not clear that the argument about gender-differentiated prioritisation has been fully accepted or understood. The most frequent response is simply that 'an Equality Impact Assessment has now been carried out'. Another is that the Plan is intended to serve the needs of 'all people' and to take into account equality impacts (though the TIPD Consultation Document – and the options outlined in it - made no reference to the possible impact on different demographic groups). The allusion to 'all people' implies that needs are universal, rather than differentiated by particular group characteristics, and that there is equality of access to all provision.

In fact, the Equality Impact Assessment that was carried out in response to the TIPD consultation pays most attention to older and disabled people (women are mentioned only once). In terms of logic and presentation, it seems to have been hastily prepared and compares poorly with the content and form of the Sustainability and Strategic Environmental Assessments which were carried out as part of the TIPD development process. It is difficult to deduce the rationale for some of its conclusions. For instance, the claim that the needs of protected groups will be taken into account in subsequent work (Q. 4b) seems to be at odds with the statement that no further information is needed for planning purposes (Q. 6b)²².

Part of the 'subsequent work' to the 2019 TIPD was a consultation on Road Safety, Walking and Cycling, launched in January 2020. An Equality Impact Assessment was included among the consultation documents²³. Though very brief (one page) and general in scope (no data are included), this can be seen as a step in the direction of a more proactive planning approach to equality promotion. However, it was disappointing that the consultation document itself disregards the MK Fawcett submission to the TIPD regarding gender differences – for example in relation to cycling – and that no gender breakdowns were proposed in the monitoring data to be collected.

Making Equality Impact Assessments more accessible and useful

In summary, our experience in searching for examples of EqlAs in Milton Keynes decision-making suggests that, despite a commitment to their use in planning, there seems to be a rather unsystematic approach to their application and follow-up. The fact that it is so difficult even to access them makes it almost impossible to evaluate their impact on outcomes.

Some authorities make it much easier to track the application of Equality Impact Assessments in their work. For example Devon County Council publishes all completed assessments going back to 2007, and provides a toolkit outlining its approach²⁴. Haringey Borough Council provides a detailed account of its EqlA process, including sections on what it is, why they do it, how do they do it, using the right data (with links to data sources), publishing results. Results of EqlAs since 2014-15 and up to 2019-2020 are published on the website. These are categorised according to the six priorities of Haringey's Corporate Plan. EqlAs are attached to each committee report where there is a public decision. In addition, a search of committee papers brings up the relevant EqlAs²⁵.

If Milton Keynes were to develop a model along these lines, it would bring greater clarity to the ways in which due regard is paid to protected groups in planning, decision-making and design. Moreover, it would

be easier to situate MK's level of achievement using the assessment model of the Equality Framework for Local Government.

5. The Public Sector Equality Duty and Disaggregated Data

Transparency in decision-making relies on providing accessible data to the public. Without this, the evidence on which decisions are based is not clear. In its response to the Open Government National Action Plan 2019-2021 to improve transparency, participation and accountability in policy-making, the UK Women's Budget Group points out that fulfilment of the Public Sector Equality Duty depends on the collection of data that is broken down by sex/gender and by other protected characteristics so that Equality Impact Assessments can be 'firmly embedded into policy, decision-making and budgetary processes. When conducted properly, as investigative analysis instead of mere tick-box exercises, EqlAs have the potential to ensure that new policies are responsive, transparent and participatory in their content, as well as in their format'²⁶.

Our search for publicly available gender-disaggregated data in Milton Keynes has been frustrating. We focused on a few areas in which we believed gender differences could have a bearing on the design and delivery of plans and services.

Health – scattered data, confusing presentation

Health is an area in which accessible gender-disaggregated data are essential to ensure effective strategy and outcomes for both women and men. The Joint Strategic Needs Analysis (JSNA) which drives the Health & Wellbeing Strategy is not easy to navigate on the MK Council website. The summary report is short and quite general²⁷. There are a few references to gender differences - in relation to life expectancy, causes of premature death, diagnoses of autism and depression – and the need to identify vulnerable women in the context of pregnancy and early family life. However, specific health conditions – e.g. cardiovascular, mental health, dementia – are divided over separate individual sections of the site, each briefly introduced and with links (some of which are not working) to other documents whose relevance is not always clear.

