

SUBMISSION TO THE UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON EXTREME POVERTY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

from the ENGLISH COLLECTIVE OF PROSTITUTES

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The ECP 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.

There has been an increase in prostitution in the UK as a result of the rise in poverty.

Of the approximately 72,800 sex workers in the UK — 88% are womenⁱ. Most sex workers are mothers working to support families.ⁱⁱ

Prostitution has always been connected to women's poverty – that's why most clients are men and most sex workers are women.

86% of austerity cuts in the UK have fallen on women.ⁱⁱⁱ As poverty increases, more women, particularly single mothers, turn to sex work to survive and feed their families. In some cities massive rises in prostitution are being directly attributed to benefit sanctions.

Doncaster reports a 60 per cent increase in prostitution with charities saying: "Women are being forced to sell sex for £5 because of benefit sanctions."^{iv} Sheffield reports a 166% increase,^v while charity workers in Hull report: ". . . women who are literally starving and they are out there to feed themselves. People are turning to prostitution to pay for gas and electricity because they are being left without money under current regulations."^{vi}

Measures that would help women exit prostitution include: repealing universal credit, benefit sanctions, the benefit cap and bedroom tax, and reinstate Income Support for single mothers.

A report from the English Collective of Prostitutes '[Decriminalisation of Prostitution: the Evidence](#)' also documented how "Cuts to single mothers' benefits are already having an impact and there are more cuts to come with single mums expected to lose at least £240 a year in benefits this year."^{vii} . . . With 3.9 million children living in poverty^{viii} in the UK [this figure has risen to 4 million since the time of this report] and 500,000 people surviving on food banks,^{ix} " the report directly connected this to the rise in prostitution.

Many women go into prostitution because they are caring for a disabled partner or child. WinVisible points to how "Austerity policies have targeted sick and disabled people". This was an issue addressed by a mother in the ECP network in Manchester who spoke at the Symposium mentioned above about she as the mother of a disabled child "worked on street corners as a prostitute" to "pay for the basics that most people take for granted – keeping warm, having decent food, replacing essential furniture". She broke down in tears as she described how £100 a week was going to be taken from her daughter's benefits.

Other mothers in our group have commented:

"We ate a lot of beans and rice. One pack of chocolate biscuits was a Friday after-school treat. It was a relief when the kids went to a friend's house after school because I didn't have to find the money for their tea. I nicked toilet rolls from public toilets and kept my eyes skinned for money in the street. I was part of a community of mothers and we helped each other out."^x

All African Women's Group, Black Women's Rape Action Project and Women Against Rape have pointed to the fact that women seeking asylum, who are living on £36 a week or denied any income at all when their asylum claims are closed, are forced to exchange sex for money to live or for a roof over their head.^{xi}

The denial of benefits to EU migrants has caused great hardship and forced many into sex work where they face racism, including from the police.^{xii}

There is also evidence that women are going into prostitution because they are homeless. A 2012 study by the homeless charity Crisis found that a quarter of young homeless women have engaged in sex work to fund accommodation or in the hope of getting a bed for the night. Nearly 60,000 families were declared homeless by local authorities between April 2016 and March 2017 – a rise of 34% on the same period in 2010-11.^{xiii} Shockingly single mothers make up 47% of those who are statutory homeless^{xiv}

Response from the government – increased criminalisation and the undermining of women's safety

Instead of addressing the increase in poverty caused by its economic policies, the response from the government (both national and local) and the police has been to increase arrests, criminalisation and crackdowns against sex workers.

[Decriminalisation of Prostitution: the Evidence](#) reports: "In December 2014, the city of Hull won a court ruling allowing it to bring in a prostitution-free zone^{xv} where anyone working in that particular area faced arrest." Women in [the ECP] network received Anti-Social Behaviour Orders^{xvi} banning them from that area. Local outreach charities have been complaining that women have gone underground^{xvii} as a result.

Going from press reports and from women in our network, which is in no way comprehensive, over the course of six months in 2015 there were crackdowns against women on the street in Bolton, Nottingham, Peterborough, and Wolverhampton. And in London: in Hackney and Ilford. Inside, where women are working together, prosecutions for brothel keeping have been Blackburn, Walsall, Pontypridd in Wales, Glasgow, Cambridge, Luton, Portsmouth, Plymouth, Bury, Teesside, Swindon, Kingsbury, and Surrey. And in London: in Camden, Ilford, Golders Green, Hounslow, Wembley, Hillingdon, and Redbridge.

(More recent figures on arrests are here: <http://prostitutescollective.net/bulletins/>)

"The increase in prosecutions is confirmed by government figures that show 96 prosecutions for brothel-keeping in 2015 compared with 55 the previous year.^{xviii} The offence of brothel keeping is the charge that is most often used against women working together collectively from premises.

"Figures show prosecutions for loitering and soliciting appear to have gone down, but we know that Anti-Social Behaviour Orders are being used instead and those have gone up.

