

Gendered impact of the UK's Government's lifting of lockdown

Women and girls are being left behind by the UK Government's approach to lifting lockdown. The UK Government is prioritising reopening shops, pubs, hairdressers and cinemas – while childcare and care infrastructure receives little attention. For many parents, a lack of childcare means they cannot return to work. Plans to open primary schools in England before the summer holiday were dropped, and nurseries and care homes are struggling financially and in need of a bailout. Women still do the majority of unpaid care, and early data shows that mothers in opposite-sex couples were 50% more likely to have been fired, quit or furloughed than fathers during lockdown. This situation is likely to be even worse for single parents, 90% of whom are women.

Existing inequalities have been worsened by the coronavirus outbreak. Death rates and critical illness rates are disproportionately high amongst Black and Asian people and those from ethnic minority backgrounds (BAME), and BAME women were more likely to say they were struggling to make ends meet and feed their children during lockdown than white women.¹ Social isolation has hit disabled women hardest, with 56% saying they've struggled to cope.² Older women are more likely to suffer the fatal consequences of the pandemic, and to be socially isolated while shielding. Women are the majority of people in poverty and more likely to be in low paid and insecure work with no sick pay. Research by Autonomy found that 2.5 million of the 3.2 million workers employed in the highest risk roles are women, and they must be protected from the risk of a second wave.³

The Prime Minister himself agreed that women should have been more visible in the Government's crisis decision-making. In response to questioning from the Chair of the Women and Equalities Select Committee, Caroline Nokes MP, the PM said "It's certainly true that I would have liked to have had more female representation at the press conferences so far" and promised to do "whatever it takes to help get women back into work".

We are a coalition of over 65 women's and charitable organisations calling for action from the UK Government. Here we have focused on ensuring that years of progress on women's rights is not overturned as lockdown is lifted. Our asks of Government as the crisis began can be viewed [here](#), and in the coming months we plan to put out a statement on the long-term gendered impact.

Our calls to act are focused 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, some will affect women in Great Britain and some will affect women across the UK.

¹ <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/coronavirus-impact-on-bame-women>

² <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/disabled-women-and-covid-19>

³ Autonomy (2020) 'Low-paid workers, women and migrants will bear the brunt of this crisis', <https://autonomy.work/portfolio/lowpaidworkersbearbrunt/>

Section 1: Reopening the economy without care

The UK Government should:

- Prioritise funding for the childcare and social care sectors by providing an immediate and substantial injection of funding at the local level.
- Make furlough more flexible now to cover parents who cannot access childcare.

The UK Government is prioritising reopening the economy while side-lining care.

Childcare

Plans to fully open primary schools in England before the summer holiday have been dropped, and women are at greatest risk of losing their jobs and income because they still hold the majority of childcare responsibilities. The situation will be particularly difficult for single mums, 90% of whom are women.⁴

We know that women, in normal times, spend far more time doing childcare work than men.⁵ During lockdown, economists at Cambridge INET found a gap of 1.5 hours per day between the work done by women and men, an increase of half an hour.⁶ The Institute of Fiscal Studies also finds that for mothers in opposite-sex couple households, mothers are doing two hours less paid work and two hours more childcare than fathers. Mothers are also one-and-a-half times as likely to have lost work during the crisis than fathers.⁷

The childcare sector outside of schools was already underfunded, and survey data during lockdown suggested that up to 10,000 providers might go out of business, with the loss of 150,000 places.⁸ Many nurseries are struggling to operate at capacity because they need to use bubbles, zones and staggered drop offs to limit the spread of the virus and keep children safe. Schools are struggling to reopen with half-size classes and schooling for a few year groups at best, which does not add up to a meaningful school day for many parents. Parents are also understandably nervous about the safety of sending their children back to school or nursery. We risk creating a two-tier workforce, with parents - and mothers in particular - facing being left behind as they are less or inconsistently available to work. Again, this is likely to be more of a risk for single parents.