The result is that data are scattered, hard to find and not obviously related to policy or strategy. For instance, the section on adult mental health notes that 'more than 26,000 adult residents of Milton Keynes (aged 18-65) are estimated to have a common mental health disorder at 2017 (10,250 men and 16,390 women)²⁸. In other words, women account for 61.5% of people in MK with a mental health disorder. This was one of the few gender-specific pieces of data found in our search on Health, and it was not clearly sign-posted or linked to potential action.

Housing and Homelessness – a gender data vacuum?

An extensive search in this area produced even more disappointing results. The public consultation on the Draft Housing Strategy 2019-2024 made no mention of women. The Centre for Cities report on Milton Keynes (frequently cited on the MK Council website as a useful source of data) includes no statistics broken down by gender. Specifically in relation to homelessness, relevant local groups such as Works For Us, the MK Homelessness Partnership, the Rough Sleeper Partnership could provide no data.

On the other hand, Government figures show that in the period April to June 2019 single parent households that were homeless or threatened with homelessness in Milton Keynes were much more likely to be female-headed than male-headed. Of 78 single parent households owed a prevention duty (i.e. who are threatened with homelessness), 76 were female-headed. Of 61 single parent households owed a relief duty

(i.e. homeless), 57 were female-headed²⁹. The figures must have been supplied by MK Council, though we were unable to find them in publicly available documentation.

As the homelessness example shows, it seems that detailed data breakdowns are in existence. But the extent to which they are fully exploited in planning and decision-making is not clear. Though we cannot claim to have made a fully exhaustive search, in the areas we selected for exploration the lack of publicly available gender-disaggregated data is undeniable. Intersectional data - data on groups with more than one shared protected characteristic (for example Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic women) – is even harder to find³⁰. For local action groups or service providers, the lack of up-to-date easily accessible data broken down by gender – and, by extension, by other protected characteristics – makes attempts to analyse and target the needs of specific demographic groups in MK very difficult if not impossible.

The website as a research tool

Our search for data via the Council website was disappointing. References to non-existent documents or out-dated links are frequent. MK Insight - though frequently referenced in documents and on the website as a source of recent information – contains almost no data after 2016³¹.

The amount of information contained on the website is of course prodigious, and therefore challenging to organise. But it is worth looking at how other Councils present equality-related data. Again, Haringey Borough Council is a useful model. Specifically in relation to the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA), the approach of Devon County Council deserves consideration. It brings together a large amount of explanatory information, along with (almost) annual JSNA overview documents which give plenty of useful detail in relation to gender differences³².

6. Effective Equality Analysis: a way of thinking

Evidence-based equality analysis is not a luxury – an ‘optional extra’ to be dispensed with when budgets are tight. On the contrary, says the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA): ‘Public finance managers are under increasing pressure to ensure value for money and demonstrate efficiencies. Effective gender analysis, and wider equalities analysis of policy and spending decisions, makes for more targeted allocation of limited resources. In turn, this can achieve better outcomes from public money and improved outcomes for people using public services’³³.

As such, effective gender analysis needs to be embedded at all levels and at all points in the policy-making cycle – and not seen as an ‘add on’ that comes late, after supposedly ‘gender neutral’ alternatives or scenarios have been developed. From the earliest stage – including the tendering and commissioning of evidence documents – terms of reference need to make clear that equality impacts should be included in the plans put forward by contractors. But major MK strategy documents we have looked at suggest a lack of attention to gender equality considerations in the commissioned studies that form the evidence base for eventual strategies and plans.

