

The impact of austerity on women ^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

Press release and report in pdf ^[2]

Excerpts:

3.1 Women 'filling the gaps': our concerns

The Fawcett Society is concerned that as services that assist those with caring roles and provide for those in need - services such as childcare, social care services and meals on wheels - are cut, women will by default be the ones to 'pick up the tab' and fill the gaps left in provision.

Despite many advances in gender equality, women still do the bulk of caring and domestic work. On average, women do 2 hours more unpaid work a day than men, and mothers do three-quarters of the family's childcare during the week and two thirds during the weekend. Further, nearly three-quarters of claimants of Carer's Allowance are women, suggesting that women also take responsibility for the majority of care for older and disabled people.

Withdrawing vital support risks adding to women's unpaid and informal caring roles and further entrenching the already unequal distribution of labour. The knock-on effect will be to limit women's opportunities to work and engage fully in public and political life - including in positions of power and influence.

In particular, the Fawcett Society is concerned about the impact of changes in a number of areas. These can be characterised as 'pull factors' that incentivise women to take on more informal and unpaid roles (set out in sections 3.2 and 3.3) and 'push factors' that disincentivise paid work (set out in section 3.4 below).

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3.2 Childcare

As outlined above in section 2.12 on the Working Tax Credit, and section 2.2 on Sure Start, the Fawcett Society is concerned that, as the cost of childcare ever increases and support for childcare is reduced or lost altogether, it is women who pay the highest price: they are far more likely to be the ones to leave the labour market as the household budget no longer adds up. This disadvantages women both in the short term by reducing their personal agency and economic autonomy, and in the long term by diminishing their future prospects in the labour market. Extended time away from the labour market is already a key driver in the pay gap between women and men and these changes risk making things worse. Such changes also fail to recognise that many of today's partnered mothers will be tomorrow's single mothers. They and their children will do very much worse if they have been out of the labour market for sustained periods.

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3.4 Universal Credit

Disincentivising work

The government's stated ambition for the Universal Credit is to "simplify the [welfare] system to make work pay and combat worklessness and poverty". The Fawcett Society strongly welcomes these aims, and welcomes the extension of support for childcare costs to parents working below 16 hours a week in the UC proposals that pursue that aim. However, UC as it stands will do nothing to address concerns about cuts to childcare support, as outlined above in section 2.12 on the Working Tax Credit, that make it unaffordable in many households for both adults to work.

The Fawcett Society is concerned that UC will actively discourage mothers in couples from seeking paid employment where their partner is already working/seeking work. As the DWP itself states, UC has been designed primarily with the aim of improving work incentives for the household, as opposed to individuals, and "work incentives for first earners have been given priority over second earners".

Given that women are less likely to be 'first earners' (because they are both far more likely to have taken time away from the labour market to raise children and because they still earn less on average than men), this reform risks undermining the principle that for all individuals, work should pay, and reinforces the highly regressive man-as-breadwinner/woman-as-homemaker model. Indeed, as the UC

impact assessment states, 'it is possible that in some families, second earners may choose to reduce or rebalance their hours or leave work. In these cases, the improved ability of the main earner to support his or her family will increase the options available for families to strike their preferred work/life balance'.

Moreover, under the UC system, single parents working 16 hours or more a week will be worse off. For example, single parents working 30 hours a week or more currently have a personal allowance which is almost £18 higher a week under the WTC than it will be under UC: they stand to lose almost £1,000 a year.

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