

Written evidence submitted by the Centenary Action Group to the Women and Equalities Committee Inquiry into Coronavirus and the impact on people with protected characteristics

1. The [Centenary Action Group](#) (CAG) is a cross-party campaigning coalition convened by Helen Pankhurst and represents over 100 activists, politicians and women's rights organisations working together to eradicate the barriers that prevent a diverse range of women from taking part in the decisions that affect their lives. Member's include the Fawcett Society, Women for Refugee Women, Glitch, Girlguiding and political party affiliated women's groups.

Introduction

2. The impacts of COVID-19 are likely to have disproportionate effects on women & exacerbate intersectional inequalities in both the short and long-term. Under the lockdown, women face increased levels of domestic violence, and bear greater financial costs. Migrant women with insecure immigration status are vulnerable to street homelessness, exploitation, and abuse, and are at increased risk of suffering due to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Policymakers must consult with a range of women's organisations and include women in response and recovery decision-making, centring the experiences of women with multiple protected characteristics, such race, disability and religion.

Recommendations to the Government

3. Consult with diverse women's organisations and include women in the COVID-19 response and recovery decision-making.
4. Implement Section 106 of the Equality Act 2010 as a first step to achieving more representative and diverse politics.
5. Ensure that all women at risk of domestic violence can access safe spaces through properly funded services
6. Provide guidance to employers on measures they must take to ensure their employees are safe from increased risk of online abuse due to lockdown homeworking.
7. Implement the ILO Convention 190 on Eliminating Violence and Harassment in the World of Work.
8. Provide financial support measures that reflect an understanding of women's position in the economy and in society, including unpaid care work.
9. Ensure that women continue to have the same levels of access to sexual and reproductive health services.
10. Ensure that all data collected in relation to Covid-19 and its impact is disaggregated by sex and other protected characteristics.
11. Remove barriers to accessing public funds and asylum support, so that all migrant women can receive financial support and housing, whether through the mainstream benefits system or the National Asylum Support Service.
12. Close all immigration detention centres and provide women released from detention with safe accommodation so that they can self-isolate.
13. End data-sharing between the NHS and the Home Office, and suspend all NHS charges, so that migrant women, including those with suspected coronavirus, can access vital medical care.

Women's Representation

14. The impacts of COVID-19 are likely to have both short and long-term disproportionate effects on women – particularly those of lower economic status, BAME women and those with disabilities. Therefore, it is vital that response and recovery decision-making accounts for the needs and experiences of women in all their diversity. This can only be done if there are women at the table. Yet, women are not equally represented in decision-making roles responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. Women are underrepresented in leadership roles – only 27% of cabinet ministers and

34% of MPs are women. The team PM Boris Johnson assembled to lead the United Kingdom's COVID-19 response is composed of all men.

15. Political gender gaps result in missing out on the talents, experiences and interests of women, in all their diversity – the need for which is greatly heightened at the time of crisis. It is no coincidence, for example, that because of the crisis women look to be experiencing greater pregnancy discrimination, sexual harassment and unequal pay, and are known to be hardest hit by public sector cuts. We need parliament and government to really understand the implications of these realities, to be able to incorporate mitigation strategies into the response.
16. In the short-term, leaders must consult with diverse women's organisations and include women in response and recovery decision-making. Many women's rights and women-led organisations are first responders with invaluable insights into the impacts and priorities of the most marginalised. The Government should also ensure coordination and decision-making bodies are gender-balanced and inclusive, where appropriate using targets and other mechanisms at the national and local level.
17. Looking beyond women's representation, it is essential that all decision makers are informed by gender and intersectional analysis. Decision-makers and those coordinating response efforts should use existing gender analyses, for example that produced by women's organisation, and include gender specialists at all levels to inform COVID-19 preparedness and response measures. In the longer term, the government and political parties must do more to address the lack of diversity amongst politicians. A first step would be the implementation of Section 106 of the Equality Act 2010 which would require political parties to collect and publish candidate diversity data.

