



ENGLISH COLLECTIVE OF PROSTITUTES

Crossroads Women's Centre, 25 Wolsey Mews, Kentish Town, London NW5 2DX
Tel: 020 7482 2496 Email: ecp@prostitutescollective.net

Submission to Work and Pensions Committee from the English Collective of Prostitutes, April 2019

The ECP is a self-help organisation of sex workers, working both on the street and in premises, with a national network throughout the UK. Since 1975, we have campaigned for the decriminalisation of prostitution, for sex workers' rights and safety, and for resources to enable people to get out of prostitution if they want to.

Context

Of the approximately 72,800 sex workers in the UK — 88% are women. Prostitution has always been connected to women's poverty – that's why most clients are men and most sex workers are women.

Researchⁱ shows that 86% of austerity cuts have fallen on women. As poverty rises, more women, particularly single mothers, turn to sex work to survive and feed their families. In some cities massive rises in prostitution are being directly attributed to benefit sanctions (see below).

In general, in the UK, poverty is at alarming levels. We give just a few examples. One and a quarter million people are officially destitute. Four and a half million children are living in poverty.ⁱⁱ Asylum-seekers get just £36 a week if they qualify for support; many get nothing at all.

Vulnerable people like mothers and people with disabilities have been disproportionately targeted by the cuts and Universal Credit (UC) has exacerbated this. Disabled single mothers have lost out from tax and benefit changes since 2010 and a third of this loss is due to shift to Universal Credit.ⁱⁱⁱ Single mothers are 85% of those affected by the benefit cap^{iv} and have been hit particularly hard by cuts to universal credit – losing on average £2,380 per year.^v BAME women are hardest hit by the introduction of Universal Credit.^{vi}

Women in our network gave evidence to the UN Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty^{vii} about being destitute, homeless and being forced into exchanging sex for somewhere to live. His scathing report condemned the Government's "punitive, mean-spirited, and often callous" austerity policies which could have been designed by a "group of misogynists" in the way austerity affected women.

Women in our network have raised three main issues:

1. Delay in payments.

One single mother reported to us that in addition to the seven-day period after she applied for UC she waited for four weeks for her claim to be assessed. During this time she had no money at all.

"My daughter has learning disabilities and needs a lot of extra care and attention. I spent weeks waiting for money. I used every penny I had and had no-one else to borrow from. I was crying to my friend and she told me to speak to one of the mums at the school. I got friendly with her and she got

me a couple of shifts in a local massage parlour. I was very reluctant but so stressed I couldn't think straight. The money has been a life-saver."

Another woman commented:

"Three months ago I lost my professional job of 10 years and I've got nothing to live on. I've got a claim in for benefits but haven't had a penny. They tell me to be patient but being patient isn't going to feed my child or pay my mortgage."

It is hard to believe that the government didn't know that by building in a delay into the administration of UC that they would be forcing women to borrow money, including from unscrupulous loan sharks. This inevitably would make women extremely vulnerable to exploitation and violence. It is particularly shocking considering that as far back as 2004 the government acknowledged that debt plays "a major part in driving people into prostitution as a survival activity." and that it is a significant factor . . . in making it difficult to leave.^{viiiix}

We note that the government denies that there is a five-week delay. A DWP spokesperson commented in response to an article we wrote that: *"It is not true to say that people need to wait five weeks for their first payment. Universal Credit is available to claimants on day one."* We hope the Work and Pensions Committee, having heard evidence directly from people affected by delay, will hold the government to account for lying.

2. Sanctions are even more punitive than before.

Even before the introduction of Universal Credit, there was acknowledgment that benefit sanctions are driving thousands of women into prostitution. Doncaster reports a 61% increase in prostitution with charities saying: "women are being forced to sell sex for £5 because of benefit sanctions"^x. Sheffield reports a 166% increase in sex work^{xi}, while charity workers in Hull report: "women who are literally starving and they are out there to feed themselves"

The UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty commented on "the harsh and arbitrary nature of some of the sanctions, as well as the devastating effects that resulted from being completely shut out of the benefits system for weeks or months at a time."^{xii}

Universal Credit sanctions are even more draconian than the previous benefit regime. Women in our network report losing benefits for three months on the first occasion that they got sanctioned. People are sanctioned for six months the second time and three years the third time. And the number of people being sanctioned is rising. In addition, 40% of your Universal Credit can, without your consent, be deducted to repay rent, fuel and water charges, council tax, etc.

