**Submission** **on issues related to poverty and human rights in the UK by Legal Action for Women (LAW) and Single Mothers’ Self Defence (SMSD).**

Legal Action for Women (LAW) is a grassroots anti-sexist, anti-racist legal service for all women based at the Crossroads Women’s Centres in London, England, and San Francisco, USA.  LAW-London began in 1982, in response to prostitute women’s need for legal advice and back-up.  Since then, it has focused on providing free services to low-income women who are more likely to be denied justice.  LAW combines access to a network of sympathetic lawyers, with experienced lay workers from similar backgrounds to the women using its services.  LAW insists that no case is ‘hopeless': something can always be done.  This insistence has won LAW recognition from legal professionals, civil rights and welfare organisations, as well as community groups.  LAW has helped prevent many injustices and set important precedents, including with the first private prosecution for rape in England and Wales, which resulted in an 11-year conviction.  We work with the mothers, daughters, sisters, wives and other relatives and friends who are fighting for justice for their loved ones.

SMSD is a network of single mothers and other women caring for children alone which campaigns for entitlements to welfare/housing/services and other resources.  We have been working intensively for the past 10 years with mothers, grandmothers and other family members whose children have been taken into state “care” where they have been permanently separated from their birth families by adoption, long term foster care, residential care, etc.  At the same time, children’s poverty has increased to 4 million.[[1]](#footnote-1)[1]

There are currently over 70,000 children in state “care”, more than at any time in the past 30 years.  One in five children under five are referred to children’s services, one in 19 are investigated.  Over 5,000 children are adopted every year, higher than in any other European country, and now stand at the highest level since data was first collected.  More than 90% of adoptions are done without the consent of the birth family.  Fostering and adoption are now multi-million pound industries.

Our experience that families from poor areas are targeted has been confirmed by new research showing a geographical divide with families from the North of England disproportionately at risk.  With nearly four million UK children (28%) living in poverty, the potential for social engineering is huge.  Working class single mothers, many of them women or colour and/or immigrant, victims of domestic violence, women with a disability or mental health problem, mothers on low incomes and teenage mums are targeted for child removal.  Yet they are denied the financial and other support the law entitles them to – under Section 17 of the 1989 Children Act and for disabled mothers the 2004 Care Act.  Instead millions are spent on removing children from their families, keeping them in care or findings adopters for them.

We urge you during your investigative tour of the UK to look at how UK austerity policies and cuts to mothers and children’s welfare benefits, and to the services they depend on, are causing devastating poverty.  This is resulting in a massive rise in children being taken into care, which breaches children’s as well as mothers’ and other primary carers’ human right to family life.

Our recent seminar in Parliament Do No Harm featured a distinguished panel of speakers who all confirmed the devastating harm caused to children by being taken from their families. They raised that little or no attention is being paid to the SIGNIFICANT HARM that has been or will be caused by separating the child from their mother and wider family.  That harm is not weighed up in the ‘Welfare Checklist’ (Children’s Act 1989) and lives are devastated as a result.  Children under five are more likely to be adopted, cutting all contact with their birth families with often tragic lifelong implications.

This concern led to the formation of the coalition [Support Not Separation Coalition](supportnotseparation.wordpress.com) to end the unwarranted and damaging separation of children form their mother or other primary carer, and to challenge the policies and practices which are causing such harm.

We would be delighted to welcome you to the Crossroads Women’s Centre so you can meet mothers who have been affected by austerity cuts and have been accused of neglecting their children when in fact they have not had the financial support they are entitled to.

Some key facts/extracts illustrating mothers’ and children’s’ poverty:

* 80% of UK women are mothers.  Women are primary carers in 90% of households.[[2]](#footnote-2)[2]
* Women have borne the brunt of “austerity” measures (87%) and have been impoverished particularly through the total benefit cap, cuts to benefits and social care, pay inequity and high levels of zero hours contracts.[[3]](#footnote-3)[3]
* Child poverty is at its highest level since 2010 (4.1 m) with 30% of children living in poverty of whom 2/3 are in working families.[[4]](#footnote-4)[4]
* This was before the introduction of Universal Credit which has led to increased destitution (41,000 children live in households which were due to move on to universal credit from mid-November).[[5]](#footnote-5)[5]
* 4m children in families too poor to eat healthy diet - 47% of all UK households with children do not spend enough on food to meet the government’s Eatwell cost targets, a proportion that rises to 60% for single parent families.  (Sept 18)[[6]](#footnote-6)[6]
* Food Banks use has increased by 13 per cent over last year, compared with rise of 6 per cent year before (April 2018).[[7]](#footnote-7)[7]Tess Lanning, director of the Living Wage Foundation, highlighted the impact of low earnings on food bank use, saying: “Many of those who are going hungry are also working, with one-in-six households referred to foodbanks in work. "Our own research found over a third of parents working full-time and earning less than the real Living Wage are now regularly skipping meals.[[8]](#footnote-8)[8]
* 50% of children of colour live in poverty.[[9]](#footnote-9)[9]
* Children from poor areas are 10 times more likely to be taken into care than those in rich areas .
* One in five children are now referred to children’s services.[[10]](#footnote-10)[10]
* Polling finds 46 per cent of mothers in the UK aged under 25 do not eat proper meals in order to ensure their children are fed, while more than a quarter have used food banks.[[11]](#footnote-11)[11]
* There were 78,930 households living in temporary accommodation between October and December 2017, a 4% rise on the same period in 2016. Out of these households 60,520 had children.[[12]](#footnote-12)[12]

