

# Submission to the Women's Budget Group's Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy

## About us

Nordic Model Now! is a grassroots women's group campaigning for the Nordic Model (also known as the Sex Buyer Law). Group members come from a variety of backgrounds and include survivors of prostitution and child sexual exploitation. See <http://nordicmodelnow.org/> for more information, or contact us at [nordicmodelnow@gmail.com](mailto:nordicmodelnow@gmail.com).

## *Summary*

First we outline how Government policies since 2010 have impacted women's economic position and how, along with concomitant cultural and policy changes, this has resulted in women turning to prostitution in increasing numbers, often as a last resort from destitution. The evidence is clear that prostitution is inherently violent and damages those in it; that getting out of it is much harder than getting into it; and that it tends to entrench the socioeconomic disadvantages that lead women to enter it in the first place. Moreover prostitution can never meet the UN's definition of decent work or the WBG's vision of wellbeing in the workplace. We hope to show with this report that prostitution is one of the tragic side effects of women's poverty; it is damaging to society and any increase is bound to lead to worsening social and economic inequality between the sexes.

### *1. Causes and results of economic inequality*

The Conservative government, and the Coalition government that preceded it, have presided over the systematic withdrawal of economic resources from women and children. For example:

- The burden of austerity is being borne disproportionately by women, with 86% of savings from tax and benefit measures (2010-2020) [coming from women's pockets](#)<sup>1</sup>.
- The tripling of the student tuition fees and the increase of the interest rates that apply to them have a disproportionate effect on women, since they are likely to earn less than their male counterparts. As things stand many, if not most, women will never pay off their student debt and so will be saddled with an effective 41+% marginal tax rate for all the years they earn over the threshold for [repayments](#)<sup>2</sup> (currently £21,000).
- A lack of political will to hold absent fathers to account for the money they owe to the mothers of their children means that most of the £4 billion that absent fathers owe the mothers of their children through the CSA will never be [collected](#)<sup>3</sup>. New CMA rules further disadvantage single parents, 91% of whom are [women](#)<sup>4</sup>.

- The lower minimum wage for under 25s has a disproportionate effect on women because they are more likely to be in low paid occupations like cleaning, childcare and social [care](#)<sup>5</sup>.
- Lone parents are now [expected to be working](#)<sup>6</sup> (or looking for work 16 hours per week) when their youngest child reaches three years of age, making them at risk of benefit sanctions for minor infractions, which can tip many lone parent families into destitution.
- The extreme shortage of affordable secure family housing means that many families are forced to move frequently, uprooting them from formal and informal local support. For single mothers in particular this can be [catastrophic](#)<sup>7</sup>.
- Cuts to specialist services for women in [prostitution](#)<sup>8</sup>, victims of other forms of male [violence](#)<sup>9</sup> including specialist services for black and minority ethnic (BME) [women](#)<sup>10</sup>, and the removal of domestic abuse services for women in order to create services for [men](#)<sup>11</sup>, mean more women are trapped in prostitution and violent relationships, and are left to deal alone with the effects of trauma, thus reducing their ability to rebuild their lives. The impact on BME women, disabled women and women with insecure immigration status is particularly severe.
- By default, Universal Credit is [paid to a designated person in a two-parent family](#)<sup>12</sup> (usually the man in a heterosexual couple), with the other parent being defined as the lead carer. This tends to entrench women's financial dependence on her partner, thus increasing his power within the relationship and putting her at greater risk of poverty should the relationship break down and making it harder for her to [leave](#)<sup>13</sup>.
- Reduction in funding to local councils and the imminent axing of their central government grant are inevitably having a serious impact on women as services that they depend on (such as services for children, support for the disabled and elderly, exit services for women in prostitution, parks and libraries) are axed or [reduced](#)<sup>14</sup>.
- Cuts to Legal Aid have had a disproportionate effect on all women, with [BME](#)<sup>15</sup> and [disabled women](#)<sup>16</sup> being hardest hit.
- Changes to immigration law disproportionately affect women subject to immigration control with intersecting high needs, such as those fleeing trafficking and domestic [violence](#)<sup>17</sup>.