Job centre staff can waive work-related requirements for single mothers, but a number of mums reported that judgemental and hostile work coaches abused this discretionary power.

Women on UC are also being penalised and sanctioned for not earning enough. This is particularly outrageous considering the gender pay gap and institutionalised low wages suffered by women. Over half (54.7%)^{xiii} of workers on zero-hour contracts are women, who suffer the lowest pay.^{xiv} Single mothers, are more likely to be trapped in precarious work.^{xv}

All this adds up to terrible, deliberate brutality. Official statistics show over 81,000 people have died as a result of sanctions.

3. The reduction in income compared to previous benefits.

Even before the introduction of Universal Credit, benefits were set below the minimum income standard^{xvi} needed to cover essentials such as a healthy diet, water, fuel, clothes, transport and other necessities after the rent, council and income taxes are paid. Considering this it is unconscionable that women are facing cuts in their income when they are transferred over to UC. Families with children are estimated to lose around £1,000 a year and lone parents (90% of which are women) about £2,340 a year.

One mother commented:

“They took £72 a week off me. My kids are nine and one and I need to get school uniform for the eldest. I didn’t have a good childhood. My kids aren’t going to suffer like I did. What the kids want, they get. But it has to be paid for. That’s why I’m here.”

One woman in our network in Preston who has four children, one of which is autistic estimates that she will lose £100 a week compared to the benefits she is on now. She is trying to resist being moved onto UC but because her circumstances have changed that is counted as a new claim.

She wrote:

“I am terrified about my money being cut. I am already stressed because my daughter is a handful and I am on my own with her and the other children. My partner was abusive but I managed to get away. I have worked a few shifts on the street in my local area and think I will have to go back to that work but I am terrified that my ex will find out and use it as an excuse to call in social services who will accuse me of being a bad mother. I am exhausted and scared and don’t know which way to turn.”

Another mother in our group described the impact of losing money by being transferred onto UC:

“They took £72 a week off me. My kids are nine and one and I need to get school uniform for the eldest.” I didn’t have a good childhood. My kids aren’t going to suffer like I did. What the kids want, they get.” But it has to be paid for. That’s why I’m here. My boyfriend doesn’t know. He thinks I work in a strip bar”

Mothers being transferred onto Universal Credit have also been hit by the two-child limit under which women get no money for their third or subsequent children. The money for some disabled children is halved from £61 to £32. Single mothers under the age of 25 receive a lower rate of benefit, unlike in the previous benefits system. One disgraceful exemption to the two-child limit is if a child was conceived as a result of rape – but the mother has to go through the degrading process of convincing jobcentre workers of this.

Universal Credit rolls many benefits into one and in doing so enables the jobcentre staff to remove someone’s personal allowance, as well as their housing benefit and child tax credit. Women are left destitute and at risk of eviction which did not happen previously.

Women also raised the following issues:

Survival sex work

Many women objected to a distinction being made between survival sex work and other sex work. All the women who commented considered that what they were doing was sex work to ensure their survival and the survival of their families and other loved ones.

“I had to leave my husband after the relationship broke down and had two young children. For a few years our lives just about worked. I managed to get occasional cleaning job but scrubbing toilets and vacuuming around porn magazines under beds is exhausting, hard physical work and badly paid. It was a relief when the kids went to a friend’s house after school because I didn’t have to find the money for their tea. I nicked toilet rolls from public toilets and kept my eyes skinned for money in the street. Then a friend let slip that she worked in a massage parlour and that was that. Suddenly I was just about managing.” She also commented: *“If it had been like today I wouldn’t have had anything for my youngest. I would have been desperate and think I may have ended up on the street.”*

A street-based sex worker explained:

“I go out to work because of economic pressures. I have a disabled child. Benefits don’t cover the cost of gas, electric, water rates, replacing household equipment. No-one can live on benefits long term. When I need to buy coats or shoes I can’t afford them. Most of the other girls or women I meet on the street are

there for very similar reasons, purely to keep their families together and their children out of care. It means we can choose to have the heating on. We go out and make enough money to pay a bill.”