Neglect of gender analysis in evidence studies – some examples

The *Transport Infrastructure Delivery Plan*³⁴, adopted in October 2019, was preceded by an Evidence Review (January 2019). This included no gender-based analysis – an omission inevitably reflected in the draft TIPD Consultation document (June 2019) and indeed in the final TIPD. Yet the Women’s Budget Group has shown that transport policy has important implications for gender equality³⁵.

The *MK Draft Strategy for 2050*, published for consultation in January 2020, gave links to ten Evidence Studies. There is no gender-based analysis in any of these or in the Draft Strategy itself. Indeed a fleeting reference to women in one of the studies, the *Strategic Growth Study*, betrays a stereotypically limited view of women's place. A section on 'Placemaking' describes four qualities of 'good places' - accessibility, activities, comfortable, sociable - and proposes measures of success for each. In relation to 'sociable places', one indicator is 'monitoring numbers of children, women, minority groups'³⁶. But why is this indicator not included in relation to accessible, active, or comfortable places?

The 2019 *Local Economic Assessment* (LEA) is an important planning tool which 'will be used to help inform future strategy, funding bids, policy and partnership working'. In a section on Emerging Trends in the Milton Keynes Economy, the report discusses the impact of automation, noting that the Office for National Statistics estimates about 1.5 million workers are at high risk of losing their jobs to it, with women among those most at risk – even before the Covid-19 crisis. A Centre for Cities Report in 2018 found that MK could lose 22% of its jobs due to automation (much higher than Oxford or Cambridge – both at 13%). The sectors most at risk are warehousing and logistics, wholesale and retail, public administration, education and health – most of which are female-dominated, although no gender breakdown is given in the LEA. The Assessment concludes that MK 'must be careful to ensure that everyone is able to take advantage of opportunities for automation'. But it fails to make the point that future strategy must ensure that those most at risk (i.e. women) are shielded from its negative effects³⁷. Although detailed data are still emerging, we would expect these risk factors to increase in the wake of the Covid-19 crisis.

'Not thinking' – a form of unintended discrimination

The millennia-old way of 'not thinking' about women is widespread. But policies and plans designed for 'everyone' risk overlooking important gender differences in life situations. The Draft *Milton Keynes Housing Strategy 2020-2025* says that 'everyone in Milton Keynes should have fair and equal access to safe and secure housing that meets their needs'. Encouragingly, it acknowledges that this includes addressing the specific needs of those facing housing-related challenges – 'children leaving care, people with disabilities and complex health issues, and older people'³⁸. It is astonishing that women are not included in this list.

Research by the Women's Budget Group concludes that women on average have lower wages, greater caring roles, and are at greater risk of intimate partner violence. 'These affect housing needs in terms of location, tenure, built form, design, cost, housing-related support and other features. These distinctive needs, combined with different wealth circumstances, reflect the need for housing policy to be gender-sensitive'³⁹. According to the *Housing Strategy 2020-2025* the cost of buying a home in Milton Keynes has increased 69% since 2010, compared to a 46% increase across England. The gender pay gap in MK - 20.4% - is among the highest in the country⁴⁰. The 2018 document *Lifelong Wellbeing – Our Ten Year Health and Wellbeing Strategy*, reports that total homelessness in MK rose by 26% from 2016 to 2017 (the national rise was 15%)⁴¹, and national data show that well over 90% of families in MK who are homeless or threatened with homelessness are headed by women (see Section 4). A 2017 survey found that only 57 local authority areas in England and Wales (out of 173) provided homelessness accommodation for women, apart from refuge space⁴².

Lifelong Wellbeing also reports that 45% of women survivors of domestic abuse suffer mental or emotional problems; Women's Aid's most recent report documents a growing shortfall in the number of refuge spaces available to meet the needs of an increasing number of domestic abuse victims – particularly those with children⁴³. There is no shortage of data to document the specific issues that women face in finding safe and affordable housing. If the Milton Keynes Housing Strategy is to meet the needs of 'everyone' it will need to explicitly address these gender-related realities.