The most that the Government has done is to encourage employers to be sensitive to parents' and carers' availability. Formal flexible work requests will not be sufficient to cover this insecurity and loss of childcare support. This combination of factors risks women being pushed out of work and back into the home. The furlough scheme needs to be made more flexible than currently planned, with a one-week

⁴ <https://www.gingerbread.org.uk/what-we-do/media-centre/single-parents-facts-figures/>

⁵ Dunatchik, Mayer, and Speight (2019) *Parents and time pressure: evidence from time use diaries*, NatCen <http://www.natcen.ac.uk/media/1827637/Time-pressure-report.pdf>

⁶ Hupkau and Petrongolo, *ibid*

⁷ Andrew et. al. (2020) 'How are mothers and fathers balancing work and family under lockdown?' *IFS Briefing Note BN290*

⁸ Women's Budget Group (2020) 'Easing Lockdown: Potential problems for women' <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Easing-lockdown-.pdf>

minimum and with entry to the scheme not closed off, and this needs to happen sooner, so that it can cover the insecure situation parents and carers face.

All changes and plans to get schools back fully need to take place with the right precautions in place for families who are shielding, self-isolating or vulnerable to the virus – see section 6. Putting the safety of all children and their families at the forefront of the strategy. Parents need to feel reassured that the safety of their children is being put first.

Social care

The social care sector has suffered the worst fatal and financial consequences of the pandemic. There have been thousands of excess deaths and many care homes are now struggling with decreased demand and the increased cost of PPE. Women are the majority of those in need of care due to longer life expectancies, and the majority (83%) of these working in the care sector. BAME and migrant women are also overrepresented.⁹ As with childcare, shortages in social care will also mean that women are more likely to leave the paid workplace to undertake more unpaid care work for disabled or older people. Coronavirus has exposed and exacerbated the consequences of neglect for both recipients and staff – the sector now needs an urgent cash injection.

Section 2: Redundancies and safeguarding women's incomes

The UK Government should:

- Implement a duty on larger employers to report the numbers of people they make redundant, with breakdowns by protected characteristics including ethnicity, gender and pregnancy and maternity
- Protect pregnant women and new mothers against unfair redundancy by supporting and ensuring swift passage of the Pregnancy & Maternity (Redundancy Protection) Bill
- Immediately increase child benefit to £50 per week per child to support families during school closures and shielding and self-isolating households.
- Protect women and their families from poverty by scrapping the two-child limit on Universal Credit and the benefit cap, and make advances for Universal Credit non-repayable grants rather than loans.
- Step in to fill the shortfall for Child Maintenance payments to protect single parents who often rely on these payments to meet their children's basic needs.
- Ensure the benefits system can provide security for young women who are being hit hard financially and increase support for young women needing to find alternative employment.
- Increase mental health support for those who's mental health has been impacted by lockdown

Analysis by The Women's Budget Group shows that as we approach the end of the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme in October, women are most at risk of redundancies. Women are already four percentage points more likely to have been made redundant instead of furloughed. Looking ahead, many companies that are large employers of women may not recover from the crisis, particularly in sectors such as hospitality, retail, childcare and tourism. Women are the majority of low-earners (69%), those on zero-hours (54%) or part-time (74%) contracts, making them first in line to lose out on hours or

⁹ Skills for care (2019) State of the adult social care sector <https://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/adult-social-care-workforce-data/Workforce-intelligence/documents/State-of-the-adult-social-care-sector/State-of-Report-2019.pdf>

contracts. This is of particular concern for BAME workers who are a third more likely than white workers to be in precarious work. There are also concerns that women who have requested furlough or taken unpaid leave because of childcare responsibilities may be more likely to be selected for redundancy.¹⁰ Data on pregnancy discrimination is sorely lacking but evidence suggests one in four pregnant women have faced workplace discrimination and this is bound to increase as the furlough scheme ends.¹¹ As we move toward October, there is an urgent need to replace the existing, ineffective legal protections against unfair redundancy for pregnant women and new mothers with a new framework, similar to that used in Germany, under which women can be made redundant only in very limited circumstances.¹² Large employers should also be required to report the numbers of people they make redundant, with breakdowns by protected characteristics including ethnicity, gender and pregnancy and maternity.

