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Moderator questions in Bold, Respondents in Regular text.

KEY: Unable to decipher = (ia + timecode), **Phonetic spelling** = (ph + timecode), **Missed word** = (mw + timecode).

Moderator: It's Wednesday 20th October 2019 and I'm with Mary-Ann Stephenson. Mary-Ann is direct of the Women's Budget Group, an independent network of leading academic researchers, policy experts and campaigners. Mary-Ann is sharing her experience of working in the women's voluntary community sector and campaigning for women's rights for the Sisters Doing it for Themselves archive.

Mary-Ann Stephenson: Great.

Moderator: So, if we can start by you telling us what influenced your decision to work in the women's sector and for women's rights.

Mary-Ann Stephenson: I've always been a feminist. My mother was a feminist, is a feminist. I mean, more of the, kind of, shout at the radio rather than activist variety but, you know, brought me up with feminist values. There's a photograph of me aged about three on the beach wearing a t-shirt with a picture of Lucy from Peanuts, saying 'I am a new feminist' on it, I've got on my wall. You know, there was never a moment when I suddenly became aware of the inequalities that women faced, or the injustices that women faced. Although, obviously, as a child the focus was more on, kind of, unfairness around pay and things like being told boys can do certain things and girls can do other things. Issues around male violence against women, for example, I wasn't aware of until I became an adult because, obviously, that's not the sort of thing mothers talk to their kids about a lot. So, when I was at university, I went along to the Women's Centre at the University of Sussex and, to be honest, that never really took.

At that point, there was lots of very heated arguments and debates going on around pornography and it felt, to me, like there were people who were more focused on the arguments than on-, saying that it's not a vital issue because it is, and I have very strong feelings about it, but it felt that the argument was, kind of, getting in the way of people being able to do anything together. The atmosphere was not very pleasant. So, I was not really that involved at university. After university, I went and worked for the National Council for Civil Liberties, because I also had a strong interest in human rights, particularly around the period with all the big miscarriages of justice cases coming to light. The 'Guildford Four' and the 'Birmingham Six', and so on. So, I worked at Liberty and, you know, then I became very aware of, kind of, divisions between a human rights approach and a civil libertarian approach within that organisation.

Saw myself very much on the, kind of, human rights side and started reading-, there was a big photocopier down in the basement and there was lots and lots of old pamphlets and leaflets from the old NCCL Women's Committee. When people like Anna Coote, Patricia Hewitt and Harriet Harman were at Liberty. So, when I was photocopying things, as we used to have to do in large amounts in those days, I used to stand and, kind of, read through all these pamphlets, which I guess was a bit of an education on the activist's side of feminism from when I'd been a child, but I hadn't been that aware of. I was asked by a woman who was on the Fawcett Society management committee if I would be on an advisory group they were setting up around, kind of, campaigns and communications, because that's what I did at Liberty and I ran the local groups network. I got involved with Fawcett through that and then there's a job came up running Fawcett's general election campaign. That was in 1996. So, I went and worked for the Fawcett Society and I've been working in women's organisations in one form or another ever since.

Moderator: In terms of women's collective action, we have placed the women's refuge set up by Erin Pizzey as being one of the first examples, if you would like. I wonder how significant was that for you? Was it significant?

Mary-Ann Stephenson: When it was set up. The setting up of the refuge wasn't, because of my age, you know, wasn't something that I was aware of at the time. Obviously now, I can see that it's hugely significant, but it wasn't something that influenced me then. I was too young. I mean, I've since become involved. I'm a member of the management committee at Coventry Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre, and the Women's Budget Group is a member of the End Violence Against Women Coalition. So, I've become more involved in work around violence against women than I was, for example, when I first started at Fawcett, which had very much a focus on women's political representation, equal pay, poverty and so on, but did less work on violence.

Moderator: In terms again of your beginnings, when would you say-, you've said that you were aware of women's issues because of your mother's influence. Would you say there was a time when something happened that really focused you on women's rights?

