

Universal Credit (Application Advice & Assistance) Bill | 7th March 2018

Scottish Women's Aid (Charity No. SC001099) is the lead organisation in Scotland working towards the prevention of domestic abuse. We play a vital role coordinating, influencing and campaigning for effective responses to domestic abuse.

Financial abuse: Research suggests that 89% of women experience financial abuse¹ as part of their experience of domestic abuse. Some perpetrators stop their partner from working. Some monitor and control her spending, take her earnings, steal her bank cards and run up debt in her name. The evidence shows that limited or no independent income puts women at increased risk of financial abuse.

Our work so far: Scottish Women's Aid have worked with Engender and a coalition of Scottish charities and academics to explore the issue of Universal Credit and to promote and protect the safety of victim-survivors of domestic abuse in considerations of social security².

We have met regularly with the Scottish Government to share our learning, informed by the victim-survivors of domestic abuse within our network. At the first roundtable held in January 2016 all stakeholders agreed that split payments should be the default option.

Social Security Bill Consultation

In the 2016 Scottish Government consultation on social security: 88% of respondents were in favour of split payments (78% of individuals and 99% of organisations).

- Overwhelmingly, the main reason for supporting split payments was that this is required to prevent power imbalances within relationships. Often, respondents emphasised that money can be used as a tool in situations of domestic abuse.
- Respondents often emphasised the disproportionate impact on women. There was great concern that the approach to Universal Credit would effectively mean more men would receive benefits on behalf of the household, exacerbating existing problems.
- A common response was that the changes under Universal Credit represent a regressive step for women's rights. For many, this was a point of principle. Respondents at times emphasised that people with other protected characteristics or experiencing disadvantage would be especially affected.

¹<http://www.refuge.org.uk/files/Whats-yours-is-mine-Full-Report.pdf>

²<https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Securing-Womens-Futures---using-Scotlands-new-social-security-powers-to-close-the-gender-equality-gap.pdf>

We would urge the Department of Work and Pensions to deliver split payments of Universal Credit by default. We understand that the IT functionality to implement a split payment does not yet exist, and that the ability of the DWP to deliver split payments on a large scale is untested. Development costs and ongoing administration costs should be considered as part of a feasibility study. Given the complexity related to the implementation, one option suggested by stakeholders has been to pilot a scheme in Scotland with subsequent rollout.

Case Study

When Ms A and her two children came into refuge she had no bank account, no access to or control of any household finances. Her husband had total control of all income and benefits and all financial matters. Although they had a joint bank account she had no bank card and was not allowed to take money from the account. She had to ask for money to pay for food, or to buy clothes or shoes for her children, she was required to show receipts for anything she bought and to justify each item of expenditure. When she came to us for support she had no money of her own or benefits in her name, we were able to arrange food and to cover heating and electricity as it took some considerable time to get benefits in her name. Her husband had also taken out credit and instore cards in her name and because of the considerable debt on these she had a poor credit rating which made it even harder to open a bank account. Financial abuse has such an impact on women we work with as they lose the ability and confidence to deal with money or make financial decisions. The introduction of the single household payment for Universal Credit makes it so much easier for abusers to control women and children in fact it bolsters their sense of entitlement to do so.

Case study from Stirling Women's Aid

Summary: Scottish Women's Aid lend our full support to Dr Philippa Whitford MP's Universal Credit (Application Advice & Assistance) Bill | 7th March 2018 and would urge all MPs to be vocal in their support for this Bill.

It is our view that the single household payment of Universal Credit is a gift to abusive men; it gives them money, power and therefore control in handy monthly instalments. It gives him a legitimate and easy way to get total control over his partner's income and her ability to be able to leave. A process that may have previously taken months or years of coercive and manipulative behaviour can now be accomplished in weeks.

As the roll out of Universal Credit continues we know that more and more women will find themselves with no money of their own and unable to leave an abusive partner. We know this is a problem, now we absolutely have to fix it.