Paying the benefit to the head of household.

The single monthly payment to the man as head of household is a dangerous and retrograde feature of UC. Women have to apply for split payments if they want the money to go to them. Considering that women are overwhelmingly the primary carers, this has left many without money to feed their children. By the beginning of this year there had been only 20 successful applications by women for the money to be paid to them.

WinVisible and Women Against Rape protested that women pushed into financial dependence will be more vulnerable to domestic violence.^{xvii} Mothers have been accused of being unfit and threatened with having their children taken into care for not being able to get their children away from violent situations.^{xviii} Women in our network have been accused by violent partners of being an unfit mother for working in the sex industry and threatened with applying to have their children taken from them.

Hostile benefit environment.

All of the women in our network who have tried to apply for UC have described a torturous online application process, arbitrary decisions weighted in favour of refusing people, judgemental and hostile work coaches and other job centre staff. That is in addition to the actual regulations which are institutionally sexist: payments go to the nominated account holder - usually the man, single mothers are disproportionately penalised, benefit rates for young single mothers are less than for others, the two-child limit and the exemption which relies on women proving that their child was born as a result of rape . . .

One young woman in our group applied and made an appointment with her work coach within seven days as required. She said that when she got there “The work coach treated me like a scrounger and said I should go and get a job rather than apply for benefits. I told the woman that I had a job which paid me so little (£4.20 an hour) it didn’t even cover my fare to work. Now I am trying to study. I was refused without warning and the online application was closed. I got the woman at my college to write to confirm I was entitled and applied again. I was refused again. I’m now appealing but have been waiting five months for a decision. I started advertising online and escorting -- as well as studying -- because I couldn’t survive any other way.”

Another woman commented:

“I’ve had mental health problems for a few years and can’t hold down a regular job. I was on benefits but I was thrown off everything except DLA. I tried to apply for universal credit but I couldn’t do it on my own. Even if I got it I would have to wait six weeks for a payment. So I had to start doing sex work so I wouldn’t be made homeless. I can’t lose my flat. I have used heroin and crack regularly but have cut down a lot and I need time to get more help. I was attacked in August, I wanted to report it but know it’s useless, what would the police say. My mental health problems got worse after the attack. I get really bad days. I would like to get out of sex work but I can’t see myself doing another job. Universal credit is a nightmare – other people I know are on it and having a terrible time. So I’m stuck. I’m having the worst time in my adult life right now and I feel I can hardly cope. If I could get benefits that I am sure I am entitled to, at least I would have a chance.”

Criminalisation of sex workers

Instead of addressing the increase in poverty caused by its economic policies, the response from the government (both national and local) and the police has been to increase arrests, criminalisation and crackdowns against sex workers. We direct the Committee to the parliamentary symposium publication: *Decriminalisation of Prostitution: the Evidence*^{xix} which documents this.

One example is the London Borough of Redbridge, one of the poorest areas of London, which issued prostitute cautions for soliciting against 639 women between 2013 and 2015. It also extended the use of civil orders (Public Spaces Protection Orders) to the whole borough with the power to issue on the spot

fining of £100 to women for prostitution related activities and ban women from certain areas during particular times of the days using civil injunctions. Fining, criminalising and especially imprisoning women for prostitution and other crimes of poverty, exacerbates women's poverty.

We produce regular bulletins^{xx} which give snapshots of charges being brought against women for loitering and soliciting and brothel-keeping – the charge that is most often used against women working together collectively from premises. Police crackdowns and arrests force women to work alone in more isolated areas at greater risk of arrest.

CONCLUSION

Universal Credit must be scrapped.

The problems are so severe Universal Credit cannot be reformed and must be scrapped. Its introduction has been an excuse to cut benefits.

Poverty reduction must be the priority.

If as expected the evidence the Committee receives confirms that prostitution has increased because of rising poverty, we strongly urge you to demand that politicians who claim to want to support women and reduce levels of prostitution must firstly reduce this poverty. We raise this because some women politicians in particular have focussed on increasing the criminalisation of prostitution in the form of criminalising clients. This would be a disaster for sex workers and make it much more dangerous and difficult to work.^{xxi} We cannot be put in a situation where we are impoverished and then persecuted, and our lives endangered because of the way we have found to survive.