Mary-Ann Stephenson: I suppose it's a continuing pattern of things happening, you know. There's no one sudden moment. So, you know, even as a child I was in jeans and t-shirts and trainers. We all were in the Seventies, you know. I had one dress, my party dress, you know. I had short hair. People used to mistake me for a boy. You know, I was very conscious as a child about the idea that girls had to be like girls or boys had to be like that. Not from my family, which was very much not like that, but from what I could see around me. You know, when I went to school, the first secondary school that I went to, both girls and boys did all practical subjects up to 13, at which point the boys did woodwork and metalwork, and the girls did needlework and cookery. I was really outraged by this. Also, because my father, who was an engineer, was very into carpentry and he used to make a lot of our furniture and stuff, and I thought I was going to be the person that, kind of, shattered that bastion of unfairness. Then we moved house and I went to a different school, where they didn't have those rules.

So, I never got the chance to run that particular campaign. Similarly, you know, the idea-, this was a point when, you know, there was still schools that had rules that girls couldn't wear

trousers and all of those sorts of thing. So, as a child, it was those sorts of issues that hit me the most. I suppose when I went to university and I started reading more feminist writers, I started, you know, developing a kind of conceptual framework, looking at feminist theoretical thinking and that helped me a lot. Then, you know, there was things like-, I remember being at university and in the first term there was this trend. Everyone stuck photographs of themselves on their bedroom doors and I came back and discovered that somebody had ripped a page out of a pornographic magazine and ripped the head off and stuck it under my picture. So, it was like my head superimposed on this. That really upset me, and then I discovered that actually there'd been a whole series of pictures like that stuck on my door.

My friend, who lived in the room next-door to me, had been taking them down, because she didn't want me to be upset by them. She hadn't told me that they were there. That, kind of, sense of just outrage and frustration. I mean, that was one of the things with the Women's Centre. You know, I went along to the Women's Centre and I started trying to talk about this and how upset it had made me feel. You know, some of the women there were very much in the, kind of, feminists against censorship model. So, they took this as me coming along to try and attack them and they went straight into the, 'What's wrong with pornography?' you know. I was thinking, there's a place for a whole theoretical debate, but actually I've just had this image stuck on my door. This is definitely a personal attack, regardless (TC 00.10.00) of what you think about these magazines in general. So, you know, you have all these series of different events, don't you?

Then, when I started work at Fawcett, you know, one of the things that happens when people discover that you work at a women's organisation is they tell you horrible things that have happened to them. I don't know, not necessarily because they want you to do anything about it, but because they think you will sympathise with them. So, you start hearing stories that you might not otherwise hear and that makes you, kind of, very aware of a much wider range of things. You become aware of, you know, friends who've suffered sexual and domestic violence. I also became much more aware talking to Black women within the women's movement about the intersection between race and gender inequalities, and the ways in which, you know, the women's movement had historically not been very good at recognising that, and dealing with that. Also, doing a lot of work with women in the Trade Union movement and thinking a lot more about the relationship between class and gender. So, there's all these different bits, you know.

You're constantly learning, constantly thinking about new things. You know, when I had children, that was another set of shocks. I think I became a lot more conscious of, you know, the significance of female biology. Actually, the impact that giving birth has and constantly being told that you're pregnant, you're not ill. As though, somehow, the correct thing to do was to, kind of, tough it out, rather than to recognise that, actually, do you know what, growing another human being is quite hard work. You get knackered and you get sick and you may not feel like doing very much else for-, So, all of that and then, you know, breastfeeding and miscarriages and all of the things which, as a young woman, I hadn't really thought about a great deal. So, yes, no one thing. Then I started working more internationally. So, after I left Fawcett, I went and freelanced for quite a few years and I did a lot of work with women in transitional democracies. Kind of, post-conflict.

