

Operation Yellowhammer: briefing from the Women's Budget Group

September 2019 – updated to 2018 report: Exploring the Economic Impact of Brexit on Women

The 'Operation Yellowhammer' papers¹ have been published by the Government after Parliament mandated them to reveal the impact of a no-deal Brexit. From traffic to food prices to civil unrest, the 'Operation Yellowhammer' document exposes the short-term chaos awaiting the UK if we leave the European Union without a deal.

The five-page document confirms many things warned of in the Women's Budget Group and Fawcett report 'Exploring the Economic Impact of Brexit on Women'². The cost of living will increase and this will hit women – particularly the poorest women – hardest.

What was not published, if it exists at all, was an assessment of the differential impact this economic and social disruption will have on women and other marginalised groups. In fact, since 2016, the government has failed to publish equality impact assessments of the impact of different Brexit options.

What does Yellowhammer say and what does this mean for women?**Food and energy price increases**

"there will likely be significant electricity price increases for consumers..."

Women often take responsibility for budgeting³ in low-income households. They are also the majority (90%) of single parents - 45%⁴ of whom are already living in poverty due to public service and social security cuts since 2010. If household costs increase the poorest women could be more at risk of extreme poverty and turning to food banks.

"...Certain types of fresh food supply will decrease. Critical dependencies for the food supply chain...may be in shorter supply. In combination, these two factors will not cause an overall shortage of food in the UK but will reduce availability and choice of products and will increase price, which could impact vulnerable groups."

"...Low income groups will be disproportionately affected by any prices rises in food and fuel"

The poorest households would be hardest hit by rising food prices: 23%⁵ of the poorest tenth of households' expenditure is on food, compared to the richest tenth who spend 10%. This will disproportionately affect women, who are more⁶ likely than men to be poor and who tend to have the main responsibility for the purchase and preparation of food and who are also most likely⁷ to go without food or warmth in order to feed their family. Rising costs of food will add a further burden to those pushed into poverty by the impact of cuts to social security.

Medicine and health consequences

"The reliance of medicines and medical products' supply chains on the short straits crossing make them particularly vulnerable to severe extended delays; three-quarters of medicines come via the short straits"

For women with cancer and on long-term medication delays and shortages will have serious and potentially fatal impacts. Health unions have already warned that a no-deal Brexit could "devastate" the NHS and cause fatal medicine shortages. 80% of radioactive isotopes which are used in the diagnosis and treatment of cancers and a range of other conditions are imported, mainly from the EU. These cannot be stockpiled because they begin to decay as soon as they are produced.

¹ Gov.uk (2019) Operation Yellowhammer

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/831199/20190802_Latest_Yellowhammer_Planning_assumptions_CD_L.pdf

² WBG (2018) Exploring the Economic Impact of Brexit on Women <https://wbg.org.uk/analysis/new-report-exploring-the-economic-impact-of-brexit-on-women/>

³ WBG (2018) The Female Face of Poverty <https://wbg.org.uk/analysis/the-female-face-of-poverty/>

⁴ Gov.uk (2019) Households below average income 1994/5 to 2018/9 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/households-below-average-income-199495-to-201718>

⁵ WBG (2018) Exploring the Economic Impact of Brexit on Women <https://wbg.org.uk/analysis/new-report-exploring-the-economic-impact-of-brexit-on-women/>

⁶ Gov.uk (2019) Households below average income 1994/5 to 2018/9 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/households-below-average-income-199495-to-201718>

⁷ WBG (2015) Poverty in the UK: the need for a gender perspective <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Gender-and-Poverty-Briefing-June-2015.pdf>

Delays in access to medicine is just one impact of a no-deal Brexit on women's health: women also make up the majority (77%) of NHS staff and service-users (women made up 55% of admissions to hospitals in 2015/16).

Adult social care system

“An increase in inflation following EU exit would significantly impact adult social care providers due to increasing staff and supply costs, and may lead to provider failure.”

Women are the majority of those needing care, and the majority of those providing it (paid and unpaid). Only last week the Chancellor announced a spending increase of £1.5bn needed to prevent the immediate collapse of the social care system. But the social care remains in crisis with 1.4 million people with unmet care needs, and an additional £9.1bn needed to return to (already inadequate) 2009/2010 equivalent funding levels⁸.

The negative economic impact of a disorderly EU exit, including an increase in inflation and an economic recession will augment the pressure on providers who are already facing financial instability. This is likely to shift the burden of care work onto unpaid family carers, the majority of whom are women.

EU migrant nationals make up 5.4%⁹ of the social care sector workforce. The sharp fall in net migration from the EU since the referendum has exacerbated the recruitment difficulties and shortage of workers in the sector. This is likely to be made worse by the impact a no-deal Brexit will have on recruitment from the EU as new immigration constraints are put in place.

Women UK citizens in EU

“UK nationals will lose their EU citizenship and, as a result, can expect to lose associated rights and access to services over time, or be required to access them on a different basis to now.”

UK citizens living in EU member states will lose the rights associated with freedom of movement. Member states have started to put in place EU settlement scheme equivalents, which vary widely across countries with some requiring registration now. Proof of residency is usually done by employment and tax records, rental agreements, etc. Women will find it harder to prove their residency as they're more likely to take on care roles and less likely to be in paid employment. This creates a risk that women will fall between the cracks and see their residency status denied and their right to access services and benefits stopped in EU countries. This is also a risk for women living in abusive relationships where they may not have access to their financial records.

