

Written evidence from the English Collective of Prostitutes [RCW0040]

The English Collective of Prostitutes 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.

We are part of the [Hookers Against Hardship campaign](#) along with other sex worker led organisations in the UK. The campaign demands that the government address the poverty, homelessness and debt that forces so many people, particularly mothers, into sex work.

Names have been changed in this submission to protect women's identity.

Context

Of the approximately 72,800 sex workers in the UK — at least 88% are women. The majority are mothers working to support families.

Prostitution is increasing because poverty is increasing. Approximately, 86% of austerity cuts [have targeted women](#).

Government policies of benefit sanctions and the introduction of [Universal Credit](#) (UC) have deliberately caused destitution and pushed more women, [particularly single mothers](#), into "survival sex" to feed themselves and their families.

[Evidence](#) from sex workers to the 2019 Work and Pensions Committee Inquiry into Universal Credit and Survival Sex resulted in the Committee [recommending](#) changes to draconian sanctions and the five-week delay.

This week, the UN's special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights said the UK is ['in violation of international law' over poverty levels](#).

1. How are rising food, energy, housing, and other costs affecting women compared to men? What are the challenges for women?

Rising food, energy, housing and other costs are pushing more women, particularly mothers, into prostitution to survive and feed their families.

The English Collective of Prostitutes has seen an increase in calls to our helpline from women in crisis because of the rise in the cost of living. Women are calling for information and advice about starting working in the sex industry and many are going back into sex work having left years ago. Women identify key factors that have meant they can no longer cover their living costs such as increases in bills especially energy bill, rent and food. Most women calling us are mothers working to feed themselves and their children and keep a roof over their heads. Some women were topping up low benefits, wages in other jobs and some were destitute. A number of women have been affected by benefit sanctions. We spoke to one

mother who hadn't eaten for three days. Women forced to work more from their own rented premises were facing increased scrutiny from landlords and councils.

Sex workers also reported a loss of income due to appointment cancellations and workplace closures. Women are starting work earlier and closing later and seeing clients they might have otherwise refused. Sex workers cannot access labour protections such as paid sick leave, unemployment insurance, or maternity pay: there is no safety net for sex workers when we are unable to work.

Ms FY from Northampton said:

"I work from home and sex work has got me through my studies. I have received a letter from my landlord accusing me of breaching the lease on the basis of a complaint of prostitution. I am terrified I will lose my flat during a cost-of-living crisis and won't be able to continue studying."

2. What long-term effects will the rise in the cost-of-living have on equalities for women?

The rise in the cost of living is forcing more women into sex work and putting sex workers at greater risk of rape and other violence.

Sex work is criminalised in the UK and having a criminal record or any contact with the police goes on women's record and comes up with a DBS check which has lifelong consequences. In our recent report: *"Proceed Without Caution: The Impact of Prostitute's Cautions and Convictions on Sex Workers' Lives"*: women describe in distressing detail about how cautions and convictions trapped them in prostitution preventing them getting other work, denied them access to education, housing and justice as victims of violence and affected their relationships with their family and friends.

Sex workers face high levels of violence. But research show that criminalisation exacerbates the violence, exploitation and harm suffered by sex workers. Where arrests of sex workers and clients were high, less women report violence.ⁱ It is much safer to work indoors with others, ⁱⁱ but this is illegal – a conviction for brothel-keeping carries a maximum sentence of seven years in prison. Working on the street is much less safe but safer when in close proximity to others, but this increases the chance of arrest for soliciting and targeting by vigilantes.

Ms SR from Bristol said:

"I have worked as an independent sex worker in people's homes and hotels for almost a decade in my 20s - but eventually found a sales job. But having lost that job in lockdown and not being able to survive on benefits with soaring bills, I have now had to sign up to an escort agency. This time I'm working for an agency and I've been shocked by the conditions. Some of the women are expected to provide sex without protection."

Ms MR from Central London said:

“I have worked in a walk-up flat in Central London for six years. I am from Lithuania and have financial responsibilities for my family, including a child with a disability. I am living in the flat where I am working. I reported to ECP that since the soaring bills, there have been less clients and I’ve been working longer hours to make the same amounts I used to. I’m having to accept clients I would probably have said no to before. Other women working in area have also said the same things to me.”

Many women reported to us that Universal Credit is not enough to survive on. The delay in payments, sanctions, reduction of income compared to other benefits and the two-child limit have disproportionately affected women (and children).

Ms MC from North West England said:

“I am a single mother-of-four. I have been struggling to pay bills and food expenses after losing hundreds of pounds in the switchover from the government's old benefit system to Universal Credit. I couldn't get a job that fitted in with my childcare arrangements so I started doing a couple of evenings a week on the streets - just enough to pay each bill. I didn't have any capacity to work inside, even though it would have been much safer and I would have preferred to. Although the money has been a lifesaver, I'm terrified my abusive ex-partner will find out and use it against me with social services.”

One particularly long-term consequence of the cost-of-living crisis is that more mothers face losing custody of their children because poverty is labelled neglect. Sex workers face particular discrimination. They are frequently labelled bad mothers and are more likely to have their children taken by social services and the family courts causing lifelong grief and trauma.¹ This is exacerbated by the criminalisation of sex work which prevents sex working mums being public and getting credit and recognition for the hard work of raising children (in often difficult circumstances) and this vital contribution to society.