That was training on participation in campaigning, how to campaign, wellbeing, standing for election, but also gender budgeting, because I'd been involved in the Women's Budget Group when I was at Fawcett. Again, that gives you an insight into a whole range of different women's experiences and the different ways in which women think about their experiences and talk about those experiences. Talking to, you know, feminist women in Iran and Kuwait. Yes. I think it's constant learning and growth. Now, I've got a thirteen-year-old daughter who is also a feminist and, you know, we have some very heated disagreements about some things. I guess I learn stuff from her, as well, because she's on Tumblr and Twitter, you know. While she's not allowed to post, she reads stuff, so yes.

Moderator: Why do you think you continue to work in the voluntary sector, and the women's sector in particular?

Mary-Ann Stephenson: I mean, I suppose the thing that motivates me is the desire to bring about change, the desire to leave the world a better place than I found it. I think. I mean, this is quite a, kind of, philosophical question, isn't it, but if there is a meaning to life, it has got to be about the contribution we make while we're alive and how we try and improve things. There's all sorts of ways in which you can do that. It doesn't have to be through campaigning, but that's where I am. You know, the women's movement to me feels like home. It feels like family. So, there are some arguments and there's some cross-nesses. There's people that you don't really want to speak to very much but you have to get together at Christmas. Actually, there is a sense of shared identity and a sense of trying to achieve change together. I can't imagine working anywhere else.

Moderator: You've touched on this earlier. Who has inspired you and who inspires you now?

Mary-Ann Stephenson: Gosh. So many women who've inspired me. When I was a young woman and I was at university, I suppose it was a lot of feminist writers that I was reading. You know, I'd be reading, kind of, Kate Millett and things that-, you know, suddenly somebody going, 'It's alright to think that this writer's a sexist git. It's not because you're stupid or you're not sufficiently sophisticated. It's because they're sexist. That's fine.' That was quite liberating, actually. Then, when I was working internationally, you know, the women that I was meeting for whom their activism really was, potentially, a question of life or death. You know, it made me question-, it's very easy to think, this is what I do and I would always campaign. You think would I have the bravery to campaign in these circumstances when the implications - not just for me, but for my family - could be so severe? I don't know. I don't think anyone can know until they're in that situation, really, can they? I think now, actually, you know, the young women at the Women's Budget Group inspire me. You know, we've got a relatively young staff team, apart from me.

Just the energy and the passion and the commitment that they bring. Also, one of the things I really like about the Women's Budget Group is it's really inter-generational. We don't talk enough, I think, about age in the women's movement. You know, there's often a tendency for successive generations of feminists to treat the generation before as if they're, kind of, like their mother. You know, they've done some useful stuff and yes, they've cooked dinners or they got the vote, or whatever it is. Really, they're not people. They're not people with needs and desires.

You know, you can just reject them and be mean to them and they will still be there to love you, you know. What I really like about the Women's Budget Group is we have women who are retired and who are incredibly active and busy and involved in our work, and who've been, you know, activists since the Sixties, or before. Then, we've got young women. We have an early career network, so we have young women who are coming up and, actually, being able to link those women up sometimes.

So, we had our early career conference last week in Liverpool and some of the women who were students-, you know, for them to be able to link up with some of the feminist academics whose work they've read, feminist economists that they've only ever read and to actually meet them. Then, for that person to say, 'Oh, I'll have a look at what you're writing. Send me what you're working on. I'd be really interested to see it.' I just think it's great. There's that, kind of, sisterliness. So, I think what inspires me now is that idea that, actually, we have more strength in diversities of all sorts of things and that, you know, we can always learn from each other. You know, none of us has all the answers. None of us knows, really. We're just, kind of, trying to do the best we can.

Moderator: We're moving onto leadership. Do you think women's leadership is different from men's leadership and, if it is, how?

Mary-Ann Stephenson: It's an interesting question, isn't it? So, I don't think there's anything intrinsically different because of being male or female. I don't think it's an inherent quality. I think probably, you know, we know that women and men are socialised differently, and we know that that socialisation has impact on all areas of our lives. So, it would be surprising if it didn't have an impact on our leadership styles. I don't think that we should be saying what we want is a more female style of leadership. I think what we should be saying is, you know, there are different leadership qualities, some of which are traditionally seen as masculine and some as feminine. We need to be able to draw on those different qualities. Sometimes you need different approaches at different times and different styles at different times. I've generally worked in female dominated organisations and I have always really enjoyed that. I'm always really surprised when people talk about, you know, 'I couldn't work for women because it's so mean, so bitchy.'