These factors have resulted in increasing numbers of women being driven into dire poverty and even destitution, leading many to turn to prostitution as a last resort. During the same time period, the government has presided over: increasing gender stereotyping of children's toys and clothing and of the media representation of women; the normalisation of prostitution in the mainstream [culture](#)<sup>18</sup> and easy access to online pornography; and a lack of political will to systematically tackle the widespread pimping of girls and women or to address the demand from men for prostitution that drives this heinous trade.

None of these factors are inevitable. Each one is the result of political decisions whose consequences on the equality of women and girls has been ignored. We hope at some point the government will reverse the decisions that have led to this situation, and that they take steps to ensure that such disastrous decision-making can never be repeated. This would mean conducting an in-depth gender impact assessment for every potential decision, and not maintaining or changing legislation if it is assessed as likely to worsen or maintain sex inequality. For non-governmental organisations, this would mean seeking always to minimise any adverse effects on women and girls and taking steps to redress the harms of previous policies.

Gender equality is not simply a matter of gender neutral provisions. Women's lives are different from men's for a variety of reasons, including: biological reproductive functions; the unique nature of the mother-child bond and the work associated with raising children that spans many years of mothers' working lives; gender stereotyping; the pay gap; the long history of men's systematic advantaging at the expense of women; the palpable misogyny that pervades our culture; men's greater propensity for violence (whatever that is caused by); women's smaller average body size and muscle mass, and that traditionally they are not taught how to defend themselves. Gender neutral provisions invariably benefit men at the expense of women. To achieve gender equality, provisions need to address the systematic and structural nature of gender inequality and all of the complex realities. For example: ensuring that lone parents have a stable income and housing; investing in services to help women exit prostitution and to help women recover from the trauma of male violence; prioritising the policing of male violence against women and children, including pimping and brothel-keeping; investing in high quality support for mothers and services for children, including day care, after school care, and emergency care; decriminalising prostituted persons while making sex buying a criminal offence in order to reduce demand and change attitudes.

It is sadly unsurprising that women's poverty has a strong correlation with involvement in prostitution. Women are turning to prostitution in large numbers, often in ignorance of the likely long-term consequences and out of financial desperation. In [Sheffield](#)<sup>19</sup> a 400% increase was noted in women entering or returning to street prostitution under the duress of extreme poverty. Few women leave prostitution in better shape – financial or otherwise – than they entered it.

[Research](#)<sup>20</sup> has found that violence is a prominent feature of prostitution in all settings and that it tends to entrench women's disadvantage and social exclusion, and shore up the inequality between the sexes. The 1949 UN [Convention](#)<sup>21</sup> on the Suppression of the Trafficking in Persons recognises prostitution as incompatible with the dignity and worth of the human person. While the UK has not ratified this convention, its adoption by the General Assembly means the UN recognises prostitution as a human rights violation. This strongly supports the notion that prostitution should never be considered an acceptable solution to women's poverty.

Prior to May 2010, the Labour Government was taking seriously its obligations under [Article 9 of the Palermo Trafficking Protocol](#)<sup>22</sup> to address the poverty and inequality that make women and girls vulnerable to entry into prostitution and being trafficked, and to discourage the [demand](#)<sup>23</sup> from men for prostitution that drives trafficking. Since then the Government has abandoned these obligations. Not only have women's poverty and inequality deteriorated rapidly, but [National Policing Sex Work Guidance](#)<sup>24</sup> now advises police forces against using the law to target sex buyers and brothel-keepers (unless neighbours complain).