3. How effectively is the Government's cost of living response helping women to meet the costs of essentials?

Not only has the government's cost of living response done little or nothing to help women meet the cost of essentials, its policy of enforced destitution in the form of benefit sanctions and other cuts has deliberately made women poorer.

The government is responsible for the desperation we see among women in our network. Women have been forced to find their own solutions to prevent hunger, homelessness and soaring debt. Prostitution has been one of the strategies that increasing numbers of women, particularly mothers, have employed.

Sex work should be seen as a survival strategy. Instead, sex workers are punished and persecuted by criminalisation, stigma and discrimination. This means that sex workers cannot even access labour protections such as paid sick leave, unemployment insurance, or maternity pay – rights and resources available to others. There is no safety net for sex workers when we are unable to work.

Destitution puts women at greater risk of exploitation and violence as they are forced into dependency on men and are deprived of the resources to escape. Many women in our network report that they went into prostitution to escape domestic violence from partners, husbands and other family members. Criminal records trap women in prostitution. The conclusion that can be drawn from this is that government policies is promoting prostitution.

4. What could the Government Equalities Office do to ensure the Government's cost-of-living measures respond to any inequalities women face?

Prostitution is an equality issue. 92% of sex workers are women and the majority of those are mothers. Sex workers are disproportionately victims of rape and other violence and the risk of violence is increased because sex workers are forced to work in isolation because of the prostitution laws.

As part of the coalition Hookers Against Hardship we have identified other measures the government could take to ensure their cost-of-living measures respond to women's particular situation.

Full decriminalisation of sex work, in order for women sex workers to access support and safety while earning the money they need to survive. Under the soliciting and brothel-keeping laws, hundreds of sex workers a year are prosecuted or threatened with prosecution just for working to support themselves. Women of colour, migrant and trans women are particularly penalised. It is illegal for two women to work together from the same flat for safety – so people work alone, putting them at greater risk of violence from clients; or they work together anyway, and risk dangerous clients threatening to call the police on them.

Evidence from New Zealand where decriminalisation was introduced in 2003 shows: no rise in prostitution; women more able to report violence without fear of arrest; attacks cleared up more quickly; sex workers more able to leave prostitution as convictions are cleared from their records; drug users treated as patients not criminals.

Target resources at sex workers to enable them to leave prostitution if they choose. Specifically, priority for social housing, debt relief, health services, improved domestic violence services.

An end to benefit sanctions. Many women have told us that they went into sex work because their benefits were sanctioned, and they desperately needed to earn money to cover the loss of income. It's unacceptable for government policy to be driving women into sex work – especially during a cost-of-living crisis. The government must end benefit sanctions.

Access to benefits for all, at a living wage. Thousands of women currently face destitution because they either have no, or limited, access to public funds – or because benefits are simply not enough for them to live on, particularly if they are supporting a family. The government must raise the level of benefits to a living wage, and ensure that everyone experiencing poverty in the UK has access to

Address the housing crisis, which is having a particular impact on women, by introducing a moratorium on evictions and rent controls. Sex workers (primarily women) are particularly vulnerable as renters because their landlords can evict them if they believe that they're doing sex work from their flat. An evictions ban was put in place for a period of

time early on in the pandemic, and saved thousands of people from losing their homes. The government should put in place another temporary moratorium on evictions while the inflation rate remains so high.

Other measures that would help women exit prostitution include: **scrapping the No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) condition** which disproportionately impacts on women; financial help to pay energy bills at a level that meets the need, ending the benefit cap and bedroom tax, reinstate Income Support for single mothers and a similar to the paymentsⁱⁱ of £1600 a month given to young people leaving care in Wales - in recognition of the fact that most sex workers are working to support families. Hawaii passed a law in January to pay a basic income of \$2000 a month to sex workers aiming to exit prostitution.ⁱⁱⁱ Why not here?

Action should be taken specifically to **stop sex working mothers losing custody of their children** -- no child should be taken from their mother/primary carer because the family is poor, homeless or unable to afford food, clothing or childcare.

Quotes from women who are part of the Hookers Against Hardship Campaign:

*"I wanted to take time away after being assaulted at my last booking but I don't feel able to. It's been quieter, and rising bills are constantly in the back of my mind, so I **don't feel like I can say no to any work that comes my way.**" Scarlett, in-person sex worker*

*"I'm going to have to go back to work soon, eight weeks after giving birth to my **baby.** I'd like to keep not working for longer, but I can't manage – the maternity allowance you get from the government isn't enough to cover my bills right now." Angelica, stripper and online sex worker*

*"I've noticed that in the strip club that I work in, people are starting to ask for more for less. So **they want me to do more and they want to pay less for it.** And these customers know they have the power, they know exactly what they can get from us and they know that we're the most desperate." Joanna, stripper*

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ⁱ Briefing: Sex Work, Mothering and Mental Health, Professor Teela Sanders and Dr Rosie Campbell OBE, March 2020. LINK?

ⁱⁱ <https://gov.wales/basic-income-care-leavers-wales-pilot-announced>

ⁱⁱⁱ [SB3347 \(hawaii.gov\)](https://www.hawaii.gov/dhs/sb3347/)