Violence Against Women and Girls

Domestic Abuse

18. Domestic violence is increasing under the lockdown, as victims are stuck in isolation with their abusers. Over the first three weeks of the initial lockdown, domestic violence charity Women's Aid saw the demand for its Live Chat service rise by a staggering 41%¹ and at least 16 suspected domestic abuse killings in the UK have been identified by campaigners, far higher than the average rate for the time of year². The rise in domestic abuse is particularly concerning for disabled women, who more likely to experience domestic abuse than non-disabled women³.
19. Domestic violence support services need increased funding to support the increased number of service-users, while also adapting their services to be run remotely. We welcome the Chancellor's announcement of a funding package for charities, in particular the £360 million for organisations providing vital frontline services, and call on the government to work with charities such as Refuge and Women's Aid to ensure that an adequate portion of this funding is ring-fenced for Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) services⁴ and centrally managed to ensure money is given to provide specialist services for specialist services for BAME women, disabled women and LGBT+ people.
20. As well as through increased funding, there are other immediate steps that can be taken to protect survivors: domestic violence Protection Orders should be extended to cover the full isolation period giving victims immediate protection from the violence; court fees for domestic abuse cases should be waived and such cases should be prioritised in court and delegated to trained magistrates.⁵
21. One of the main reasons why women and children struggle to escape domestic abuse is because of the lack of alternative safe places to stay. In 2018-19, 64% of referrals to refuges in England were declined and therefore refuges will not be able to cope with the current levels of demand. Compassion in Politics along with Southall Black Sisters are calling for hotels to open their rooms

¹ Women's Aid, [Women's Aid calls for emergency cash injection during Covid-19 crisis](#), April 2020

² The Guardian, [Domestic abuse killings 'more than double' amid Covid-19 lockdown](#), April 2020

³ SafeLives, [Disabled Survivors Too: Disabled people and domestic abuse](#), March 2017

⁴ Refuge, [Refuge responds to Chancellor's charity funding package](#), April 2020

⁵ Women's Equality Party. Stop Women Being Locked in With Abusers. March 2020. Available at: https://www.womensequality.org.uk/dvpo_lockdown_letter

to those fleeing domestic abusers so that vacant hotel rooms could be used as safe spaces.⁶ Migrant women fleeing domestic violence find it especially difficult to seek safe spaces because they have no recourse to public funds and cannot access government benefits or housing. The government must ensure that all women have access to safe spaces, both during lockdown and beyond.⁷ As a long-term measure, the government must provide refuges with enough funding and ensure that all victims of domestic violence have a safe place to stay.

Online Abuse

22. The use of digital spaces has increased significantly in light of COVID-19, and with it has come reports of an increase in abuse and harassment online. Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, a 2017 online poll by Amnesty International found that one in five women in the UK had suffered online abuse or harassment⁸. It is also well-established that online abuse disproportionately affects women with intersecting identities whereby female politicians and journalists of colour were found to be 34 percent more likely receive abuse on Twitter than their white counterparts.
23. New trends of targeted online abuse and harassment have been reported as more people spend time online. For example, there has been a rise in ‘zoombombing’, whereby “uninvited attendees share hateful and graphic material, often including pornographic, racist and anti-Semitic images in Zoom video conferences”. This requires the sociotechnical vulnerabilities of new and emerging tech platforms to be urgently assessed and the collection of data for such reports of online harassment. This should be conducted by tech platforms and monitored by government.
24. Research by Girlguiding shows that online abuse and harassment is an issue that particularly affects girls and young women. 50% of girls aged 11-21 think sexism is worse online than it is offline (2016), and 25% of girls and young women aged 11-21 had threatening things said about them on social media (2018). Given this, in the current situation, girls and young women are at a higher risk of experiencing harassment and abuse online and could be exposed to unwanted sexual imagery and harmful content.
25. Glitch, a UK charity championing everyone's right to be online safely, is calling on the government to address online abuse against women through education, enforcement of existing laws and policies and to empower civil society organizations in the upcoming Online Harms Bill. Glitch also supports [Lord McNally's private members bill and amendment to the Online Harms White Paper](#) to include ‘hatred by sex’ as part of the definition of ‘online harm’ presented in the Online Harms white paper. Government earlier this year already made a commitment to this.
26. With many people now transitioning to remote working online, swift efforts must also be taken to address potential vectors for harassment and abuse online in the online workplace. Accordingly, the government should implement the International Labour Organisation Convention 190 on Eliminating Violence and Harassment in the World of Work. Furthermore, companies need to implement their own strategies relating to online harassment and domestic abuse.

