

9 March 2023

Allowing women and children the safety to thrive

Angela's blog is based on the speech she gave at the Women's TUC, moving PCS's motion on how the cost of living crisis exacerbates economic abuse.

Economic abuse is the holding back of money, controlling the purse strings, handing out pennies to women like a parent to a child, to intimidate, belittle and patronise while coercive and threatening behaviours can prevent women from working, or massively impact their employment prospects. Unable to leave an abusive partner due to lack of money, women will stay for much longer than they would if they had financial independence.

One result of the devastating Coronavirus pandemic was to shine a light on social disparities. It showed the reality of inequality and discrimination that women face every day - and of course I include our Trans sisters - all women abused by those who claim to love them. But love is not abusive, love is not cruel.

And we now see this controlling behaviour fuelled by the cost-of-living crisis, where more and more women are trapped, isolated, suffering mental health trauma, at risk of physical injury and even death, just to hold on to a little bit of financial security. The pittance they are given in some cases doesn't even cover the bills and then sees them blamed for being unable to manage.

The Domestic Abuse Act has brought some welcome improvements with a statutory definition of domestic abuse, emphasising that domestic abuse is not just physical violence but can also be emotional, controlling or coercive, or economic abuse. The Act provides for a Domestic Abuse Commissioner, a Domestic Abuse Protection Notice, Protection Order, and prohibits perpetrators of abuse from cross-examining their victims in court - but if a victim of coercive manipulation and control is too terrified to leave because her money is being held by her abusive spouse, this legislation is no good to her.

When formulating an escape plan, the reality is stark - there is no money, and nowhere to turn for immediate financial support.

The DWP, where many PCS members work, is working to provide support for members of the public in a domestic abuse emergency. Jobcentres will become a safe haven as the government moves to install the Ask for Ani initiative where those asking for Ani will get immediate support – but what support?

This is the same government that requires a victim of abuse to provide a letter from a health care professional, police officer, social worker or charitable body as evidence before they will provide monetary support for a woman who is running for her life, a woman who might arrive at the Jobcentre with nothing more than the clothes she stands in – and sometimes with children clinging to her with nothing more than the clothes they stand in – no belongings, no toys, no home.

DWP will direct people to services but there's no mention of an immediate payment to support them, and this government, whilst paying lip service to supporting women who suffer domestic abuse, still holds to the two-child rule, whereby women with more than two children will not receive any money to support them, if those children are born after April 2017.

PCS put a motion to the Women's TUC, which was passed unanimously, calling for the most basic of provisions, for the Women's Committee to robustly campaign for government to provide an emergency support fund for domestic abuse survivors to offset the impact of the cost-of-living crisis, to provide financial support for community and legal services, and to raise awareness of the abuses that millions of women experience every day, in particular economic abuse.

We can lift women out of this trap, the money is already there. In England alone the estimated spending on services for physical and mental abuse is £1.6bn. If the government is proactive in providing support, women will have a means to escape the trauma and devastation that pushes them into mental health deterioration and leaves them at risk of physical harm, so fewer will need to access health services and we would see a reduction in that spending.

We want to see immediate financial support for our sisters, we want to empower our women, give them the support they need to cut those ties, to walk away, and for women with children to walk with confidence into a new life, where children can be pulled out of the chaos and trauma of abusive relationships and be made safe, allowed to thrive in secure surroundings. We must continue the campaign to support survivors of domestic abuse, because in doing so we will be saving lives, in more ways than one.