Women will also be facing increased debt when payment holidays lift. Parents have been struggling with additional living costs due to school closures, and those who have borrowed to get by or had bills suspended during lockdown will face high interest rates and spiralling debt. Pre-crisis, women were already the majority of people living in poverty.¹³ Research found that the percentage of single parent families anticipating living on £500 or less a month increased to 42% in April, up from 30% in February.¹⁴ Changes to Universal Credit and Child Benefit are urgently needed to ensure it can support families being pushed into or further into poverty as a result of loss of income and increasing debt.

Currently the Child Maintenance Service (CMS) is allowing non-resident parents to stop or reduce the amount they pay towards the upkeep of their child without any investigation or appeal. Single mothers, many of whom are already in or on the edge of poverty, rely on these payments to help meet their children's basic needs. Lack of childcare means many single mothers will be forced to give up work or reduce their hours, and the Government must step in to cover losses in child maintenance payments.¹⁵

Young women have been hit hard financially, with research from the Resolution Foundation finding that one in three 18- to 24-year-olds is earning less than before the outbreak.¹⁶ It is predicted that the existing mental health crisis amongst young people will have been exacerbated by lockdown and research by Agenda finds that young women facing poverty and disadvantage are more likely to self-harm than those in more affluent households.¹⁷ The UK Government must ensure that the benefits system can provide security for young women and ensure that they are able to access support with finding alternative work. Government should increase mental health support for those whose mental health has been impacted by lockdown¹⁸

¹⁰ Women's Budget Group 2020, Easing Lockdown: Potential Problems for Women <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Easing-lockdown-.pdf>

¹¹ <https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/PregMatCovid-19.pdf>

¹² Maria Miller MP presented the Pregnancy & Maternity (Redundancy Protection) Bill 2019 and will present the bill again in 2020.

¹³ Women's Budget Group 2020, Easing Lockdown: Potential Problems for Women <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Easing-lockdown-.pdf>

¹⁴ Turn2us, <https://www.turn2us.org.uk/About-Us/Media-Centre/Press-releases-and-comments/Coronavirus-pandemic-widens-the-gender-gap>

¹⁵ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-52386775>

¹⁶ Resolution Foundation 2020, Young Workers in the Coronavirus Crisis <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/young-workers-in-the-coronavirus-crisis/>

¹⁷ <https://weareagenda.org/often-overlooked-pr/>

¹⁸ The Young Women's Trust, Ignored, Undervalued and Underpaid https://www.youngwomenstrust.org/assets/0001/3589/Ignored_Undervalued_and_Underpaid_Report.pdf

Section 3: Public health and protecting women from a second wave

A sense of complacency is taking hold and with the increasing likelihood of a second wave we are calling for greater vigilance to ensure safety for women at work, particularly for BAME women and pregnant women. Employers need clear guidance. Belly Mujinga, a TFL worker who died from the virus, had an existing health condition, yet her employer kept her placed in a public facing role and failed to provide additional protection. Protecting public health means protecting everyone – including people who do not have access to state support through benefits or healthcare as a result of their immigration status. We are calling on the UK Government and local authorities to take the following action to prevent the spread of the virus and save lives:

- PPE should be provided to all who need it in their workplace.
- Support employers to carry out risk assessments to protect their employees. Risk assessments should include ethnicity.
- Government should proactively communicate to employers that pregnant workers have a right to be suspended from work on full pay if the risks facing them cannot be removed, and there is no alternative work available. Government should ensure the law is enforced.
- Local authorities should improve care workers' terms and conditions: provide adequate PPE, end 15-minute visits and zero-hours contracts, and pay for travel time. Government should provide adequate funding for this.
- Government should fund local authorities to increase social care workers' wages across the board, with the Real Living Wage as a minimum.
- Government should abolish the lower earnings limit for Statutory Sick Pay, and lift it to the rate of the Real Living Wage, so all women who need to can afford to self-isolate.
- Government should introduce a period of "Limited Leave to Remain", with recourse to public funds and access to the labour market, to everyone with insecure immigration status during the outbreak.
- Suspend all NHS charging and data-sharing between NHS Trusts and the Home Office.
- Remove 'No Recourse to Public Funds' condition for all migrants.
- Release all those who are held in immigration detention centres.