“Healthcare may require people to demonstrate residency, current or previous employment, enter a social insurance scheme, or purchase private insurance.”

These rights include access to healthcare, which women depend more¹⁰ on (including specific services such as pregnancy and maternity care, reproductive health) and for longer, as they live more years¹¹ in ill-health than men. Lower incomes and less likely to be in paid work make it harder for women to be included in social insurance schemes or purchase private insurance.

What doesn't Operation Yellowhammer say?

Operation Yellowhammer only refers to the short-term consequences of a no-deal Brexit. It doesn't cover the longer-term economic consequences. Already, leaving the EU is costing the public purse more than staying – the government has spent billions¹² preparing for no deal while the economy is already 2-2.5%¹³ smaller than it would have been.

⁸ WBG (2018) Social care: a briefing from the Women's Budget Group <https://wbg.org.uk/analysis/2018-wbg-briefing-social-care/>

⁹ LSE Brexit blog (2019) How EU migrants have propped up Britain's social care <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2018/11/13/how-eu-migrants-have-propped-up-britains-social-care/>

¹⁰ WBG (2018) Health: a briefing from the Women's Budget Group <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Health-October-2018-w-cover-2.pdf>

¹¹ WBG (2018) Health: a briefing from the Women's Budget Group <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Health-October-2018-w-cover-2.pdf>

¹² Reuters (2019) Britain to spend an extra £2.1 billion on no-deal Brexit planning <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-britain-eu-jauid/britain-to-spend-an-extra-2-1-billion-on-no-deal-brexit-planning-idUKKCN1UQ2RR>

¹³ WBG (2018) Exploring the Economic Impact of Brexit on Women <https://wbg.org.uk/analysis/new-report-exploring-the-economic-impact-of-brexit-on-women/>

In the medium to long term there is broad agreement that no-deal will have a severely negative impact on the UK economy. In January 2018 BuzzFeed reported leaked findings of a UK Government study of the economic impact of Brexit by 2033. This predicted GDP would be 8% lower under a 'no deal' scenario. This is broadly in line with independent modelling carried out by a range of organisations including the LSE, the National Institute of Economic and Social Research and the UK Treasury before the referendum.

Analysis by the IFS¹⁴ forecasts that the projected budget deficit in 2019-20 as a result of the economic impacts of Brexit will be an additional £20-40 billion. By 2033 8% lower GDP would cost the UK economy £80bn a year after savings from no longer making contributions to the EU.

If the economy goes into recession as a result of no-deal there is a risk that this will cause further cuts to public services and social security benefits already devastated by nine years of austerity. Public spending increased significantly in the last spending review¹⁵ (although still fell short of delivering the end of austerity that the Government had promised). However, it is not clear whether these spending announcements were a one off pre-election bribe or mark a longer term change of direction. Women, particularly poor, BME¹⁶ and disabled women¹⁷ were hardest hit by spending cuts since 2010 and would likely lose most from any cuts in response to a fall in GDP.

The UK Trade Policy Observatory¹⁸ has calculated that a no-deal Brexit would be likely to lead to the loss of approximately 750,000 jobs. This is in the context of a labour market increasingly characterised by precarious forms of work such as zero-hour contracts (53.6% are taken up by women) and part-time (73%) or temporary (52%) work¹⁹. Women already make up the majority of those living in in-work poverty (45% of single parents²⁰ – 90% of which are women – are living in poverty) and are more vulnerable to job loss or increased precarity during a recession.

More uncertainty, less control

For particularly the poorest and most marginalised women, a no-deal Brexit means job losses, cuts to services, squeezed family budgets and reduced legal protections.

Far from taking back control 'no deal' will make us vulnerable to repeal of rights, standards and protections. The public are exhausted and susceptible to the idea that 'no deal' heralds the end of Brexit. In reality, it would only be the beginning of years of wrangling over every detail of our economic and political constitution while poverty continues and inequalities increase.

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For a digital download of this briefing please visit: <https://wbg.org.uk/analysis/operation-yellowhammer-briefing-from-the-womens-budget-group/>

¹⁴ IFS (2016) Brexit and the UK's public finances <https://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/publications/comms/r116.pdf>

¹⁵ WBG (2019) An end to austerity? What the spending review means for women. <https://wbg.org.uk/analysis/uk-budget-assessments/an-end-to-austerity-what-the-spending-review-means-for-women/>

¹⁶ WBG (2019) Intersecting inequalities: the impact of austerity on BME women <https://wbg.org.uk/analysis/intersecting-inequalities/>

¹⁷ WBG (2018) Disabled women and austerity <https://wbg.org.uk/analysis/2018-wbg-briefing-disabled-women-and-austerity/>

¹⁸ UK Trade Policy Observatory (2019) Job losses and no deal Brexit by constituency <http://blogs.sussex.ac.uk/uktpo/files/2018/12/632-constituencies-Data-no-deal.pdf>

¹⁹ WBG (2019) Employment and earnings: a briefing from the Women's Budget Group <https://wbg.org.uk/analysis/intersecting-inequalities/>

²⁰ WBG (2019) DWP data reveals: women and children continue to be worst affected by poverty <https://wbg.org.uk/blog/dwp-data-reveals-women-continue-to-be-worst-affected-by-poverty/>