For a detailed description of the issues we are raising please see the Dossier by Legal Action for Women “[SUFFER the little CHILDREN & their MOTHERS](http://legalactionforwomen.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/LAW-Dossier-18Jan17-final.pdf)” (see particularly chapter 8. Neglect – or is it poverty).[[13]](#footnote-13)[13]

Please visit this [link](supportnotseparation.wordpress.com) for the newly published statistics from the past 18 months since the Dossier was published.

Legal Action for Women works closely with the following women’s organisations campaigning against women’s poverty that we would refer you to:

**English collective of Prostitutes.**

Facts <http://prostitutescollective.net/2016/11/facts-sex-work/>  extracts:

**Most sex workers are mothers working to support families.**[[ii]](http://prostitutescollective.net/2016/11/facts-sex-work/" \l "_edn2) 74% of off-street sex workers “cited the need to pay household expenses and support their children”.

Prostitution is increasing because of austerity. A 60% increase in street prostitution recorded in Doncaster is primarily attributed to destitution caused by benefit sanctions.[[iv]](http://prostitutescollective.net/2016/11/facts-sex-work/" \l "_edn4) 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.[[v]](http://prostitutescollective.net/2016/11/facts-sex-work/" \l "_edn5) 86% of austerity cuts have targeted women.[[vi]](http://prostitutescollective.net/2016/11/facts-sex-work/" \l "_edn6)

**Black Women’s Rape Action Project**

Research shows that low income Black and Asian women are the poorest and pay the highest price for austerity. Camden, where we are based is ranked the 15th most deprived borough in London and has one of the highest rates of child poverty – 60% of children live in low income families.  In 2011, 56% of Camden’s residents described being of Black minority ethnic origin or non-white.\*[[14]](#footnote-14)[14]  Mothers risk their children being taken into care when their poverty is equated with “neglect”.  The overwhelming majority of rape and DV victims who come to us for help are working class and disproportionately affected by poverty, racism and other discrimination compared to the general population.\*\*[[15]](#footnote-15)[15]  In the last 18 months 36% of mothers attending the Mothers’ Self-help Group at the Crossroad’s Women’s Centre were women of colour and 21% were immigrant mothers, including asylum seekers, who are fighting to prevent their children being taken or to be reunited with them after they were wrongly put into care or up for adoption.  50% of women asylum seekers who come to us for help are destitute as a result of government policies.

**Women Against Rape.**

“The Fawcett Society launched an inquiry which heard evidence that women who had lost their Job Seekers Allowance were told their children would be taken into council care because they did not have enough income to support them.”[[16]](#footnote-16)[16]

Women Against Rape said:

“Since the Fawcett inquiry in 2014 the cuts have got much worse and more women have contacted us who are forced into staying with and depending on violent men as they cannot afford to leave them, and there is nowhere for them to move to.  A catastrophic number of women are having their children taken from them, sometimes permanently because the state isn’t making available to them the resources they need to protect themselves and their children. This is through no fault of their own, it is as a result of austerity.

In particular, the benefit cap, which limits how much total benefit a family can get. This impacts mothers in areas where rents are high, and also the bedroom tax means mothers cannot afford to move to properties big enough for their needs.

Now a new benefit called Universal Credit is being introduced, which is paid to only one adult in the household, usually the man. This is a recipe for rape and domestic violence.

There is also a limitation to two children only for child benefit, unless a third child is born as a result of rape. This forces women into disclosing rape to a job centre worker, putting them in danger from their violent partner.

There has been a total slashing of legal aid which puts women at a severe disadvantage in all aspects of family law –divorce, injunctions, and in family court cases where many mothers cannot afford a lawyer and are forced to litigate in person. Often their husband will be able to afford a good lawyer, and this increases the chances of custody being given to them, despite the impact on the children who want to stay with their mum.”