PPE which is designed to fit women must be made available to all who need it in their workplaces - including for social care workers, disabled women and their personal assistants/carers and violence against women and girls services. Employers must be supported to carry out risk assessments that include ethnicity, and to take action to protect BAME employees. Six in ten health workers who have died are BAME,¹⁹ and work-related anxiety for those working outside the home is highest amongst BAME people.²⁰ Meanwhile eight out of ten keyworkers employed in roles at the highest risk of contracting the virus are women. Several NHS Trusts have already started prioritising BAME staff for PPE and testing and deploying them away from the highest risk roles where possible.²¹

The Government should proactively communicate to employers that if the risks facing a pregnant worker cannot be removed, and there is no alternative work available, pregnant women have the right

¹⁹ The Intensive Care National Audit and Research Centre (ICNARC) report published on 22 May found that Black and Asian patients were over-represented among those critically ill with confirmed COVID-19 receiving advanced respiratory support.

²⁰ <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/coronavirus-impact-on-bame-women>

²¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-somerset-52455233>

to be suspended from work on full pay. The Health and Safety Executive should enforce the law through spot-checks and should encourage pregnant women to raise concerns with them (anonymously if necessary). Employers who break the law should be subject to the full range of penalties, including fines.²²

Social care workers are an at-risk group as the likelihood of a second wave increases. Eight out of ten social care workers are women, with many BAME and migrant women working in the sector.²³ The Government must commit to regular testing for care workers and care home residents as well as sufficient PPE. The social care sector is chronically underfunded at a time when we need it most and work done by women is still being undervalued. On average, care workers in the independent sector earn just £8.52 per hour, are often on zero hours contracts, and have no sick pay. Recent polling shows strong public support for pay rises for care workers and tackling poor working conditions.²⁴

The Government's new track and trace systems require people to self-isolate for up to 14 days if they are at risk of having contracted coronavirus. Women comprise 70% of individuals working in jobs which are not eligible for Statutory Sick Pay, with 1.2m women in this situation.²⁵ Given that women are more likely to be in key-worker roles, this is a toxic combination. Women should not face a choice between public health and poverty. For those who can access it, sick pay is far below median wages. Government should abolish the lower earnings limit for Statutory Sick Pay, and lift it to the rate of the living wage, so all women who need to can afford to self-isolate.

At a time when public health demands that everyone has ready access to healthcare and housing, insecure immigration status acts as a barrier and puts everyone's health at risk. We fully support the calls of organisations working with refugees, asylum seekers and migrants for the UK Government to grant a period of leave to remain during the outbreak, with recourse to public funds and access to the labour market, to all those with insecure immigration status.²⁶ This measure would be alongside Home Office decision-making, and would include women awaiting decisions from the Home Office, women who have been refused asylum and women who are undocumented.

Women who are seriously destitute or struggling as a result of not being able to access the government support and/or the right to work, are at an even greater risk of illness, domestic abuse and exploitation. Women who are destitute - who receive no state support at all - rely entirely on sofa surfing with community members or strangers, food parcels and on small hardship grants. Fears around the spreading of coronavirus mean that many women have become street homeless or are being forced into poor and overcrowded housing where the virus spreads easily. We must not miss the opportunity as lockdown lifts to help the most vulnerable women.²⁷

²² Pregnant and precarious: new and expectant mums' experiences of work during Covid-19, p.3.