The guidance also claims – without evidence – that “experience suggests that enforcement does not resolve the issue, but rather displaces it, making sex workers more vulnerable.” Policing of the sex trade is now mainly focused on “organised crime” and the plight of British women who have turned to prostitution out of naivety, financial desperation, or coercion from “boyfriends,” is largely ignored. This suggests the Government understands that prostitution is serving as a last line of defence against destitution for women, and that it wishes to institutionalise that. In this climate of rapidly worsening poverty and inequality between the sexes within a pornified culture that glorifies consumerism and consumption, and police tolerance of prostitution, men are turning to pimping and sex trafficking as a way of making easy money. All of this is a catastrophe for women and children, and for the possibility of any meaningful social and economic equality. The Government's austerity policies that have disproportionately impacted women, and their laissez-faire approach to prostitution are in clear violation of binding obligations under the Palermo Trafficking Protocol, CEDAW, the UNHCR, UNCRC, and the [Lanzarote Convention](#)<sup>25</sup>.

## ***2. The reality of prostitution as work***

Considerations of the impact of prostitution on the safety, well-being, and socioeconomic prospects of individuals involved in it cannot be understated. One of the most prevalent themes emerging from [case studies and accounts of women who have been involved in prostitution](#)<sup>26</sup> is the inextricable link between women's poverty and prostitution. Prostitution, whether forced or “voluntary,” is harmful to the individual, contributes to MVAWG generally, and tends to entrench individual women's disadvantage and all women's inequality. Any policy that legitimises prostitution leads to its increase and works against the WBG's vision of a gender-equal society and economy. A gender-equal economy necessitates decent work for women, and safe and secure working environments for all, with particular attention to women migrants. Page 33 of the UN Secretary General's [Leave No one Behind](#)<sup>27</sup> report defines decent work as follows: “productive work for women and men in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity. Decent work involves opportunities for productive work, delivers a fair income, guarantees equal opportunities and equal treatment for all, provides security in the workplace and protection for workers and their families, offers better prospects for personal development and social inclusion” Prostitution, again whether forced or “voluntary,” cannot fit this definition of

decent work. It cannot meet the criteria set out in this definition of safety in the workplace, of equal treatment, and of the protection that an employer must be able to provide. Since the objective definition of prostitution meets [various criteria for sexual harassment in the workplace](#)<sup>28</sup>, we fail to see how it can meet even the basic safety regulations for the workplace in the UK, never mind provide meaningful employment with opportunities for growth.

Even under legalised regimes, ruthless organised criminal gangs control large swathes of the sex industry. The former mayor of Amsterdam - an often-cited example of a regulated and functional sex industry - said of the industry [in 2008](#)<sup>29</sup>, “We’ve realized this is no longer about small-scale entrepreneurs, but that big crime organizations are involved here in trafficking women, drugs, killings and other criminal activities”. This is also true [in the UK](#)<sup>30</sup>, where enforcement of laws against pimping and brothel-keeping is lax. We support the conclusions of the [European Parliament study on Prostitution and its Impact on Gender Equality](#)<sup>31</sup>, that laws against sex buying that rely on consent are ineffective; the notion of vulnerability should be treated in a wide sense when assessing whether victims meet the definition of trafficking; and the definition of vulnerability should include poverty and deprivation.

### ***3. Future directions and suggestions***

We therefore believe that in order to work towards a gender-equal economy, the WBG must take steps towards ensuring that women have an independent income. Factors such as the Universal Credit payment system and the changes to parents on JSA (outlined in Section 1.) have contributed towards women’s financial dependence on their partners, and have made it vastly more difficult for women to escape poverty. Section 1. also shows that an increase in poverty correlates with a increase in women becoming involved in prostitution, and with domestic violence rates. Ensuring a more economically independent reality for women, specifically for those with children, could potentially be achieved under a Universal Basic Income, but it is not the only solution. We hope that this report has shown the dire need for measures to address women’s poverty and inequality, including equal education and decent, safe, healthy and productive employment; that prostitution cannot possibly fit this definition; the need for prostituted persons to be decriminalised and provided with well-funded holistic services to help them exit; the need for buyers who drive the industry to be criminalised and effectively policed to reduce the demand that leads to this; and to avoid this causal chain between women’s poverty and prostitution, steps must be taken to achieve better reliable and sustainable economic independence for women, particularly mothers. A vision for a gender-equal economy, and society, must not include or allow scores of women having to turn to prostitution to keep a roof over their heads, or food on the table for their children.