We also work closely with **WinVisible, Women with Visible and invisible disabilities**, and we understand that they are submitting evidence separately.

**What Legal Action for Women is demanding:**

* Implement S17 of the 1989 Children Act to ensure families get the financial and other help they need in times of crisis and to avert a crisis; we want early support NOT early intervention.
* Reinstate income support, one parent benefit and universal child benefit, end the benefit cap, Universal Credit and sanctions so money goes directly to the mothers who need it for the work they do for society caring for their children.
* Adequate financial support for kinship carers (usually grannies).
* Reprioritise housing for single mother families.
* An end to the forced separation of children from their mothers, which punishes mothers and children living in poverty.

**Attachments/links to articles and letters in the press:**

# [Dossier](http://legalactionforwomen.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/LAW-Dossier-18Jan17-final.pdf)

# [Guardian Dossier review](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/jan/18/children-parents-foster-social-care-families-adoption) “Children unnecessarily removed from parents, report claims”

Dossier indicates drive to increase adoptions is punitive for low-income families and alternatives exist.  
Sandra Laville Guardian article 19 Jan 17 “[Rising adoptions penalise poor families but don‟t cut numbers in care, says report”](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/jan/18/children-parents-foster-social-care-families-adoption).

* Guardian letters 30 Jan 17, [“How poverty, care and adoption are related”.](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/jan/30/how-poverty-care-and-adoption-are-related)
* Guardian letter 10 Dec 17, “[Family carers must get the financial support they deserve](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/dec/10/family-carers-must-get-the-financial-support-they-deserve)”.
* Patrick Butler, social policy editor Guardian 5 Sept 18 [“Four million UK children too poor to have a healthy diet, study finds”](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/sep/05/four-million-uk-children-too-poor-to-have-a-healthy-diet-study-finds)
* Guardian letters 30 Jan 17 [“How poverty, care and adoption are related”](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/jan/30/how-poverty-care-and-adoption-are-related) Dr Andy Bilson, *Emeritus professor of social work, University of Central Lancashire.*
* Richard Adams education editor Guardian article, 2 April 18 [“Teachers warn of growing poverty crisis in British schools”](https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/apr/02/teachers-warn-of-growing-poverty-crisis-in-british-schools)   
  Patrick Butler, social policy editor Guardian 11 Oct 17  [“ Austerity policy blamed for record number of children taken into care.”](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/oct/11/austerity-policy-blamed-record-numbers-children-taken-into-care) The Guardian, 11 October 2017.

*Legal Action for Women*

Crossroads Women's Centre

25 Wolsey Mews

London NW5 2DX

Tel: 0207482 2496

[www.legalactionforwomen.net](http://www.legalactionforwomen.net)

1. [1] [“Government statistics show 4.1 million children now living in relative poverty compared with four million the previous year, accounting for more than 30 per cent of children”](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/child-poverty-increase-children-family-benefit-households-a8268191.html) Independent 22 March 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [2][2] <https://revisesociology.com/2014/02/09/functionalist-perspective-family/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [3] Women’s Budget Group [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [4] [https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/mar/16/child-poverty-in-uk-at-highest-level-](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/mar/16/child-poverty-in-uk-at-highest-level-%20) [since-2010-official-figures-show](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/mar/16/child-poverty-in-uk-at-highest-level-since-2010-official-figures-show). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. [5] h[ttps://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/nov/07/food-banks-warn-of-struggle-to-cope- this-christmas-due-to-universal-credit.](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/nov/07/food-banks-warn-of-struggle-to-cope-this-christmas-due-to-universal-credit) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. [6] <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/sep/05/four-million-uk-children-too-poor-to-have-a-healthy-diet-study-finds> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. [7] <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/food-bank-uk-benefits-trussell-trust-cost-of-living-highest-rate-a8317001.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. [8] https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/food-bank-uk-benefits-trussell-trust-cost-of-living-highest-rate-a8317001.html [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. [9] http:/[/www.p](http://www.poverty.org.uk/06/index.shtml))o[verty.org.uk/06/index.shtml](http://www.poverty.org.uk/06/index.shtml)) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. [10] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-36377293 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. [11] <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/uk-food-poverty-half-young-mothers-mums-skip-meals-feed-children-struggle-research-young-women-s-a7652361.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. [12] https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/news/news/number-of-households-living-in-temporary-accommodation-rises-again-55435 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. [13] https://supportnotseparation.wordpress.com/ [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. [14] Camden Equality Taskforce Evidence Base [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. [15] <http://againstrape.net/evidence-to-home-affairs-committee-on-domestic-violence-from-black-womens-rape-action-project-and-women-against-rape-5-july-2018> [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. [16] Independent, 2014 Andrew Grice [↑](#footnote-ref-16)