<https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/PregMatCovid-19.pdf>

²³ <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/News/vast-majority-of-the-public-think-care-workers-are-underpaid>

²⁴ <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/news/vast-majority-of-the-public-think-care-workers-are-underpaid>

²⁵ ONS (2020) 'Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE) – Estimates of employee jobs earning below £118 per week, UK, 2019'

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/adhocs/11396annualsurveyofhoursandearningsasheestimatesofemployeejobsearningbelow118perweekuk2019>

²⁶ <https://www.jrsuk.net/news/jrs-leads-call-for-leave-to-remain-for-all-to-protect-public-health/>

²⁷ <https://www.refugeewomen.co.uk/not-safe/>

Because of their insecure status, women with underlying health conditions or symptoms of coronavirus have been deterred from accessing the NHS due to known data-sharing protocols with the Home Office, as well as the risk of charges should they test negative for the virus.²⁸

Migrant women who have leave to remain with a 'No Recourse to Public Funds' (NRPF) condition are barred from accessing mainstream welfare benefits, including Universal Credit. With the easing of lockdown measures, many NRPF women, including those with underlying health conditions, are feeling compelled to work, and therefore risk exposing themselves to coronavirus, as they are unable to fall back on state support. The Government should end NRPF, including restrictions on access to support for women without immigration status.

A number of women are still locked up in Yarls Wood immigration detention centre which is at risk of acting as an incubator for the virus - reports suggest inadequate sanitation levels with little or no access to soap, sanitiser and masks.²⁹ Social distancing often means solitary confinement and many women in detention are also survivors of torture, trafficking and extreme gender-based violence, and being locked up while a global pandemic is ongoing is causing them immense distress. With many borders closed and flights suspended, the prospect of removal from the UK has disappeared, making continued detention unlawful.

Section 4: The disproportionate impact on Black, Asian and ethnic minority women

UK Government should:

- Launch a public inquiry into the disproportionate deaths of BAME people which examines structural and socio-economic factors within society and the NHS.
- During the easing of lockdown, complete and publish meaningful and comprehensive equality impact assessments for all coronavirus policies, informed by intersectional data.
- Ensure marginalised families get the support they need by immediately ending the two-child limit, scrapping the benefits cap and by making advance payments of Universal Credit grants instead of loans.
- Implement a duty on larger employers to report the numbers of people they make redundant, with breakdowns by protected characteristics including ethnicity and gender.

Public Health England (PHE) have now released the second part of the Coronavirus Risk Review which focuses on the disproportionately high death and critical illness rates amongst Black, Asian and ethnic minority people. Stakeholders consulted as part of the review identified causal factors that include racism, discrimination, fear and trust and long-standing inequalities exacerbated by the outbreak. PHE has been under scrutiny for initially publishing a report that failed to touch on understanding why BAME people are more likely to lose their lives or become seriously ill from the virus and the UK Government has still failed to set out a policy response. In support of calls made by BAME organisations, we are calling for a public inquiry into this issue which examines structural and socio-economic factors within society and the NHS. Right now, as lockdown is eased, the Government should complete and publish meaningful and comprehensive equality impact assessments for all coronavirus policy.

²⁸ <https://www.refugeewomen.co.uk/women-and-equalities-committee-inquiry-evidence/>

²⁹ <https://www.refugeewomen.co.uk/covid-19-yarls-wood/>

Initial research suggests that BAME women are being hardest hit by the economic impact of the virus. 43% of BAME women said they believed they would be in more debt after the crisis, compared to 37% of white women. BAME mothers in particular reported that they were most likely to be struggling to feed their children, 24%, compared to 19% of white mothers.³⁰ The Government should immediately end the two-child limit and scrap the benefits cap which disproportionately limits Black, Asian and ethnic minority families' financial support and make advance payments of Universal Credit grants instead of loans. As we approach the end of the furlough scheme, large employers should be required to report the numbers of people they make redundant with breakdowns by protected characteristics which includes ethnicity and gender.