I don't see that, you know. I've also seen women, (TC 00.20.00), not who I've worked for directly but in other organisations being, kind of, hierarchical or aggressive or bullying. So, I don't think we can, kind of, let ourselves off the hook. You know, by being a woman you'll behave better. I think there is something about a consciously feminist style of leadership, where people are actually reflecting on their leadership style and really, really working through what works, what doesn't, how they want to behave, how their leadership style can demonstrate their wider values. You know, it's more like, you get some male leaders who have that very, very self-conscious style, where they've done a lot of-, and that involves doing work on yourself and recognising things about power, and recognising things about, you know, wanting to be in charge or whether or not you're willing to take responsibility for things and all of those sorts of questions. I've been lucky enough to know some wonderful feminist women leaders who really, really thought about this stuff quite hard, and spent time working on it. Yes. So, maybe it's a feminist style rather than a women's style.

Moderator: What do you think there is inherent in a feminist's leadership that makes it successful?

Mary-Ann Stephenson: I think it's about recognising that you're seeing your role as a leader in terms of the responsibility you have, rather than the power you have. It's about recognising that, you know, power exists in all situations. Sorry, this is going to be a bit of digression. You know, I've been involved in organisations where the idea is to, sort of, remove all hierarchies of leadership and supposedly work in this non-hierarchical fashion. Quite often, what that means is there are all sorts of power dynamics going on that are just not scrutinised and just not engaged with, because everybody's so busy telling each other that they're working in a non-hierarchical way. I think, you know, recognising and reflecting on your own power. Thinking about how you can use that to support and encourage others. How you can think about not just the ends that you're trying to achieve, but the means how you get there. So, you know, really recognising that the ends do not justify the means.

It would not be a feminist victory if you achieved something by treating the women who worked in your organisation appallingly and driving them into the ground. You have to think about the way you relate to people, the way you listen to people. It's, kind of, listening and engagement and participatory leadership. Enabling people to feel supported, to take as much responsibility for themselves, rather than feeling that you've got to micromanage what everybody does. At the same time, being willing to take responsibility for making things actually happen. Think, you know, this will not happen unless there is somebody pushing it forward and I seem to be the person who's in that situation so, therefore, I will do that. Yes, and when you're thinking about issues about power, you know, these aren't just about formal power hierarchies. They're about informal hierarchies and they're also about, kind of, wider social hierarchies around class and race, in particular. Also, as I said, age. I think there's a lot both ways in that.

You know, younger women learning not to write off older women. Older women recognising that, actually, young women have to work stuff out for themselves. There's a load of stuff that each generation has to work out for themselves. You can't just say, 'Look, we thought about this in the Seventies. You don't need to worry about it.' It's a process. I think feminist consciousness is also a process that each individual generation has to go through for themselves. That can be kind of frustrating to watch. I mean, I see it with my own daughter. I'm thinking why doesn't she just listen to me, because I know? Of course, she doesn't listen to me. She's thirteen. It's not her job to listen to me. It's her job to shout at me, unfortunately.

Moderator: What motivates you as a leader?