Challenging conventional thinking

Though usually unintended, 'not thinking' about gender inequalities reduces the effectiveness of planning and resource allocation. Conversely, thinking creatively and challenging received wisdom about gender differences can produce better outcomes through more targeted actions. A good example of this is the Milton Keynes Interim Adult Autism Strategy 2017-18. Discussing the level of need in the MK population, it notes that the commonly accepted autism ratio (believed to be much higher in males than females) is now questioned by research⁴⁴. And it goes on to report that 'local services tell us that they are supporting an increasing number of women with autism'. In line with this, the strategic priorities for the strategy include a 'longer-term' pledge to 'work with services to understand the under diagnosis, or misdiagnosis, of women and girls'⁴⁵

We were unable to find later references to this gender-aware approach to autism. The MK Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2018-2028 simply commits to ensuring that 'people' with autism receive earlier diagnosis⁴⁶. However, the fact that gender differences in diagnosis are signalled and questioned in the Interim Strategy document is encouraging and may inform subsequent practice, even if not explicitly mentioned in the subsequent documentation.

7. Re-thinking Gender Equality

While this review has focused on specific shortcomings, it is important to acknowledge the positive ways in which equality issues are being addressed in Milton Keynes – particularly in a period when national austerity policy has ravaged local authority budgets. To mark International Women's Day in March 2020 the Deputy Leader of Milton Keynes Council drew attention to the Council's work to minimise the effects of government cuts on women locally – including 'by keeping our Sure Start Centres open, championing the Real Living Wage, investing in our domestic abuse services and tackling health inequalities'. A key to this, she continued, was having 'women's voices equally represented at the table'⁴⁷.

These achievements are real and must be celebrated. But, as our review has found, some important obstacles – which are not always visible – undermine the pursuit and realisation of gender equality in Milton Keynes.

- Most obviously, and despite differences between the political parties, women's voices across the Council as a whole are still not 'equally represented at the table'. All parties need to find ways of building a pipeline of future female candidates – for example by committing to the Equal Power Campaign, run by a coalition of national organisations including the Fawcett Society⁴⁸.
- Equality Impact Assessments need to be more accessible and it should be made clear how their results feed into planning and monitoring. We have suggested some models used by other Councils that could be explored.
- Our search for gender-disaggregated data in selected subject areas was frustrating and largely fruitless. A systematic effort is needed to update (or replace) MK Insight and to ensure that future data collection is broken down by sex/gender and other protected characteristics.
- A first port of call in researching equality in Milton Keynes is the Council's website. We found it surprisingly hard to navigate. Many links are out-dated or not working. Other Councils have found ways of presenting complex equality data in an accessible way. These models are worth looking at.
- A fundamental issue is the extent to which equality analysis is fully integrated into planning and strategy development. Our review suggests that it often happens too late – for example, after evidence studies have been commissioned and carried out – and that the analysis may be insufficiently informed by gender-differentiated data and life experiences. Yet again, models exist

that could help to inspire a more integrated, embedded approach. For instance Devon County Council works with an Equality Reference Group of external experts who provide advice, feedback and scrutiny⁴⁹. Broader, participatory models such as the Equalities Engagement Framework of Bradford District Council, the Wigan Deal, or the Preston Model offer ideas on how local expertise can be integrated into early planning.

The annual Thriving Places Index uses a set of indicators to measure all 343 local authorities in England in terms of Equality, Local Conditions for Wellbeing, and Sustainability. Each domain has a maximum score of 10. In 2020 the top Equality score – 7.04 – went to Brent Borough Council. Milton Keynes obtained a score of 4.86 (down from 5.29 in 2019), placing it in a ‘medium’ category compared to the other 342 authorities. Among the 56 unitary authorities in the Index, MK was in position 36⁵⁰. While this is a creditable result, it suggests there is still ground to be covered in the search for ‘a more equal Milton Keynes for all’.