Section 5: Making women safe from violence and abuse

UK Government should:

- Deliver a secure funding solution for specialist violence against women and girls (VAWG) services, including ring-fenced funding for 'by and for' services for BAME women, deaf and disabled women and LGBT+ survivors.
- End the current fragmented, short term funding system for VAWG services and commit to a sustainable funding future for this life-saving sector.
- Ensure VAWG services are supplied with sufficient PPE and refuges are supplied with testing for residents.
- Ensure coordinated, cross-government action to mitigate the impact of coronavirus on the rights of all women and girls to live free from violence.
- Amend the Domestic Abuse Bill to ensure it provides equal protection and support for migrant survivors, and delivers the changes across housing, health, criminal and family justice that survivors urgently need.

As lockdown is lifted, for those providing support to women and girls who are living with violence and abuse, the picture is increasingly complex. They are seeking to deliver lifesaving support with a mix of in-person and remote activity, increased demand and an escalation in the risk level of cases. The UK Government has taken the approach of issuing broad, rather than specific, guidance – which means the responsibility for running services safely is on those managing the services (as is the case for schools and businesses). Services supporting BAME women and those supporting D/deaf and disabled survivors are particularly concerned about the safety of their clients and staff. The Government's announcements on easing shielding, and the protections which come with it, is a serious concern in this regard. VAWG sector organisations are concerned about the welfare of staff and survivors, particularly BAME women, D/deaf and disabled women and those with long-term health issues, and the pressures they may face in returning to face-to-face service delivery.

These pressures follow a backdrop of serious, continuous under-funding of the VAWG sector.³¹ Emergency funding of £37m pledged by the Government is welcome – but it is only predicted to last

³⁰ <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/coronavirus-impact-on-bame-women>

³¹ Women's Aid data from before the crisis shows that 64% of refuge referrals were declined last year, and bed spaces are 30% below the level recommended by the Council of Europe. While a quarter of Imkaan's membership of specialist BME services are concerned they will not survive for six months.

until October.³² As this was split across three government departments, it came with difficult and exclusionary processes for frontline services to navigate during a time of crisis, and which disadvantaged smaller services. There was also a disappointing failure to ring-fence funds for services working 'by and for' BAME women, D/deaf and disabled women, and LGBT+ survivors. These are often small and poorly resourced, and the process has ignored the systemic funding inequalities they face. The absence of the planned Comprehensive Spending Review to date means that many VAWG budgets, at national and local level, remain highly insecure. As lockdown is lifted the UK Government must not return to fragmented, short-term funding but commit to a sustainable funding future for this life-saving sector.

In May 2020 the Prime Minister held a 'Hidden Harms' summit, which included a focus on domestic abuse.³³ Organisations in the VAWG sector have set out comprehensive recommendations for an 'action plan' following the summit - including on leadership, funding, equal protection and support for migrant women, housing and refuge services, criminal and family justice, health, adult social care, child protection, welfare reform economic security, and communications and awareness. VAWG is a multifaceted issue that requires commitment across Government to respond. It is highly concerning that the current VAWG strategy has ended and its replacement has not been prioritised. We urge the UK Government to take this opportunity to listen to the sector's recommendations for an action plan now, and to prioritise the development of a long-term, fully funded and comprehensive VAWG strategy for the future.

Insecure immigration status also makes women who have fled domestic and sexual violence even more vulnerable to experiencing abuse again during the pandemic. Women who are destitute are facing a daily struggle for survival even in ordinary times. The doors of many charities and local groups remain closed, and vulnerable women are being pushed into exploitative situations and abusive relationships in order to avoid hunger and street homelessness. No women should be denied help and the Domestic Abuse Bill should be amended to provide equal protection and access to support for migrant women regardless of migrant status or NRPf status

Section 6: Women being left behind - disabled and older women, and self-isolating and shielding households.

The UK Government should:

- Support disabled women by increasing Employment Support Allowance payments in line with the rise in Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit.
- Assess the impact of Care Act 2014 easements every three months to mitigate the impact of lessened care standards on disabled and older women.
- Require any councils enacting Care Act easements to release a document showing how they are continuing to deliver their duty of care to disabled and older people.
- Ensure local authorities and supermarkets work together to ensure disabled women's needs for groceries and shopping are prioritised.
- Ensure supplies of PPE and testing to care home staff as well as domiciliary carers and personal assistants/carers.