Mary-Ann Stephenson: Change. Bringing about change, is the first thing. That's what the aim of the organisation is. You have to focus on that. The second thing, I suppose, is paying forward the support that I had when I was at an earlier stage in my career, from other feminist women. So, you know, I was really lucky that there were women, and some men, who really helped me, advised me, mentored me, encouraged me, cheer-led for me, gave me opportunities, put me on platforms, asked me to-, at points when I wasn't quite ready, you know, pushed me. Not in a, kind of, oppressive sense but in a, 'You can do this. You're capable. You can do that speech. You can write that article.' I think that's what I try and do. I

mean, you'd have to ask the staff at Women's Budget Group whether or not I do that but that's what I try and do, so I do try and encourage and support and mentor and help people to develop. I see that as part of a feminist leadership is to be, kind of, thinking about how you enable other women to make their voices heard. Not just people who work for the Women's Budget group but, you know, within our wider network. So, trying to identify people that I think, 'Yes, you could be doing this,' or, 'You could be doing that.' You know, actually say to people. A lot of the time, women don't do things because nobody ever suggested that they could. You know, it's like the ask her to stand thing. So, actually saying to women, 'Do you know what, you could be a great local councillor. You'd be really, really good.' Or, 'You know, you should come and join the management committee because I think you've got these skills.' You know, just trying to do that cheerleading for other women, I think is really important.

Moderator: What are the issues that are close to your heart and how have you influenced change?

Mary-Ann Stephenson: Poverty. The relationship between paid and unpaid work, and violence against women. I actually think the two fundamental things, what it boils down to, is the gender division of labour and the impact that has on women's lives throughout their lives. Their ability to do paid work, and their ability to participate in public life. Their poverty throughout their lifetime, particularly in old age, and male violence against women. You know, those two inter-relate in some ways. What have I done to bring about change? So, you know, at both Fawcett and the Women's Budget Group, I have campaigned for some specific changes, which have been successful. So, you know, changes to the way social security payments are made. Changes to the way-, you know, most of them are, sort of, minor policy changes. They're being part of a broader project, which is around pushing impact assessments of policies. Women's Budget Group was involved in work around the Equality Act 2010 and the Public Sector Equality Duty. I think that was really important.

In terms of violence against women, I mean, what I can, I contribute by being a member of the management committee at Coventry Rape Crisis. Partly that's about governance but it's also about help with policy work and some help with, kind of, lobbying and public affairs work, where I can. Giving advice, giving support to the Director. I mean, it's not directly doing the frontline work that the women who work and volunteer there do, but it's the bit that I can do alongside another job. Then, I've been involved in various women's networks. So, in Coventry, I helped set up Coventry Women's Voices, which has brought together lots of women's organisations in Coventry. We published a series of reports on the impact of austerity on women in Coventry and managed to persuade the city council that they should continue to fund legal aid for social security cases, in Coventry, which is why Coventry Law Centre's one (TC 00.30.00) of only seven, I think, left in the country where you can get legal advice for social security cases.

We also did work on violence against women. We lobbied Police and Crime Commissioner candidates to-, oh, there was this ridiculous thing for West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner where in Coventry-, so, the way Coventry is, it's a city, which has Warwickshire bend round it. So, there was a SARC, a Sexual Assault Referral Centre, which most people in Coventry would consider to be in Coventry, but technically it was in Warwickshire. The West

Midlands police wouldn't fund it, because they said it was Warwickshire, and therefore the responsibility of Warwickshire police. So, women in Coventry were being sent to Birmingham to go to the SARC, when there was a perfectly good one in Coventry. Well, technically in Warwickshire but, you know. Physically, people would see it as being in Coventry. We lobbied the Police and Crime Commissioner to change that. So, that's, kind of, those small, local changes. There are a number of other campaigns that I was involved with, with Coventry Women's Voices and setting up, restarting Reclaim the Night.

Then, the more bigger things. Then, I suppose, the training work that I did when I was freelancing, which was about building women's capacity to lobby and campaign. Some of those women have gone onto great things. You know, you can't take credit for that, but I was a little bit of that journey, at some point.

Moderator: What do you think are the specific characteristics of being a leader in the women's sector?

Mary-Ann Stephenson: Well, I think I've, kind of, talked about that already in terms of feminist leadership. I don't think there's anything-, I mean, I suppose the question is, those characteristics that there should be or characteristics that there actually are? Obviously, you know, nothing's-,

Moderator: I think probably what they should be. What would good leadership look like?