This review has mapped some of the blocks along the road towards making equality a reality - and not simply an aspiration - in the context of Milton Keynes. Some of these blocks relate to the lack or inaccessibility of relevant statistics documenting current levels of in/equality in key areas. Some relate to the relative invisibility of gender issues in policy documentation. Others relate to women’s continued under-representation in decision-making, as councillors and as chairs of key decision-making committees in the Council.

The Covid-19 crisis provides an ideal opportunity to re-think what equality means in our community, how we measure it, and what tools can help us to pursue it most effectively. This calls for a re-examination of established procedures and practices, some of which have been adjusted already. An example is the move towards online Council meetings, which began in April 2020. Streamed or online meetings have the potential to increase public engagement by opening up access to people (the housebound, elderly, parents, carers) who normally would not be able to attend. This should surely be sustained and expanded in the post-crisis period. The impact of Covid-19 and the lockdown on existing inequalities – for instance higher levels of domestic abuse⁵¹, violence against women and girls⁵², and a potential rolling back of existing gender equalities as a result of the pandemic⁵³ - will need thorough analysis and response.

Covid-19 has revealed the ways in which certain groups are overlooked, left behind or particularly impacted in a situation that affects everyone. It is a sharp illustration of how ‘not thinking’ deeply about inequalities has profound implications for outcomes. This paper has focused on women and gender. But re-thinking and re-shaping our approach to gender in/equality will benefit all groups in Milton Keynes covered by the Public Sector Equality Duty. To begin that process, we urge members of Milton Keynes Council and other key decision-makers to start by engaging with the specific issues we have identified. MK Fawcett and other local organisations have relevant expertise that could be drawn on in this effort.

End Notes

¹ Clare Wenham, Julia Smith and Rosemary Morgan. 'COVID-19: the gendered impact of the outbreak'. *The Lancet*, 14 March 2020. <https://www.thelancet.com/action/showPdf?pii=S0140-6736%2820%2930526-2>. The Gender and Covid-19 Working Group is a grouping of academics working on health policy at universities in Australia, Brazil, Canada, Hong Kong, Indonesia, South Africa, the UK and the USA.

² Data are very incomplete and more detailed analysis is needed. Daily figures released by Public Health England are not disaggregated. Weekly figures produced by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) are disaggregated by gender and age. On 24 April 2020 the Intensive Care National Audit and Research Centre (ICNARC) published a report on the first 6720 patients critically ill with Covid-19. This showed a much higher proportion of males (72%) than females (28%) in critical care. Of all patients in critical care, there was a higher fatality rate for males (53%) than for females (43%). BAME patients in critical care (34%) were over-represented in relation to total population, and had a higher fatality rate (52%) than white patients (48%). Report available at <https://www.icnarc.org/Our-Audit/Audits/Cmp/Reports>.

³ Chika Aghadiuno. 'Global Pandemic – the great leveller?' Institute and Faculty of Actuaries. April 2020. <https://www.actuaries.org.uk/news-and-insights/news/global-pandemic-great-leveller>.

⁴ <https://www.refuge.org.uk/25-increase-in-calls-to-national-domestic-abuse-helpline-since-lockdown-measures-began/>

⁵ Working Families 'Weathering the Storm – the Covid-19 pandemic and working parents', April 2020.

<https://workingfamilies.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Weathering-the-Storm-the-COVID-19-pandemic-working-parents.pdf>

⁶ *Coronavirus: Making Women Visible*. <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/coronavirus-making-women-visible>

⁷ Women's Budget Group. *Crises Collide: Women and Covid-19*. April 2020. <https://wbg.org.uk/media/crises-collide-women-and-covid-19-2/>

⁸ Unequal Impact: Coronavirus (Covid-19) and the impact on people with protected characteristics.

