



1 July 2019

Statement on the United Kingdom

Statement to the UN Human Rights Council 41st session (24 June – 12 July 2019)
Item 3: Clustered interactive dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty

The findings of the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights situation from his country visit to the UK are alarming. In his report to the UN Human Rights Council,¹ the Special Rapporteur indicates that one fifth of the UK's population (14 million people) live in poverty, with 1.5 million of them having experienced destitution in 2017. The report also illustrates how austerity measures have hit poor people hardest and that women, racial and ethnic minorities, children, single parents (90% of whom are women), persons with disabilities and members of other historically marginalised groups face disproportionately higher risks of poverty. The report makes painful reading, especially in the knowledge that, in a country with one of the world's largest economies and one of the world's biggest defence budgets, poverty is avoidable.

The burden of austerity measures has been shouldered particularly by the most marginalised, and, without gender analysis informing these measures, women are particularly being affected. Women from minority groups, such as Black and Minority Ethnic women, experience poverty further due to intersecting inequalities.² It is not surprising that the Special Rapporteur states that "recent policies have too often perpetuated rather than tackled the gendered aspects of poverty."³ WILPF agrees with the Special Rapporteur that "it should shock the conscience that since 2011, life expectancy has stalled for women in the most deprived half of English communities, and actually fallen for women in the poorest 20 percent of the population."⁴

In 2013, the CEDAW Committee had already expressed concern over the impact of austerity measures in the UK on women's rights, especially on the ones living with a lower income and had recommended, *inter alia*, that spending reviews in the UK "continuously focus on measuring and balancing the impact of austerity measures on women's rights."⁵ Despite this, gender-blind tax and

¹ UN report: A/HRC/41/39/Add.1, 23 April 2019.

² Women's Budget Group et al. (2017) *Intersecting Inequalities: the impact of austerity on BME women*, available at <http://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Intersecting-Inequalities-October-2017-Full-Report.pdf>

³ *Idem*, paragraph 59.

⁴ *Idem*, paragraph 72.

⁵ "20. The Committee is concerned that the austerity measures introduced by the State party have resulted in serious cuts in funding for organisations that provide social services to women, including those that provide services for women only. The Committee is concerned that the cuts have had a negative impact on women with disabilities and older women. It is also concerned that the State party does not provide direct funding for these services but resorts to commissioning them, which allegedly risks undermining the provision of the services. The Committee is further concerned that budgetary cuts in the public sector disproportionately affect women, owing to their concentration in this sector.

21. The Committee urges the State party to mitigate the impact of austerity measures on women and the services provided to women, especially women with disabilities and older women. It should also ensure that spending reviews continuously focus on measuring and balancing the impact of austerity measures on women's rights. It should further review the policy of commissioning services wherever this may undermine the provision of specialised services for women." Concluding observations on the seventh periodic report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, UN Index: CEDAW/C/GBR/CO/7, paragraphs 20 and 21.

benefit policies change, such as reductions in social care services, have increased poverty and vulnerability for women. In early 2019, the CEDAW Committee expressed, yet again, concerns about the impact of austerity measures, and recommended, *inter alia*, that the UK “undertake a comprehensive assessment on the impact of austerity measures on the rights of women and adopt measures to mitigate and remedy the negative consequences without delay.”⁶

Deep cuts in social spending conducted in the name of austerity are in sharp contrast with the UK’s increasing military spending and plans to update its nuclear arsenal, as WILPF UK, jointly with Christian Aid and the Quakers in Britain, told the CEDAW Committee earlier this year.⁷ In 2018, the government reported the allocation of £1.8 billion of extra spending to the Ministry of Defence for the following year; much of this increased amount is for the UK’s ongoing renewal of the UK’s Trident nuclear programme.⁸ Indeed, in the dialogue with the UK delegation, the CEDAW Committee noted the fact that there has been an increase in military spending while a lot of cuts are being made that affect the more vulnerable and the most in need.⁹ WILPF is also concerned that, while military spending is increasing, insufficient funding is allocated to environmental programmes¹⁰. Investing in environmental programmes should be imperative, including because environmental degradation has detrimental gendered impacts and can lead to further economic vulnerability.

In its response to the Special Rapporteur’s report, the UK states that “tackling poverty will always be a priority for this government.”¹¹ WILPF strongly believes that moving money from military to social spending is an essential step in fulfilling that stated commitment.

⁶ “17. The Committee is concerned about the disproportionately negative impact of austerity measures on women, who constitute the vast majority of single parents and are more likely to be engaged in informal, temporary or precarious forms of employment. It reiterates its previous concern (CEDAW/C/GBR/CO/7, para. 20) that austerity measures have resulted in cuts in funding to organisations that provide social services to women, including those that provide services for women only, as well as budget cuts in the public sector, where more women are employed than men. It notes with concern that reductions in social care services increase the burden on primary caregivers, who are disproportionately women.

18. The Committee recommends that the State party undertake a comprehensive assessment on the impact of austerity measures on the rights of women and adopt measures to mitigate and remedy the negative consequences without delay.” *Concluding observations on the eighth periodic report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland*, UN index: CEDAW/C/GBR/CO/8, paragraphs 17 and 18.

⁷ See “*The impact of the UK’s arms transfers and military spending on women’s rights*” *Joint submission to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 72nd session (February 2019)*”, available at: <https://www.wilpf.org/portfolio-items/the-impact-of-the-uks-arms-transfers-and-military-spending-on-womens-rights/?portfolioCats=644%2C463%2C462%2C461%2C460%2C459%2C458%2C640>

⁸ Ministry of Defence “Mobilising, Modernising, and Transforming Defence: A report on the Modernising Defence Programme” 18 December 2018, available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/765879/ModernisingDefenceProgramme_report_2018_FINAL.pdf

⁹ See <http://webtv.un.org/meetings-events/human-rights-treaty-bodies/committee-on-the-elimination-of-discrimination-against-women/watch/consideration-of-united-kingdom-northern-ireland-1671st-meeting-72nd-session-committee-on-the-elimination-of-discrimination-against-women-6007342588001/?term=> , at 1:25:43 .

¹⁰ <https://www.independent.co.uk/environment/budget-2018-philip-hammond-environment-climate-change-wildlife-plastic-pollution-oceans-a8608671.html>; and <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/may/08/aid-funding-must-recognise-climate-change-emergency-say-mps>

¹¹ Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights on his visit to United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Comments by the State, UN Index: A/HRC/41/39/Add.3, 30 May 2019, paragraph 3.

WILPF urges the UK government to:

- Significantly reduce military spending and increase investment of resources allocated to promote gender equality, the human rights of women and girls and environmental protection;
- Implement policies that move away from austerity measures and instead focus on investments in the public sector, thus promoting social cohesion and gender equality; as an intermediary step, the UK should implement immediate measures to mitigate and remedy the impact of austerity measures on women and the services provided to them;
- Take concrete action on the recommendations of the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and the CEDAW Committee;
- Undertake a gender-responsive analysis of the impacts of increasing the military budget, in consultation with women's organisations and women and girls in the UK.