Mary-Ann Stephenson: I think one of the things that we need to do more and better in the women's sector is being able to work more closely together with each other. It's very difficult because a lot of women's organisations are very small and underfunded and overstretched, which means that the capacity to have time to go to networking meetings and all of those things is really limited. I think that's a real problem for the sector. I think, you know, we don't have a, kind of, single voice that's recognised by government as the voice of the sector, in the way that some sectors do. Obviously, there's tensions over funding. You know, there's often competition for funding. I also think that we're seeing an upsurge, which is great, of younger feminist activism and, kind of, activism on social media and things. That's fabulous, but I think because of the form it takes, because it's about social media and because it's not necessarily about delivering services or practical projects, there isn't the same need as maybe the earlier generations of feminists had, to try and find common ground with people that you disagreed with.

You know, if you're in a relatively small city and you're wanting to run a women's project, you can't afford to be constantly falling out with each other. I mean, people do, obviously, people do. There is that sense of: people need to find ways of working together if they're going to achieve change. I think where what you're doing is online campaigning, you can always find your tribe. It's a lot easier to become a lot more purist in your politics, and much less willing to engage with people who've, you know, committed some form of thought crime. I've always taken quite a pluralist approach to feminist politics. You know, there are women who I disagree with profoundly, but I still recognise that they're feminists. They just think different things to me. I don't think there is one feminism, you know. They are still women that I could very much

work with on other issues, possibly. I mean, obviously, there are some people that I could never work with because their views are so antithetical to any sort of respect for human rights of others.

Generally speaking, I think, you know, you try and find common ground. I think part of what the sector needs is that leadership to create those spaces where people can try and find common ground. The only way to do that is through, kind of, discussion and dialogue, and probably discussion and dialogue in the real world, rather than online. In the real world, you can't just block somebody. You do, at least-, they're sat in front of you, you know. So, yes.

Moderator: How has your involvement in the sector impacted on you personally?

Mary-Ann Stephenson: It's difficult to tell, isn't it, because I don't know what my life would be like if I'd done something else. I think generally it's had a massively positive impact on my life. You know, I've met the most amazing women. I have learnt so much from different people and been really, really lucky to have, you know, met and worked with and learnt from a whole range of different women. I think probably, sometimes, it makes me slightly less fun at parties because I get a bit, you know. There's some things that when you know them, you can't un-know them. I think, as a parent, being conscious of levels of male violence. Also, being conscious of what it was like to be a teenager who wanted to go out and have fun and, you know. That real anxiety. I mean, I find it quite upsetting sometimes, when I think about it. When I think about the world that my daughters are growing up in. I think, I know so much about the horribleness of it, do you know what I mean? The potentially horrible things that can happen to them.

I don't want them to grow up scared or, you know, constantly feeling that they can't do things. On the other hand, you know, I want to wrap them up in cotton wool and not let bad stuff happen to them. I remember when the 'Me Too' campaign really, suddenly, broke, and having lots and lots of conversations with lots of female friends. We were all really upset because you suddenly start thinking about all the things that have happened to you. All of them, and they just go on and on and on and on, back to when you were first catcalled aged twelve, in your school uniform or something, which seems to be the fairly common experience from women I know. Just that, kind of, sense of the awfulness of it, and having conversations with male friends and with my partner, who were kind of sympathetic but just didn't get quite how awful it was. Quite how suddenly absolutely furious so many of us were, thinking, do you know what? We've put up with all of this for so bloody long. You know, it's just become, kind of, the background to our lives.

I suppose, actually, the thing that feminism, and the women's movement gives me is hope and optimism, and the potential for change. I keep thinking that. I keep thinking about Andrea Dawkins words about, you know, 'Do you know why we haven't all just stabbed you in your beds? Because we believe in your humanity and capacity for change.' You know, that's what I think. It doesn't have to be like this. It is not something intrinsic about being male that makes men behave like this. We can do things differently. If we couldn't do things differently, we'd have to have a very, very different approach to all of this. So, actually, while the women's movement gives me a, sort of, knowledge that could make me depressed, it doesn't, actually. It

makes me think, you know, no, we keep going. There's always tomorrow. There's always more stuff. Actually, I think, yes. It's that potential for change, is really positive.

