

## ***Benefits or barriers? Making social security work for survivors of violence and abuse across the UK's four nations. Marilyn Howard speaking notes, report launch 12.6.19***

First I'd like to thank the Women's Budget Group and partner organisations Surviving Economic Abuse and the End Violence Against Women coalition. Also, thanks to Policy Bristol who funded the report and speakers' travel costs today. I'm going to flag up 3 things: what's common across the UK; some country differences; and the need for change.

### **1. Common across the UK**

Across the UK, women have borne the brunt of cuts to benefits and services; these cuts have also increased vulnerability to abuse. Survivors – predominantly women – are being let down by the social security system, which creates barriers so that:

- Women can't afford to leave the abuser if they have no money of their own. For example, women whose immigration status means that they have No Recourse to Public Funds may find it impossible to get a refuge place. Survivors making a new Universal Credit (UC) claim from a refuge may have to wait twice as long as the standard 5 weeks.
- Cuts to housing support threaten survivors' chances of getting temporary or longer-term accommodation. Single parent survivors can get caught by the Benefit Cap for not working but may have to restrict their job-search due to looking after children or trauma arising from abuse (this is to some extent recognised elsewhere in the system, such as through easements to work-related conditionality).

**Easements are an example of the approach of exemptions and discretion** for 'domestic abuse'. But to get these, survivors must disclose abuse, provide proof of that abuse and meet other conditions. Even job centre staff say that easements are too bureaucratic<sup>1</sup>. Select committees are also concerned about over-reliance on work-coach discretion<sup>2</sup>.

We heard of one survivor who preferred the indignity of returning to prostitution to the indignity of claiming benefits.

### **2. Differences**

The 4 nations vary in political and social conditions and their policy remits.

For example the 2 child limit has a particular impact in Northern Ireland because: average family size is larger; there is a legal duty for anyone aware of a crime to report this to the police or face prosecution themselves; so the 'rape clause' exemption can make women choose between poverty if they don't disclose or criminalisation if they do.

**Devolved governments mitigate the UK Government's cuts and changes.** The Equality and Human Rights Commission has found that the impact of cuts and changes in Wales and Scotland was less than in England, partly as a result of mitigation measures<sup>3</sup>. But money is running out, Northern Ireland's expire in 9 months. Devolved governments mitigations are, as UN Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Philip Alston, has said, a powerful indictment of UK policies<sup>4</sup>.

**Although some UC payment policy is devolved,** UC is delivered by DWP's IT, defaulting to a single payment, despite Ministers promising in 2012 that there would be IT capability to separate payments between members of a couple<sup>5</sup>. According to those talking to the Institute for Government, DWP's IT had not been designed for policy variation<sup>6</sup>.

**Devolved governments also approach Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) differently.** For example, introducing a public sector duty in Wales, criminal offence in Scotland and a 'gender-neutral' approach in Northern Ireland.

VAWG also includes economic abuse and can involve manipulation of survivors' benefit entitlements. The draft Domestic Abuse Bill makes economic abuse part of a statutory definition, which has been widely welcomed. However, the Bill is undermined by social security cuts and changes, and the failure of social security to meet survivors' needs. In particular the UC single payment which as Surviving Economic Abuse says, potentially *sets the scene* for abuse, restricting survivors' access to income<sup>7</sup>.

### **3. The need for change**

UK gender-neutral benefits design fails to recognise the different circumstances of men and women and so are less effective in meeting needs.

Adding on exemptions or discretion for domestic abuse doesn't improve the original policy design of say the 2-child limit. Tweaks to UC and other benefits are not enough. We need radical change.

Whilst abusers are responsible for their actions, policy can make a difference, by narrowing the scope for abuse and signalling that abuse is not acceptable.

We need to achieve economic equality. This entails three strategies:

1. Reducing the scope of means-tests
2. Enhancing benefits paid on the basis of individual entitlement
3. Improving paid work options and employment-related benefits

Failing to so:

- lets down survivors;
- lets down other UK Government departments delivering a Domestic Abuse Bill; and
- lets down devolved governments wanting to use their powers to do things differently.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> PCS letter to Work and Pensions Select Committee: <https://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/work-and-pensions/Correspondence/pcs-chair-uc-domestic-abuse-140518.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Eg Public Accounts Select committee  
<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmpubacc/1183/1183.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Equality and Human Rights Commission (2019) *Is England Fairer? (2018)*  
<https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/england-fairer-2018>

<sup>4</sup> P18 Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights: <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/41/39/Add.1>

<sup>5</sup> Lord Freud House of Lords Hansard 23.1.12 col 909; Friday 9 November 2012 Written Answers WA 285:  
<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/Documents/Answer-Book/2012/121109.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> P19 Institute for Government (2019) *Ministers reflect on 20 years of devolution; Lessons from 20 years of Scottish and Welsh government* <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/Ministers-reflect-on-devolution-WEB.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Nicola Sharp-Jeffs, Evidence to Work and Pensions Select Committee 18.4.18 Q 517  
<http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/work-and-pensions-committee/universal-credit-rollout/oral/81812.html>