"For example, in Walsall, Birmingham, after police crackdowns on the street, 800 cautions were given out over two years.^{xix} One woman was imprisoned for breaching the Criminal Anti-Social Behaviour Order^{xx} which banned her for two years from entering the area she worked and where other sex workers were working. Despite this, later in the year, residents reported an increase in prostitution in that area.

In addition, police in the London Borough of Redbridge, one of the poorest areas of London, issued prostitute cautions for soliciting against 639 women between 2013 and 2015. 106 men were arrested for soliciting women for sex.^{xxi}

Arresting and criminalising clients undermines sex workers' safety as women end up running from the police and forced to work in more isolated areas.

It's also worth noting that senior police officers have acknowledged that "operations to tackle the trade are counterproductive and likely to put women's lives at risk".^{xxii}

Redbridge council, instead of addressing widespread poverty, extended the use of civil orders (Public Spaces Protection Orders) to the whole borough with the power to issue on the spot fines of £100 to

women for prostitution related activities and ban women from certain areas during particular times of the days using civil injunctions.

Civil orders, such as Public Spaces Protection Orders and others introduced with the justification of addressing “anti-social behaviour” rely on police discretion and hearsay evidence and require a lower standard of proof. Yet breach of a civil order is a criminal offence and, in some cases, breaching an order can result in a hefty fine and even a prison sentence. Fining, criminalising and especially imprisoning women for prostitution and other crimes of poverty, exacerbates women’s poverty.

Police abuse and violation of women’s rights

Crackdowns on prostitution raise concerns about police abuse. Women in the ECP’s network say, “We get saturation policing but no protection from violence”. One woman in our network summarised her experience of the police in this way:

“The police wait outside my house to catch me when I leave. It doesn't matter how I'm dressed, who I'm with or where I'm going, they say I'm loitering. When they stop me, they jeer at me and make jokes at my expense, often sexually explicit jokes. When they arrest me, I'm strip-searched, and they sometimes leave the door open, so the male officers can see in. All this is to humiliate me.”

Considering the crisis of women’s poverty and the resulting rise in prostitution, we call on the UK government to: provide economic and other support for those who want to leave prostitution. For example: refuges and other targeted help for women escaping domestic violence; immediate cash payments to cover the transitional period until sex workers are able to get benefits or another form of employment; housing priority for sex workers who are “vulnerable” because of homelessness, drug use, domestic or other violence, especially if they have children; financial help to cover childcare costs and to clear debts; immediate and appropriate drug rehabilitation services for those who want them.

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- ⁱⁱ Home Office. (2004). Paying the Price: A Consultation Paper on Prostitution
- ⁱⁱⁱ The Guardian, 9 March 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/09/women-bearing-86-of-austerity-burden-labour-research-reveals>
- ^{iv} The Star, 19 March 2014. <https://www.thestar.co.uk/news/support-bid-for-doncaster-s-prostitutes-1-6508498>
- ^v The Star, 1 June 2014.
- ^{vi} Hull Daily Mail, 13 August 2013.
- ^{vii} The Times, 10 August 2015. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/tory-revolt-over-cuts-to-tax-credits-that-hit-the-poorest-37gqnqbfmrx>
- ^{viii} Child Poverty Action Group. (2016).
- ^{ix} The Guardian, 4 May 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/patrick-butler-cuts-blog/2015/may/04/those-food-bank-data-complicated-yes-exaggerated-no>
- ^x I News, 15 September 2017. <https://inews.co.uk/opinion/comment/like-mother-sex-worker/>
- ^{xi} The Guardian, 12 June 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/12/destitute-female-asylum-seekers-demanding-justice-for-ustoo>
- ^{xii} The Guardian, 1 May 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/may/01/romanian-sex-workers-challenge-uk-immigration-policy>
- ^{xiii} Independent, 10 August 2017
- ^{xiv} The Guardian, 25 September 2017.
- ^{xv} Vice. 8 December 2014. https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/av49pk/hull-prostitution-free-zone-120
- ^{xvi} Hull Daily Mail, 18 March 2015.
- ^{xvii} Hull Daily Mail, 22 July 2015.
- ^{xviii} Hansard (Citation: HC Deb, 13 October 2015, c61WH). <https://www.theyworkforyou.com/whall/?id=2015-10-13a.58.1&s=prostitution#g61.0>
- ^{xix} Express & Star, 18 April, 2014. <https://www.expressandstar.com/news/2014/04/18/sex-in-the-suburbs-hundreds-of-cautions-handed-out-in-space-of-two-years/>
- ^{xx} Express & Star, 13 September 2013. <https://www.expressandstar.com/news/crime/2013/09/13/sex-worker-jailed-after-prostitution-crackdown-in-walsall/>
- ^{xxi} Ilford Recorder, 30 June 2016. <http://www.ilfordrecorder.co.uk/news/crime-court/redbridge-top-for-prostitution-cautions-in-london-1-4597623>
- ^{xxii} The Guardian, 19 January 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/jan/19/woman-killed-prostitute-police-blame>