Moderator: How has your organisation, the Women's Budget Group, and the women's sector as a whole influenced and changed with its structural position within the UK?

Mary-Ann Stephenson: Gosh. Well, okay. So, the Women's Budget Group's only been going 30 years. Women's movement is much bigger and longer. So, if we think about the women's movement more generally. I mean, how far back do you want to go? I mean, you know. Winning the right to vote, equal pay, (TC 00.40.00), setting up women's refuges? Setting up rape crisis centres. Kind of, feminist education projects. Women into non-traditional trades. All of those things. I mean, women's lives have been transformed. You know, we've still got a long way to go but they are vastly different from what they were. I think, you know, it's easy to, kind of, forget that. When my mother told me that after I was born and she was living in Wales, she went to the council, local council, to find out about jobs. They said, 'Oh, it's not our policy to employ married women, because it's taking the jobs away from the men that need it.' I just think bloody hell, you know, that's my lifetime, women being told that. Obviously, things have changed.

In terms of the Women's Budget Group, I think in the UK where we've been most successful has been on specific changes where we've had a broadly sympathetic government. So, under Gordon Brown, for example, because he had such a huge priority on child poverty. We were able to persuade him that child poverty was about women's poverty, you know. You can't solve child poverty without solving women's poverty. Children aren't poor on their own. Therefore, there was an engagement with a whole range of things about women's poverty and about, you know, paying tax credits to the main carer rather than the main earner, which was what the original plan was, and so on. More recently, it's been harder with austerity. You know, we have been campaigning and reporting, and we've had a lot of success in getting things in the media. We were picked up by, you know, the UN Special Envoy on extreme poverty quoted our work quite a lot. In terms of what the government does, it's been less successful. We have managed to have some kind of changes and some dialogue around the edges, particularly around survivors of violence and social security benefits.

That's been a change that I've seen in my lifetime. Recognition that violence against women is a serious issue and needs working on has been taken up by Conservative women. Whereas, when I first started, there were very few Conservative women who would talk about violence against women in that sort of way. Now, there are. Unfortunately, quite a few of them have left Parliament in this election, so we don't know what's going to happen next. You know, Women's Budget Group works in a cross-party, in a non-party way. So, you know, we try and form relationships with MPs from all parties. Often, change can be quite incremental. So, you're kind of chipping away and chipping away and nothing seems to happen. Then, suddenly, everyone goes, 'Yes, that's what we've always thought and we're going to change the way we do this.' So, you know, a lot of the work Women's Budget Group was involved in, a lot of work around flexible working and parental leave. It was involved in work around benefits and tax credits and pensions. Some of that you get changed now, some of them you get changed further on down the line.

Moderator: What do you think still needs to be done?

Mary-Ann Stephenson: Oh, bloody hell. So much. So much really. In the UK?

Moderator: Yes.

Mary-Ann Stephenson: Well, as I said earlier, I think this fundamental issue of the gender division of labour. We still haven't sorted that. Women are still doing far more unpaid work, particularly care work, than men and that has an impact on all areas of their lives. Their position in the paid labour market and their poverty. Their ability to save their pensions, their ability to get involved in public life. Just the amount of leisure time that they have left over. I think, you know, there's all sorts of bits around that that you can address but the fundamental thing about that gender division of labour is the bit that's been really, really difficult to crack. I mean, you do see changes. So, I think men are doing a bit more than they used to but they're still not carrying the same level of mental load, or the same amount of time, or the same, kind of, being the default parent if something goes wrong. School's closed, it's a snow day, you know. We still haven't managed to address male violence against women.