<https://committees.parliament.uk/work/227/unequal-impact-coronavirus-covid19-and-the-impact-on-people-with-protected-characteristics/>

⁹ Caroline Criado Perez, *Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*. London: Chatto & Windus, 2019

¹⁰ *Milton Keynes Strategy for 2050*. Draft for Engagement, January 2020. https://ddd3d78e-749e-4b55-9eee-73303fdbcb896.filesusr.com/ugd/02d3f7_6179d2c547974a38ad86344e338fabdf.pdf.

¹¹ https://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/assets/attach/60917/2019-06-04-Milton-Keynes-Council-Plan-2016-2022_Annex-FINAL.pdf, p. 1.

¹² See for example Caroline Criado Perez, op. cit., pp. 316-318.

¹³ <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/does-local-government-work-for-women-final-report-of-the-local-government-commission>

¹⁴ Further details can be found in our final report, which was presented to all interested Councillors at an open meeting in October 2016: <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/exploring-womens-participation-in-local-politics>

¹⁵ Reasons for the variation across the three meetings are explored in our full report on the observations, available from miltonkeynesfawcettgroup@gmail.com

¹⁶ <https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/guidance-and-resources/equality-frameworks/equality-framework-local-government>

¹⁷ https://www.manchester.gov.uk/downloads/download/6292/eflg_excellent_report

¹⁸ At a meeting of the Housing and Communities Select Committee, the Corporate Equalities and Diversity Officer reported that an LGA peer review based on the EFLG in June 2013 had found a 'high level commitment and vision on equality', although 'further equality gaps could be identified which would create trends in data, which in turn would lead to a clearer narrative for strategy and service planning'. Report of Housing and Communities Select Committee meeting, 2 July 2014, p. 18.

¹⁹ <https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/guidance%20-%20equality%20frameworks%20-%20Equality%20Framework%20For%20Local%20Government%20%28EFLG%29.pdf>

²⁰ <https://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/your-council-and-elections/council-information-and-accounts/equalities/budget-equality-impact-assessment>

²¹ Plan: MK 2016-2031, Adopted March 2019, p. 6

²² See <https://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/highways-and-transport-hub/policy-and-strategy-hub/transport-policy> for the EqIA and all related documents.

²³ Equality Impact Assessment and all related documents available at <https://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/consultations/563>

²⁴ <https://www.devon.gov.uk/impact/>

²⁵ <https://www.haringey.gov.uk/local-democracy/about-council/equalities/equality-impact-assessments-eqia#data>

²⁶ <https://www.opengovernment.org.uk/2019/06/19/uk-open-government-national-action-plan-a-gendered-analysis/>

²⁷ See <https://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/social-care-and-health/2016-2017-joint-strategic-needs-assessment>