Economic Barriers

27. According to the Women's Budget Group, women are more likely to be dependent on social security, more likely to be in an insecure housing situation and, most notably, hold 70% of jobs that are not entitled to Statutory Sick Pay.⁹ Prior to COVID-19, women did three times as much unpaid care work as men¹⁰ and are now more likely to be delivering further unpaid care work at home.
28. These pre-existing gender gaps in income are exacerbated in crises as women are more likely to be in lower paid jobs and therefore more likely to sacrifice work to care for dependents, which may cause lasting damage to earnings and career. The Institute for Fiscal Studies found that,

⁶ Southall Black Sisters. [SBS and Compassion in Politics, supported by MPs and women's campaigners, call on hotels to offer rooms to abused women and children](#). March 2020.

⁷ Southall Black Sisters. [SBS and Compassion in Politics, supported by MPs and women's campaigners, call on hotels to offer rooms to abused women and children](#). March 2020. Available at: <https://southallblacksisters.org.uk/press-releases/press-release-sbs-compassion-in-politics-call-on-hotels-to-offer-rooms-to-abused-women-and-children/>

⁸ Amnesty International, [Amnesty reveals alarming impact of online abuse against women](#), 2017

⁹ Women's Budget Group. Covid-19: Gender and other Equality Issues. March 2020. Available at: <https://wbg.org.uk/blog/briefing-covid-19-and-gender-issues/>

¹⁰ UN Women. [Women and COVID-19: Five Things Governments Can Do Now](#). March 2020

because women disproportionately work in retail and hospitality, Covid-19 is likely to have a bigger effect on their earnings. Young women under 25 are most likely to have been employed by sectors shut down during the crisis¹¹. Moreover, women-led businesses are particularly vulnerable during this pandemic due to the nature of their businesses (typically very small and home based), and the fact that women's entrepreneur labour is always up for negotiation in families – and even more so during school and nursery closures.¹²

29. Yet, the financial support measures announced by the Treasury (4 of the 5 ministers of which are male) gave no consideration for the gendered impacts. As highlighted in the Women's Budget Group report, *Crises Collide: Women and COVID-19*, "many low-paid women will not benefit from current support programmes because they earn too little or are in insecure, temporary and part-time work".¹³
30. Maternity Action warn that maternity discrimination is likely to be more prevalent at this time when businesses will be looking for ways to save money. Statutory Sick pay should be available for pregnant women who need to stay away from the workplace given their vulnerability to the virus.¹⁴ Self-employed women are also more likely to be financially impacted. For example, the new self-employed income support, which provides self-employed people with 80% of their average earning over the last 3 years, does not exempt maternity leave from earnings. This will have a disproportionate effect on mothers who have taken maternity leave in this time as they will register much lower earnings than normal and will end up with less support than if it was based on their usual income.

Healthcare

Disruption to Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare

31. During public health crises, limited healthcare resources can be diverted away from sexual and reproductive health, which particularly impacts pregnant women, new mothers, and adolescent girls. The Centre for Global Development has recently called for the protection and expansion of existing health resources as health facilities should not have to choose between providing lifesaving care during pandemics and continuing to support women in need of other healthcare services.¹⁵ We must learn from the lessons of the past as studies show that during the Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone, more women are reported to have died of obstetric complications than of the disease itself because resources were diverted from sexual and reproductive health care.¹⁶
32. In response to the current pandemic, abortion rules in Scotland, England and Wales have been reformed, allowing women and girls to self-manage abortions at home by using approved abortion pills. However, women in Northern Ireland have once again been left behind, as the Northern Ireland Assembly has failed to put in place the same measures and access to the rest of the UK is restricted due to travel restrictions. This will undoubtedly put women in Northern Ireland at greater risk.¹⁷

Sex-Disaggregated Data

33. The inclusion of sex-disaggregated data in government planning and medical research is vital for a myriad of reasons not least because men and women experience health conditions differently and are therefore likely to be affected by different symptoms and react to different treatments.¹⁸ A

¹¹ Institute for Fiscal Studies, 'Sector shutdowns during the coronavirus crisis: which workers are most exposed?', April 2020

¹² Enterprise Research Centre. 2020. *Covid19: Critique and Proposals to Develop More Comprehensive and Inclusive Support for the Self-Employed*.

