

Urgent call for action from the UK Government: *Tackle the devastating impact of Coronavirus on women and girls in the UK*

Existing inequalities have been worsened by the Coronavirus outbreak. Women are doing the majority of the unpaid care, with many giving up work or reducing hours to care for children and elderly, disabled or vulnerable relatives. Women are out on the frontline caring for the sick and elderly, keeping our hospitals clean and pharmacies running - 2.5 million of the 3.2 million workers employed in the highest risk roles are women.

Women are the majority of adults living in poverty and are more likely to be in low paid and insecure employment. Many women and children are now trapped in their homes, self-isolating with an abusive partner. And yet women seem to be largely absent from the highest levels of decision-making in the UK.

Gendered impacts intersect with other aspects of identity. Those already disadvantaged in society and by social security are being hardest hit - including women and families in poverty, disabled women, black, Asian and ethnic minority women, women in unsuitable or insecure housing and migrant women, particularly those with no recourse to public funds. Without urgent intervention that recognises the gendered and other intersectional impacts, the consequences for women and girls will be devastating.

We are a coalition of more than 60 women's and charitable organisations calling on the UK Government to take the following immediate action:

1. Make women visible in crisis decision-making
2. Make women safe at work
3. Support parents during school and nursery closures
4. Protect women from poverty and homelessness
5. Protect women from violence and abuse during lockdown
6. Make migrant women safe and release women from immigration detention
7. Safeguard disabled women's rights, quality of life and care
8. Protect elderly women in care homes
9. Reduce the number of women in prison to save lives

Our calls to act are focussed on the UK Government. The powers of the devolved governments mean that some of the action we are asking the UK Government to take will affect women in England, some will affect women in England and Wales, some will affect women in Northern Ireland, and some will affect women across the UK.

Make women visible in crisis decision-making

- **Women should be better represented at the crisis decision-making table.** There are no women on the Covid-19 ministerial group and only one woman Cabinet Minister, Home Secretary Priti Patel, has spoken at the Government's daily coronavirus briefings. Senior women politicians, civil servants with responsibility for policy issues that significantly impact on women, including the Domestic Abuse Commissioner and the Victims Commissioner, as well as diverse gender equality experts, should be at the crisis decision-making table.
- **Collect and publish data disaggregated by sex as well as other characteristics protected by the Equality Act 2010, including race and disability.** Initial data shows that men are more likely to die of coronavirus. Sex disaggregated data would ensure more effective medical treatment and policy making for both women and men. Women in all their diversity should be visible in the data collected by the NHS, Government and Local Authorities. We welcome the Government's review into why ethnic minority groups are worse affected but this needs to include daily updates of critical illness and deaths by ethnicity to protect people from ethnic minority backgrounds now. Data is also vital for understanding how the outbreak is affecting women's safety and finances, as well as how that intersects with other aspects of identity.
- **Ensure that public information is accessible to all women.** D/deaf women in particular are excluded by the lack of sign language interpreters at Downing Street announcements.

Make women safe at work

- **A guarantee that no key worker will be forced to work without high quality, sufficient and properly fitting personal protective equipment (PPE).** Key workers are caring for the sick and elderly, keeping our hospitals clean, protecting women and families from domestic abuse and making sure there is food on the supermarket shelves. Frontline workers are being forced to put their lives at risk - research by Autonomy found that 2.5 million of the 3.2 million workers employed in the highest risk roles are women.¹ PPE still tends to be designed for the male body - which means women on the frontline are being put at risk because of ill-fitting equipment.
- **The Government should make it clear to employers that pregnant women in public-facing roles have the right to suspension on full pay.** Health and safety law means that pregnant women cannot be asked to do work that carries greater risk of infection than they would face outside of work. Therefore during lockdown, employers must offer home working or other safe working conditions, or else suspend pregnant women on full pay. As pregnant women are considered a vulnerable group, the furlough income support scheme should be made available to all pregnant women.