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- <sup>1</sup> [http://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/WBG\\_2016Budget\\_Response\\_PDF.pdf](http://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/WBG_2016Budget_Response_PDF.pdf)
  - <sup>2</sup> <http://www.if.org.uk/2016/10/26/why-the-current-student-deal-is-unfair/>
  - <sup>3</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jun/16/silence-scandal-unpaid-child-maintenance>
  - <sup>4</sup> <https://www.gingerbread.org.uk/policy-campaigns/our-campaigns/maintenance-matters/>
  - <sup>5</sup> <https://www.centreforwelfarereform.org/news/uk-in-breachhuman-rights/00287.html>
  - <sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/universal-credit/your-responsibilities>
  - <sup>7</sup> [http://www.povertyalliance.org/userfiles/files/EPIC/Reports/EPIC\\_Research\\_Surviving\\_Poverty2013.pdf](http://www.povertyalliance.org/userfiles/files/EPIC/Reports/EPIC_Research_Surviving_Poverty2013.pdf)
  - <sup>8</sup> <https://www.eavesforwomen.org.uk/>
  - <sup>9</sup> <https://touchstoneblog.org.uk/2015/11/cuts-services-for-women-facing-violence/>
  - <sup>10</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/public-leaders-network/2016/mar/16/budget-cuts-domestic-violence-services-bme>
  - <sup>11</sup> <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-life/11666990/Domestic-abuse-and-violence-is-not-gender-neutral-Wake-up-Britain.html>
  - <sup>12</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/universal-credit-and-your-claimant-commitment-quick-guide/universal-credit-and-your-claimant-commitment#tailored-to-your-situation>
  - <sup>13</sup> <http://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Gender-and-Poverty-Briefing-June-2015.pdf>
  - <sup>14</sup> <https://www.imkaan.org.uk/new-reports-funding-cuts>
  - <sup>15</sup> <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Disabled-women-October-2018-w-cover-2.pdf>
  - <sup>16</sup> <http://www.southallblacksisters.org.uk/news/2015-16-immigration-bill-and-its-impact>
  - <sup>17</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2016/nov/14/television-sex-workers-porn-the-girlfriend-experience>
  - <sup>18</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/universal-credit-and-your-claimant-commitment-quick-guide/universal-credit-and-your-claimant-commitment#tailored-to-your-situation>
  - <sup>19</sup> <https://www.thestar.co.uk/news/sheffield-women-being-forced-into-prostitution-by-benefit-cuts-1-8213743>
  - <sup>20</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/303927/A\\_Review\\_of\\_the\\_Literature\\_on\\_sex\\_workers\\_and\\_social\\_exclusion.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/303927/A_Review_of_the_Literature_on_sex_workers_and_social_exclusion.pdf)
  - <sup>21</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/TrafficInPersons.aspx>
  - <sup>22</sup> <http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/protocoltraffickinginpersons.aspx>
  - <sup>23</sup> <http://library.college.police.uk/docs/hocirc/ho-circ-2010-006-prostitution.doc>
  - <sup>24</sup> <http://library.college.police.uk/docs/NPCC/National-Policing-Sex-Work-Guidance%20-%202015.doc>
  - <sup>25</sup> <https://www.coe.int/en/web/children/lanzarote-convention>
  - <sup>26</sup> <https://nordicmodelnow.org/2018/11/07/submission-to-un-special-rapporteur-on-extreme-poverty-human-rights-in-the-uk/>
  - <sup>27</sup> <http://hlp-wee.unwomen.org/en>
  - <sup>28</sup> <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/law-and-courts/discrimination/what-are-the-different-types-of-discrimination/sexual-harassment/>
  - <sup>29</sup> [https://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/24/world/europe/24amsterdam.html?\\_r=1&pagewanted=all](https://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/24/world/europe/24amsterdam.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all)
  - <sup>30</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/sep/24/organised-crime-behind-uk-sex-trade>
  - <sup>31</sup> [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2014/493040/IPOL-FEMM\\_ET\(2014\)493040\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2014/493040/IPOL-FEMM_ET(2014)493040_EN.pdf)