- ²⁸ <https://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/social-care-and-health/2016-2017-joint-strategic-needs-assessment/2016-2017-jsna-adults/2016-2017-jsna-health-conditions/2016-17-jsna-people-with-mental-health-needs>
- ²⁹ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. Initial assessments of homelessness duties owed. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/852922/DetailedLA_201906.xlsx
- ³⁰ This problem is not unique to Milton Keynes. In its 2019 report *Is Britain Fairer?* The Equality and Human Rights Commission (p. 199, p. 210) highlights the extent to which intersectional data gaps impede full assessment of inequality and urges authorities to find ways of addressing the gaps.
- ³¹ MK Insight was off-line for most of the period of our research, but was restored in April 2020. It includes links to up-to-date MK-specific business survival rates from the Office of National Statistics (ONS), to m/f employment rates from Nomis, and to selected crime statistics from <https://ukcrimestats.com/>. Almost all other data are for 2016 and earlier, and many links no longer work (e.g. 'page not found').
- ³² See <https://www.devonhealthandwellbeing.org.uk/jsna/about/>
- ³³ Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy *Gender Budgeting for Public Finance. Improving Decisions and Advancing Equality* 2018, p. 5
- ³⁴ See the case study in section 4 of this document.
- ³⁵ Women's Budget Group *Public Transport and Gender*, 2018 <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Transport-October-2018-w-cover.pdf>. The MK Fawcett submission to the TIPD consultation drew on this briefing, inter alia.
- ³⁶ *Strategic Growth Study*, David Lock Associates, August 2019, p. 141: https://ddd3d78e-749e-4b55-9eee-73303fdbcb896.filesusr.com/ugd/02d3f7_5bbd7cb184fc496580a68764e7b4f77c.pdf
- ³⁷ *Milton Keynes 2019 Local Economic Assessment*, June 2019, pp.42-44.
- ³⁸ *Milton Keynes Housing Strategy 2020-2025*, p. 2. <https://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/assets/attach/64195/Housing-Strategy-2020-2025.docx>
- ³⁹ Women's Budget Group *A Home Of Her Own. Housing and Women*, 2019: <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/WBG19-Housing-Report-full-digital.pdf>
- ⁴⁰ Based on median gross hourly earnings, excluding overtime, for all workers. The figure for the UK as a whole is 17.3%. *Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings*, Office for National Statistics, 2019
- ⁴¹ *Lifelong Wellbeing. Our Ten Year Health and Wellbeing Strategy*, p. 4; https://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/assets/attach/52079/Lifelong-Wellbeing-A4-6pp-foldout_PAGES.pdf
- ⁴² AVA and Agenda. *Mapping the Maze. Services for women experiencing multiple disadvantage in England and Wales, 2017*. <https://weareagenda.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Mapping-the-Maze-final-report-for-publication.pdf>.
- ⁴³ Women's Aid. *The Domestic Abuse Report 2020. The Annual Audit*. <https://1q7dqy2unor827bqjls0c4rn-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/The-Domestic-Abuse-Report-2020-The-Annual-Audit.pdf>
- ⁴⁴ For example the National Autistic Society has suggested that autism assessment tools are usually based on male characteristics, and that autistic females have characteristics that do not fit the profile usually associated with men and boys: <https://www.autism.org.uk/about/what-is/gender.aspx>. See also Caroline Criado Perez, op. cit., pp. 222-3.
- ⁴⁵ https://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/assets/attach/47736/2017-2018-MK-Interim-Adult-Autism-Strategy_FINAL.pdf, p. 9.
- ⁴⁶ *Lifelong Wellbeing*, op. cit, p.4.
- ⁴⁷ https://www.mklabour.org.uk/news/2020/03/06/milton-keynes-labour-group-leads-the-way-in-gender-equality/?fbclid=IwAR3pJknE1U4c5r49Ogb_fDwFzZbPxsVrErz8pclRKlduaEoGX3B7SSDbiX2Y. Following the May 2019 elections, more than half of Labour Party councillors were women (12 out of 23), a third Liberal Democrats (5 of 15), and just over a fifth of Conservatives (4 of 19).
- ⁴⁸ See <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/equal-power>.
- ⁴⁹ <https://www.devon.gov.uk/equality/performance-and-monitoring/equality-reference-group>
- ⁵⁰ Ranking developed by the Fawcett Society MK Group, based on data from Thriving Places Index 2020: <https://www.thrivingplacesindex.org/>
- ⁵¹ The charity Refuge reported a 25% increase in calls to its Helpline in the first week of the lockdown. See: <https://www.refuge.org.uk/25-increase-in-calls-to-national-domestic-abuse-helpline-since-lockdown-measures-began/>. Reflecting this in Milton Keynes, Thames Valley Police and MK ACT produced a poster with guidance and helpline numbers in April 2020.
- ⁵² 'Domestic abuse killings "more than double" amid Covid-19 lockdown', *The Guardian*, 15 April 2020, reporting on evidence from Karen Ingala Smith, founder of Counting Dead Women, to Home Affairs Select Committee.
- ⁵³ Working Families 'Weathering the Storm – the Covid-19 pandemic and working parents', pp.7-8, April 2020. <https://workingfamilies.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Weathering-the-Storm-the-COVID-19-pandemic-working-parents.pdf>