¹ Autonomy (2020) 'Low-paid workers, women and migrants will bear the brunt of this crisis', <https://autonomy.work/portfolio/lowpaidworkersbearbrunt/>

Support parents during school and nursery closures

Women still do the majority of unpaid caring in the UK. This, together with the earnings gap between women and men, means that in response to school and nursery closures it is women who are most likely to be reducing their hours and having to give up work to care, turning the clock back on gender equality.² Single and lone parents, 90% of whom are women, are struggling the most - 45% of single parents already live in poverty.

- **The Government urgently needs to raise awareness of the extension of furlough to include unpaid carers.** Employees who are unable to work because they are caring for children or elderly and disabled relatives can now request furlough from their employer. However, the Government should do more to ensure that parents and employers are aware of this change. Furlough should also be extended to include employees being able to request furlough on a part time basis - so parents and carers, if they choose to, can do some work while being able to do more caring at home. Appropriate HR structures also need to be put in place to ensure that employees can challenge decisions if furlough is denied.
- **Child benefit should immediately be increased to £50 per week per child, to support the additional costs of being at home.** Child benefit is extremely well targeted, with a high take up rate and low administration costs compared to other benefits. The Resolution Foundation have shown that the poorest families in the UK will be hit hardest financially by the outbreak.³ This is an immediate way to get financial support to vulnerable and struggling families who need it most.
- **The two-child limit on Universal Credit and benefit cap should be suspended.** Our social security system has been reformed with the aim of making work pay. At present, work is not an option for many people. The two-child cap on Universal Credit has pushed many families into poverty since it was introduced. Black, Asian and ethnic minority and disabled households are disproportionately likely to be poor and rely on benefits for a larger proportion of their income. The women's sector has long campaigned for the two-child limit and cap to be abolished and these should, as a minimum, be suspended during the crisis.
- **Digital poverty should be addressed so that all children and families can access schools online learning and vital services.** Many low-income families will be struggling to homeschool without laptops or WIFI. As well as missing out on schools' online learning, families without basic access to technology are unable to access vital public health guidance, online food shopping and support services. Marginalised ethnic groups are likely to have worse internet access. Government announcements on provision of technology are a positive step, but that support needs to be expanded to more low-income families.

² Working Families (2020), *Weathering the Storm: The COVID-19 pandemic and working parents*
<https://workingfamilies.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Weathering-the-Storm-the-COVID-19-pandemic-working-parents.pdf>

³ Resolution Foundation (2020), *Doing What It Takes*
<https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/doing-what-it-takes/>

Protect women from poverty and homelessness

We are very concerned that many women and low-income families are being pushed into/ further into poverty by the crisis, and support policies called for by the Women's Budget Group. The immediate priority must be to provide an urgent safety net. BAME and migrant women are especially vulnerable. They are more likely to have lower incomes, fewer savings, little or no access to credit or loans, and a very short period over which they can survive if their incomes stop.

- **During lockdown Universal Credit advances must be non-repayable grants, not loans.** Nearly 950,000 people applied for Universal Credit in the first two weeks of lockdown.⁴ Many families are desperate and there is currently at least a five-week wait for Universal Credit. Claimants can apply for an advance on Universal Credit however under the current system these must be repaid and force families into a cycle of debt.⁵
- **Lift Local Housing Allowance rates to cover the average cost of renting in each local area (the 50th percentile).** Before the outbreak, the majority of private renters claiming Universal Credit or housing benefit still faced a shortfall between their rent and the level of benefit received, often of many hundreds of pounds a month. Now facing a loss of income, the situation is even worse, and many women and families are at risk of becoming homeless.
- **The earnings threshold and employee status for Statutory Sick Pay should be abolished and the rate of Statutory Sick Pay should be raised** to at least that paid to a full-time worker on the National Living Wage (£322.64 per week). Women are less likely to qualify for Statutory Sick Pay because of low or intermittent pay, zero-hours contracts and not enough regular hours or earnings due to caring responsibilities. Women make up 70% of those on jobs not eligible for statutory sick pay.
- **The furlough support schemes for the employed and self-employed must work for pregnant women and new parents too.** According to the guidance, furlough pay should be based on an employee's actual salary as of 28th February 2020. This will mean many parents who have just returned from maternity or paternity leave are only entitled to 80% of statutory maternity pay (£148.68 a week) rather than their actual salary. Mothers on a period of unpaid maternity leave will also be treated as having zero pay and therefore ineligible for furlough. Self-employed women who have taken maternity leave in the last three years are also being disadvantaged, as furlough is calculated on average earnings over the last three years.
- **Carer's Allowance must be increased, to at least the level of a full-time worker on the National Living Wage.** The outbreak has highlighted that our society depends on the unpaid care done by women. Currently at £67 per week, Carer's Allowance - which can be claimed by those providing 35 or more hours of care - is