³² <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/emergency-funding-to-support-most-vulnerable-in-society-during-pandemic>

³³ <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/recommendations-for-the-hidden-harms-action-plan/>

- Provide quality home schooling and support for shielding or self-isolating households.
- Ensure local authorities provide disabled parents and families with disabled children with adequate social care support.

The lifting of lockdown does not affect everyone equally. This message has sometimes been missed in the narrative but the very different situation faced by disabled women, those who are self-isolating or shielding, and their households must not be forgotten. Older people are also more likely to be shielding due to increased risk. Polling shows that disabled women have been struggling most with isolation - with 56% saying they have found it difficult to cope. While Government guidance for these groups is changing - with more contact allowed - for many vulnerable household's concerns and fears will remain and must be accounted for.³⁴

As lockdown is lifted, women who are self-isolating or shielding and disabled women are having to make difficult choices between going back to work and protecting themselves or family members from the virus. Many may be concerned about weather appropriate measures have been taken by their employer to protect staff including additional precautions for employees with underlying health conditions. With people feeling that they have no choice but to return to work even though they do not feel their workplace is safe for them. These workers will also be concerned about how to get to work safely, for many their only option will be to take public transport³⁵. Early research shows that people shielding because of health conditions are four times more likely to have fallen behind on a bill compared to those who are not at increased risk from the virus.³⁶ Disabled women are also under significant financial pressure, with 36% saying their household has nearly run out of money.³⁷ Pre-coronavirus, 16% of pensioners and 23% of single female pensioners³⁸ were living in poverty, raising concerns about how older people are coping financially whilst shielding. To support these households, the UK Government should scrap the two-child limit and benefits cap, increase Child Benefit and make advances on Universal Credit grants rather than loans. Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) is a benefit for disabled or ill people who are unable or less able to work and this should be increased in line with the £20 per week rises in Universal Credit and Tax Credit.

Many disabled women have had to go without care during the crisis and a high proportion of disabled women (32%) said they didn't know who to turn to for help during lockdown. Loss of support is likely both a consequence of the implementation of rules around social distancing and of the changes to legislation outlining expectations for the care and support of disabled people.³⁹ Government and councils should review these decisions, and publish information on how they are continuing to deliver their duty of care.

³⁴ <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/disabled-women-and-covid-19>

³⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/plans-to-ease-guidance-for-over-2-million-shielding>

³⁶ Citizens Advice, Near the cliff edge: how to protect households facing debt during Covid-19. <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/about-us/policy/policy-research-topics/debt-and-money-policy-research/near-the-cliff-edge-how-to-protect-households-facing-debt-during-covid-19/>

³⁷ <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/disabled-women-and-covid-19>

³⁸ https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/reports-and-publications/reports-and-briefings/money-matters/poverty_in_later_life_briefing_2019.pdf

³⁹ Lisney et. al. (2020) *The Impact of COVID 19 on Disabled Women from Sisters of Frida*, Sisters of Frida <http://www.sisofrida.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/The-impact-of-COVID-19-on-Disabled-women-from-Sisters-of-Frida.pdf>

Research has found that 63% of disabled women have struggled to access basic necessities from the shops during lockdown, which raises serious concerns about hunger and food security. Work between the Government and supermarkets on priority lists remains very patchy, with many women needing support still excluded. As we lift lockdown, the UK Government, local authorities and supermarkets must work together to ensure that disabled women's needs for groceries and shopping are prioritised.⁴⁰

For disabled and older women in care homes, the lack of PPE and testing puts them at greater risk, as demonstrated in the high death rates in residential care.⁴¹ Failure to test older people when they are discharged from hospitals into care homes as well as the precarious nature of domiciliary care has also caused significant excess deaths, especially among older people. Personal assistants, who often operate outside more formal care providers, have also been unable to access PPE and testing.