¹³ Women's Budget Group, [Crises Collide: Women and Covid-19](#), April 2020

¹⁴ Women's Budget Group, [Covid-19: Gender and other Equality Issues](#), March 2020.

¹⁵ Center for Global Development, [Playing the Long Game: How a Gender Lens Can Mitigate Harm Caused by Pandemic](#), March 2020

¹⁶ Inter-Parliamentary Union, [COVID-19: What Does It Mean for Gender](#), March 2020

¹⁷ Amnesty International UK, *Northern Ireland: Women and Girls Must Be Allowed Home Abortions*, April 2020. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/actions/northern-ireland-abortion-coronavirus-covid-19>

¹⁸ Digital Health, *Government criticised for not collecting sex disaggregated Covid-19 data*, April 2020. Available at: <https://www.digitalhealth.net/2020/04/government-criticised-for-not-collecting-sex-disaggregated-covid-19-data/>

lack of representation means a lack of essential data on the types of prevention methods, treatments, and other interventions that work for women, thereby risking higher fatality rates. This was noted most explicitly within the Ebola context as pregnant and breastfeeding women were typically excluded from experimental studies.¹⁹

34. UN Women has called on governments to “ensure availability of sex-disaggregated data, including on differing rates of infection, differential economic impacts, differential care burden, and incidence of domestic violence and sexual abuse”.²⁰ Available data reveals that more men and more BAME people are dying as a result of the virus. The UK Government must ensure that all data collected in relation to Covid-19 is disaggregated by sex and other protected characteristics.

Migrant Women

Migrant Women Living Destitute

35. Hundreds of migrant women with insecure immigration status are currently living destitute in the UK, with no access to statutory support and/or housing. These women are vulnerable to street homelessness, exploitation, and sexual and domestic abuse, and at increased risk of suffering due to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Traumatized women who have fled gender-based violence, whose asylum claims have been refused, and who are forced to survive with no support, housing and right to work, are among those most at risk. During a public health emergency, all women should be protected.
36. Since the outbreak, Women for Refugee Women (WRW) and its partners across the UK have continued to support destitute asylum-seeking women. WRW’s research, [released this year](#), found that a third of destitute asylum-seeking women who suffered sexual violence in their country of origin were sexually abused again in the UK. Thus, we are very concerned by the situation of women in our network whose ability to seek help is negatively impacted by the lockdown. As food banks and other charities struggle to meet an unprecedented demand, destitute migrant women are facing increased difficulties in accessing food for themselves and their children and cash for their immediate needs. WRW has also heard from asylum-seeking women with serious health conditions - such as HIV, heart disease and diabetes - who are unable to self-isolate safely, as they are living in poor and overcrowded housing. Some migrants with insecure immigration status may also be deterred from seeking timely help from the NHS due to fears around charging and data sharing.
37. People’s ability to survive this outbreak should not be determined by their immigration status. We therefore recommend that all women, regardless of immigration status, should have immediate access to financial support and accommodation where they can isolate safely, whether through the existing system of asylum support or through the mainstream benefits system.

Women in Immigration Detention

38. Detention centres put those held in them at risk, as living conditions make it impossible to uphold social distancing. At Yarl’s Wood detention centre 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, there are serious questions about the legality of any use of immigration detention at the present time, since removal from the UK is simply not possible. All detention centres should be closed immediately, and women released from detention should be provided with safe accommodation where they would have the means to self-isolate.

¹⁹ Center for Global Development. [Playing the Long Game: How a Gender Lens Can Mitigate Harm Caused by Pandemic](#). March 2020

²⁰ UN Women. [Paying attention to women’s needs and leadership will strengthen COVID-19 response](#). April 2020

Conclusion

39. The impacts of COVID-19 are likely to have disproportionate effects on women & exacerbate intersectional inequalities in both the short and long-term. It is vital that COVID-19 response and recovery decision-making accounts for the needs & experiences of women in all their diversity and women must be included in all levels of decision-making.
40. The Covid-19 crisis has brought the need for more wide-spread change into stark reality. In the more medium and longer-term, we need a political system that is diverse and reflective of the society it seeks to represent. By ensuring women's right to take part in the issues that affect their lives we can ensure a gender balanced economy which values unpaid care, address on and offline abuse and violence against women and girls, and ensure women's rights are not affected by migration status.

We are #StillMarching.

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