⁴ Resolution Foundation (2020) 'The economic effects of coronavirus in the UK: Utilising timely economic indicators', <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/the-economic-effects-of-coronavirus-in-the-uk/>

⁵ Women's Budget Group (2020) *Crises Collide* <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/FINAL.pdf>

less than Statutory Sick Pay. It is poverty pay. Carer's Allowance should be increased in recognition of the importance of providing this care and in taking the non-urgent strain off the NHS.

Protect women from violence and abuse during lockdown

Home is not a safe place for many women and children. Early reports from across the world suggest that gender based violence including domestic abuse, sexual violence, so-called 'honour-based violence' and child sexual abuse are escalating and increasing under lockdown, while women are also less able to access support.

- **An urgent injection of cash is needed from national and local governments and trusts and foundations to ensure that specialist frontline violence against women and girls services and women's organisations can cope with the impact of coronavirus and respond to increased demand.** Services are facing a 'perfect storm' of staff shortages, lost fundraising income, the costs of shifting to remote working and increased demand. While the Government has made funding commitments to domestic abuse services it is unclear how and when this funding will reach the frontline, including helplines, online support and life-saving refuges. Emergency cash must be delivered simply and fairly to services, without a lengthy and bureaucratic process that might risk excluding smaller services and those who don't currently receive public sector funding. There should be a ring-fenced pot for services led 'by and for' BAME, migrant and disabled women and LGBT survivors. The existing £15 million Tampon Tax fund must immediately be repurposed as unrestricted grant funding for women's services.
- **Provide additional housing support to women escaping domestic abuse.** Facing additional risk and barriers to accessing help, victims of domestic abuse must be given an automatic assumption of priority need when seeking housing support from councils. Refuge spaces are filling up – the national network of refuges should be fully funded, and the Government should provide a package of emergency hotel or hostel accommodation during this crisis, with funding for accompanying support from specialist charities.
- **Remote access to Early Medical Abortion services must urgently be made legal by the Government in Northern Ireland.** Northern Ireland authorities, under pressure from pro-choice campaigners, have now confirmed that Early Medical Abortions (involves taking one pill under supervision and another at home) can now be carried out in hospitals or clinics during the outbreak. However, Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK still requiring women to visit a clinic in person while travel is very difficult and to put themselves at risk by breaking social isolation. Many vulnerable women, including those isolating with abusive partners, still won't be able to access their right to abortion as they do not have the usual reasons to leave the house, such as work. Health care staff are also being put at an unnecessary risk when consultations can easily be carried out by secure remote video link.

Make migrant women safe and release women from immigration detention

- **Ensure financial and housing support for all migrant women, particularly those who are destitute.** Many migrant women are currently living destitute in the UK, with no access to statutory support and/or housing, and are incredibly vulnerable to street homelessness, and sexual and domestic abuse. During a public health emergency, every woman, regardless of immigration status, should be protected. Migrant women should therefore be given immediate access to financial support and housing whether through the mainstream benefits or asylum support system. England should follow Scotland and Wales and end 'no recourse to public funds', including restrictions on access to support for women without immigration status.
- **Release women from immigration detention.** Detention centres put those held in them at risk, as conditions make it impossible to uphold social distancing. At Yarl's Wood by the 22nd March there was already one confirmed case of Coronavirus, and some women have underlying health conditions which would make them more vulnerable in the situation of an outbreak. Many women in detention are also survivors of torture, trafficking and gender-based violence, and being locked up while a global pandemic is ongoing is causing them immense distress. With borders closing and flights suspended across the globe, the prospect of removal from the UK has disappeared, making continued detention unlawful.

