Tackling disparate impact: The Impact on Women

Law Centre (NI) Conference

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Women’s Regional Consortium
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Impact on Women

- Research shows that women experience greater adverse impacts from the Govt’s welfare reform/austerity agenda than men.

- Range of factors:
  - More likely to claim social security benefits
  - More likely to be in low paid, insecure, part-time work
  - More likely to be caring for children/family members
  - More likely to have to make up for cuts in services through unpaid work
Impact on Women

- Research shows that 86% of the savings to the Treasury through tax and benefit changes since 2010 will have come from women.

- Cuts will have cost women £79bn since 2010 against £13bn for men.

- By 2020 men will have borne just 14% of the total burden of welfare cuts compared with 86% for women.

(House of Commons Library Research)
Impact on Women

“If you got a group of misogynists in a room and said how can we make this system work for men and not for women, they would not have come up with too many ideas that are not already in place”

(UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty, Prof Philip Alston)
Impact on Women

“disproportionately negative impact of austerity measures on women, who constitute the vast majority of single parents and are more likely to be engaged in informal, temporary or precarious employment”

(CEDAW Committee Concluding Observations, March 2019, para 16)
Key Findings - Impact of Austerity

- 78% of women reported that they had to make cutbacks in their everyday life or had been impacted by austerity in the last 3 years
- Women were forced to take a range of actions to cope with austerity/welfare reform
- Worry/stress never-ending constant
- Lack of understanding of benefits/welfare reform
- Confusion about mitigations
- Dealing with benefits/welfare reform caused stress
As long as my 2 kids are fed and watered I don’t care if I eat.

I’m scared to go to the Post Office and my money isn’t there - how will I feed my son?

There were weeks I had to choose between gas and electric - I chose electric so we had no heat.

My wee boy goes out to school and I just pray he has no holes in his shoes.

We never go out, we never get a holiday, we have no social life.

Will I be able to feed my children?

Living costs are up, the cost of everything is going up but benefits are not and the government just don’t care.

How do you explain to a 12 year old mummy can’t afford to give you any money - it made me feel really, really bad.

They keep me sane, if it wasn’t for the women’s group I don’t know where I’d be.

If you are watching every penny and can’t get things that’s stressful - it causes a lot of anxiety.

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How do you explain to a 12 year old mummy can’t afford to give you any money - it made me feel really, really bad.

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Austerity is Over?

“A decade after the financial crash, people need to know that the austerity it led to is over and that their hard work has paid off.”

(Theresa May, Conservative Party Conference, October 2018)
Recommendations

- Continue/extend the mitigations package
- Need for more info/advice on benefits/welfare reform
- Recognise/support community-based women-only provision
- Gender lens/rural-proofing
- Research/assess impact of austerity on women
- Ensure accessible/affordable childcare
Problems with UC

- Value of UC
- 5-week wait & Advance Payments
- Childcare Costs
- Single Payment & Domestic Abuse
- Treatment of Maternity Allowance
- UC Assessment Periods
- Accessibility & Digital Divide
- Increased Conditionality & Sanctions
Problems with UC

Universal Credit isn’t working: proposals for reform

“The mechanics of Universal Credit do not reflect the reality of people’s lives. It is designed around an idealised claimant and rigid, inflexible features of the system are harming a range of claimant groups, including women, disabled people and the vulnerable.”

Lord Forsyth of Drumlean, Chair
Economic Affairs Committee
UC & Women

- It has been argued that Universal Credit discriminates against women by design.
- There are a number of key design features of the benefit which are likely to have disproportionate impacts on women.
UC & Women

- UC Single Payment
- Single Payment & Domestic Abuse
- Increased Conditionality
- Work Allowances
- Childcare
- 5-week wait
- Administration of the Claim
- Combined Payment
The Benefit Cap

- Limit to the total amount of benefits
- Benefit Cap applies to UC
- All those impacted either lone parents or couples with children
- 77% of capped households were lone parents, 23% couples with children

(May 2020)
Two Child Limit

- Limits child element in Child Tax Credit and UC to two children
- Vast majority of CTC payments are paid to the female parent
- Larger family size in NI
- Not included in mitigations package
UC & Coronavirus

- Main benefit for those who have lost job/reduced income
- Steep rises in claimant numbers
- On 1 March, 70,000 people were claiming UC in NI
- By 26 April this had risen by 80% to 126,000
- Latest figures show monthly new claims to UC remain higher than normal (10,070 new claims)
- IFS found women were about one third more likely to work in a sector that is now shutdown
- Women more likely to work in retail and hospitality, two of the sectors most affected.
Impact of Covid-19

The pandemic is only demonstrating what we all know: that millennia of patriarchy have resulted in a male-dominated world with a male-dominated culture which damages everyone – women, men, girls and boys. It’s clear that we cannot go back to the failed policies that have resulted in the fragility we see around us.

António Guterres
UNITED NATIONS SECRETARY-GENERAL
Key Findings - UC & Women

- The majority of the women had a negative experience of UC
- 32% had applied for UC as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic
- 74% experienced problems applying for UC
- Almost all of the women reported negative impacts due to the 5-week wait
- The personal impacts of the 5-week wait were severe with 89% of the women suffering stress/anxiety.
The 5-week wait was horrendous. I sold my sofa and had to borrow as well.

How could a single parent on benefits afford a childcare bill upfront of £800??

I felt degraded, it affected my mental health and self-esteem.

Before I moved to UC I volunteered at the Foodbank now I have to use it.

It’s degrading. I’ve worked my entire life and due to illness I had to go on UC. It’s impossible to budget as you only find out a few days before payday what you’ll get. I’m in arrears with my rent. It’s very stressful.

I have two young children and I wasn’t able to do any activities with the children due to serious budgeting problems in the 6 week wait for my first payment.

I spent 7 hours at the Job Centre to apply. It’s very stressful and complicated.
Key Findings

- 58% applied for an Advance Payment, 42% had difficulties paying it back
- 86% had not heard about the UC Contingency Fund, only 2 got it
- Some of the women felt degraded by the UC process reporting feelings of worthlessness and low self-esteem
- A number of women reported stress/frustration because they never knew when they were going to receive their payment or how much they were going to get each month
- Some of the women reported problems getting their UC questions answered by staff due to a lack of knowledge of the benefit/delays in getting responses.
The amount allocated is just not sufficient to cover basic living costs. If I hadn’t known about the Contingency Fund that would have really helped. Now they are taking £75/month off me and I’m struggling and getting into more debt.

I don’t know how anyone who had difficulty with computers could manage this process.

I got an Advance Payment of £906. I’m having to pay it back at £75 a month. This still means serious budgeting issues and I still have to borrow money.

It would really help if you got a payment in the initial wait that you didn’t have to pay back. It would help you not get into any more debt.

On UC I’m getting around £300 less a month than I was getting on my old benefits.

With UC it’s no life to live. We can’t have the heating on because we can’t afford the gas, we have to have hot water bottles at night. Thank God for food banks.
Recommendations

- Govt should apply an intersectional gender lens to social security policy
- Make increase to standard allowance of UC permanent
- Make further £20/week increase to child element of UC
- End 5-week wait, convert Advance Payments to grants, automatic grants from Contingency Fund
Recommendations

- DfC do more to inform claimants about the Contingency Fund
- Remove the 2-child limit, locally make an additional payment through mitigations for those affected
- Extend Benefit Cap mitigation to all new claimants
- Childcare costs to be paid direct to providers
- More user friendly process including more support for online, sufficiently trained staff and independent advice