Parents could face fines if they don't send their children back to school in September without 'good reason', schools will need to do risk assessments for pupils that take into account and respect parents' assessments of the risk level. For many with health conditions, living in multi-generational or self-isolating or shielding households it will not be safe to send children back to school. Children in households which continue to self-isolate or shield must not be left behind. There must be equal provision of education, and the quality of home-schooling resources and support must strive to match that of in-person education in schools. Disabled mothers and parents often rely on the school week structure for respite and are dealing with the additional pressure of home-schooling. Local councils need to assess and provide sufficient support for those disabled parents facing increased pressures as a result of school closures and other effects of lockdown.

Section 7: Women in prison and those affected by the criminal justice system

The UK Government should:

- Ensure women are not placed in conditions akin to solitary confinement due to the risk of the virus to the prison population.
- Take urgent action to release women from prison, focussing on pregnant women and new mothers, those who are close to release, have caring responsibilities or at particular risk from coronavirus.

The Government's 2018 strategy on this issue acknowledges that many women in prison are there as a result of trauma, abuse, poor mental health, substance misuse and poverty. Racial discrimination means that women from BAME communities are disproportionately affected by imprisonment. Due to the ongoing coronavirus crisis, women are being locked in their cells for more than 23 hours per day, akin to solitary confinement. This restrictive regime is resulting in a mental health crisis, increasing rates of self-harm, and causing permanent damage to relationships between mothers and their children due to severe restrictions on prison visits.

⁴⁰ Lisney et. al. (2020) *Ibid*

⁴¹

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/articles/deathsinvolvingcovid19inthecaresectorenglandandwales/deathsoccurringupto1may2020andregisteredupto9may2020provisional> accessed 21 May 2020

The Government committed to a programme of early release for pregnant prisoners, those nearing the end of their sentences and others for compassionate and health reasons, but progress has been painfully slow. As of 8 June, only 16 women on Mother and Baby Units (MBUs) and six pregnant women have been released from prison. Action on reducing the women's prison population is needed urgently.

There needs to be sufficient financial support and access to housing for all those released and sustainable funding for the charities supporting them, including community-based women's centres.

Section 8: #MakeWomenVisible. Representation in crisis decision making and engagement with the equalities sector

The UK Government should:

1. Include more women politicians, including those with children, those who are BAME, and those shielding or in shielding households, at the crisis decision-making table.
2. Set up strong engagement channels with the equalities sector as has been done by the Welsh and Scottish Governments.

During lockdown, there were instances where it was clear that women were not involved in decision-making. This should not happen again. At the Liaison Committee on the 27th May the Prime Minister agreed that women should have been more visible in the Government's crisis decision making. In response to questioning from the Chair of the Women and Equalities Select Committee, Caroline Nokes MP, the PM said "It's certainly true that I would have liked to have had more female representation at the press conferences so far" and acknowledged that women were being hardest hit economically by the crisis. The 'Save Summer Six' group of Ministers are all men and have been tasked with getting us back to some sense of some semblance of normality by July.⁴² Senior women politicians must be at the crisis decision making table to help ensure that, as lockdown is eased, years of progress on women's rights is not overturned.

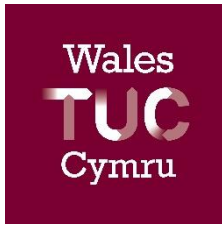
In Wales, committees which are focusing on the coronavirus response have taken clear steps to engage with the women's sector. In Scotland, a principle of non-discrimination and equality has been written into the relevant emergency legislation, and women's rights groups have been working with officials across government, including through a fortnightly meeting, to feed into the response. The UK Government must follow suit, and create strong structures to engage with the women's and wider equalities sector.

⁴² <https://inews.co.uk/news/coronavirus-latest-boris-johnson-save-summer-pubs-cafes-restaurants-434809>

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







#MakeWomenVisible



CHAYN

CHANGING LIVES



WORKING CHANCE™
RECRUITMENT REDEFINED



Llamau

Imagine a World Without Homelessness