Safeguard disabled women's rights, quality of life and care

Disabled people are currently struggling to access food, PPE for themselves and their Personal Assistants and carers, as well as fearing they will be left without essential local authority care during the crisis. 23% of women in the UK are disabled. Disability campaigners are urgently calling for more accessible guidance from the Government on how disabled people can protect themselves and on how they will be financially supported during the crisis. Disabled people are at a higher risk of poverty and disabled women already face lower earnings, higher costs of living and are now struggling with additional costs during the outbreak.

- **Restore the right of disabled people and the elderly to local authority care in England and Wales.** In England, The Coronavirus Act 2020 has temporarily removed the legal duty on councils to provide social care to all who are eligible. This will leave many thousands of disabled and older people in England without essential support or any rights to request this. In Wales, The Coronavirus Act (Commencement No 1) (Wales) Regulations 2020, suspends key social care services unless they are needed to protect an adult from a risk of abuse or neglect. Unlike in England, there is no express requirement to avoid breaches of the European Convention on Human Rights included, and in the absence of a clear statutory code of practice, services could be withdrawn without even undertaking an assessment to verify if there would be a breach of human rights. Campaigners are also calling on Local Authorities to work together with Disabled People's Organisations around social care provision.
- **Support disabled women to keep working and living independently during the outbreak.** There has been no information for disabled people who are using Direct

Payments to employ Personal Assistants on how to protect themselves and their staff during the outbreak. PPE shortages mean disabled people are unable to protect themselves, their staff and carers and no additional funding has been provided to help with additional costs of protective equipment. Reassurance is needed that the Access To Work scheme will continue to deliver existing support during the outbreak and focus on processing for new claims. Questions such as what happens to support workers if the disabled person employing them using Access To Work payments is furloughed, need answering.

- **Decisions about treatment for coronavirus must respect the human rights of disabled people, people with serious health conditions, and the elderly.** It should not be denied to people who would benefit based on assumptions about their quality of life and no one should be pressured to refuse treatment.

Protect elderly women in care homes

- **Testing and PPE must be made available in care homes.** As of 14th April, care leaders are estimating 1,400 coronavirus deaths in care homes in England alone and these numbers have not been recorded as part of Government official figures, which only include hospital deaths. The elderly, who are some of the most vulnerable in our society, are being told they can't go to hospital, forced to sign 'do not resuscitate' orders, cut off from loved ones, and isolated from other residents. An army of care workers, the majority of whom are women and who are low paid and undervalued, are working with limited or no protective gear, putting their own lives and families at risk.

Reduce the number of women in prison to save lives both in and outside of prison

- **Urgently deliver the early release scheme to reduce the number of women in prison.** For the same reason as detention centres, prisons are incubators of the virus. The Government has committed to releasing pregnant women from prison and those in mother and baby units, but progress has been dangerously slow. The early release scheme must be delivered with haste and extended to those with six months or less still to serve and those with underlying health conditions. The Government must work together closely with the women's specialist voluntary sector to deliver this scheme to ensure those on early release have the support and accommodation needed upon release. Failure to act quickly will put unnecessary strain on the NHS and cost lives.

This urgent call to action was drawn together by The Fawcett Society with input and support from the following organisations:

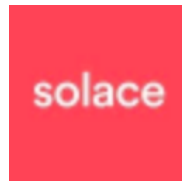




**CLEAN
BREAK**



THE EQUALITY TRUST



Refugee Women Connect



WORKING CHANCE RECRUITMENT REDEFINED



CHANGING LIVES