Sex workers' safety is paramount – decriminalise prostitution.

Our campaign #MakeAllWomenSafe highlights the issue of sex workers' safety and the key injustice that whilst sex work is legal it is illegal for women to work together. Women are therefore forced to choose between possible arrest and keeping themselves safe or avoiding a criminal record and putting themselves in danger. We urge the Committee to back our demand that the government implement the Home Affairs Committee recommendation to decriminalise sex workers on the street and working together in premises. Specifically, it recommended: ". . . the Home Office change existing legislation so that soliciting is no longer an offence and so that brothel-keeping provisions allow sex workers to share premises" and that legislation should be drafted to provide for the "deletion of previous convictions and cautions for prostitution from the record of sex workers."

Support for mothers and a living wage

Esther McVey, the former Work and Pensions Secretary, callously responded to reports of women being driven into sex work by Universal Credit by suggesting there were "other jobs on offer" to these women. Our research *What's a Nice Girl Like You Doing in a Job Like This* comparing sex work with other jobs traditionally done by women found endemic low pay, exploitative working conditions and workplace injury, discrimination and abuse across the board. Mothers reported a lack of consideration, acknowledgment and recognition for their caring responsibilities -- no wonder therefore that so many mothers go into prostitution. The introduction of a living wage for mothers and other carers would recognise the crucial work of raising children and help prevent women from being driven into sex work because of poverty and lack of economic alternatives.

-
- ⁱ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/09/women-bearing-86-of-austerity-burden-labour-research-reveals>
- ⁱⁱ www.theguardian.com/society/2018/sep/16/new-study-finds-45-million-uk-children-living-in-poverty
- ⁱⁱⁱ <https://wbg.org.uk/analysis/2018-wbg-briefing-disabled-women-and-austerity/>
- ^{iv} Syal, R. (2019). Benefit cap: single mothers make up 85% of those affected, data shows. *Guardian*. [online] Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/jan/04/benefit-cap-single-mothers-make-up-85percent-of-those-affected-data-shows>
- ^v <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/benefit-freeze-single-mothers-austerity-a8846246.html>
- ^{vi} <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/pre-budget-press-release-nov-2017-15-11.pdf>
- ^{vii} <http://prostitutescollective.net/2018/09/ecp-submission-to-the-un-special-rapporteur-on-extreme-poverty-and-human-rights/>
- ^{viii} Debt can be a contributory factor to the vulnerability of men and women to prostitution. . . . Debt . . . plays a major part in driving people into prostitution as a survival activity. They are also significant factors, along with the threat of violence from pimps/partners, in making it difficult to leave. https://prostitution.procon.org/sourcefiles/paying_the_price.pdf
- ^{ix} <https://www.chroniclelive.co.uk/news/north-east-news/north-women-debt-forced-prostitution-1450354>
- ^x <https://www.thestar.co.uk/news/latest/support-bid-for-doncaster-s-prostitutes-1-6508498>
- ^{xi} <http://prostitutescollective.net/2016/11/star-sheffield-women-forced-prostitution-benefit-cuts/>
- ^{xii} https://www.ohchr.org/documents/issues/poverty/eom_gb_16nov2018.pdf
- ^{xiii} Survation. (2014). Women on Low Pay Survey. Available at: <https://www.survation.com/women-on-low-paid-zero-hours-contracts-survation-for-fawcett-society/>.
- ^{xiv} Nearly a third (32%) of low-paid women in London are on a zero hours contract. *Ibid*.
- ^{xv} Gingerbread. (2018). One in four: A profile of single parents in the UK. Available at: <https://www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/news/articles/single-parents-financial-burden-unsustainable-employment>.
- ^{xvi} <https://www.jrf.org.uk/income-benefits/minimum-income-standards>
- ^{xvii} <https://winvisibleblog.wordpress.com/2018/05/02/universal-credit-and-domestic-abuse-our-evidence-to-mps/>
- ^{xviii} <http://againstrape.net/category/campaigns/support-not-separation>
- ^{xix} <http://prostitutescollective.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Online-Symposium-Report.pdf>
- ^{xx} <http://prostitutescollective.net/bulletins/>
- ^{xxi} <http://prostitutescollective.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/No-Nordic-Model.pdf>