We still, actually, you know-, I worry there, particularly with the rise of online pornography, and the violence in that. Young boys growing up having their, kind of, sexuality and their views of what women are and what sex is formed by really violent and unpleasant pornography. I worry about how that then feeds through into a generation of young men, and their sets of expectations. You kind of see it with-, you know, it's like all the rough sex defence in murder trials. You know, she liked being strangled. You know, and you just think, really? Have we really come to this? So, there's that. I also think we need to think about how those relate to other issues for specific groups of women. So, thinking specifically about the way our immigration and asylum system works, and the impact that that has, particularly on migrant women. You know, no recourse to public funds. All of those issues and the, kind of, complete othering of people who've come here as refugees or asylum seekers, as though they're somehow less than human, less than worthy of human rights.

I think we need to do that. There's a whole range of other issues which I could argue are related to this, you know. What do we do about Brexit and trade? What do we do about the general failure of our democracy? You know, we've got an electoral system based on a two- party system, when we don't have two-party politics anymore. That plays out, actually, in terms of women's ability to vote for people that they, you know, might want to support. I mean, if you think about things like the Women's Equality Party, you know. If we were in a country with a PR system, we would probably have some Women's Equality Party MPs and, you know, that would be great, but we don't. So, yes. There's a whole set of other things, but I think it does come down to care and violence. There's power there, as well, in both of those. Those are the things that we still haven't managed to get to the root cause of.

Moderator: You've touched on this. What are your thoughts on the future for women's rights?

Mary-Ann Stephenson: I think there's some really positive trends and I think there's some really negative trends. So, I think, in terms of positive trends there is this, kind of, growing awareness among young women. Young women are much more likely to consider themselves

to be feminists. There's a whole set of behaviours that people just assume is not acceptable, and that makes me feel positive about change, you know. Our social norms have shifted. You know, things that were considered acceptable are no longer considered acceptable. I also worry that, you know, there is a backlash against that. There is a backlash against that in terms of, you know, you saw the backlash against the 'Me Too' movement. Also, you know, back to the impact of really widespread hardcore pornography on your phone. You know, talking to my daughters, even in primary school, boys bringing phones into school and showing round-, the fact that it's not just like, you know, it used to be top shelf magazines other than anything else. Suddenly, it's all available at the click of a button. You can find it straight away.

I think that's really worrying. The other thing that worries me, which I didn't touch on earlier, is a kind of purity politics. Whereas, in the past, we might have said there are-, you know, there's always been profound disagreements between feminists, and different approaches, and different ideas. There has been a recognition that there's a range of valid views and that you argue about it. The tendency towards, you know, platforming. The tendency towards blocking people (TC 00.50.00) completely. The tendency to, you know, get behind death threats and rape threats and all sorts of horrible things aimed at women because they've said the wrong thing, because they don't believe. They don't share a particular viewpoint. You know, it's most obvious in debates around prostitution and around trans issues. It feels to me like a bit of a mindset. There is the right position and then everything else is completely unacceptable. I think, you know, there are things we can say, 'Look, these views are beyond the pale.' We just don't engage with people with those views, you know. There's a whole spectrum of views that aren't there? It's like the boundaries of what is and isn't acceptable have become narrower and narrower. I think that's really, really damaging and I think that, you know, a lot of people are spending a lot of time in some very difficult and vicious fights. I absolutely understand why they're really high priorities for the people who are working on them, but it also has the effect that there's a whole load of other stuff that isn't being done, because that's what people are doing.

That's back to this thing about leadership and the need to find ways of holding spaces where women can have those discussions, and an acknowledgement that it is legitimate to say we need to talk about this. You know, we've got this big disagreement, we need to talk about it, rather than we've got this big disagreement and you lot are evil bigots and we're never going to have anything to do with you. We're going to try and get you sacked from your job, or whatever.

I find that really, really disturbing and upsetting, but because I'm a naturally optimistic person, I try and focus on the positive stuff and think, you know, there has been a huge change. There's been a huge change in my lifetime. There was a huge change in my mother's lifetime. I hope there will be a huge change in my daughters' lifetime. You know, that's all you can do, otherwise you'd just give up and go home.

Moderator: Thank you.

Mary-Ann Stephenson: Is that okay?