

Written evidence submitted by Birmingham and Solihull Women's Aid (MRS0048)

This submission to the Unequal Impact Inquiry is sent on behalf of Birmingham and Solihull Women's Aid (BSWA), to be received as the organisation's response. Birmingham and Solihull Women's Aid have provided front line domestic violence and abuse support services for almost 40 years. As a by and for women's organisation, supporting and empowering women in the Birmingham and Solihull area, our role extends beyond those services. We pride ourselves on the work we do to advocate for the rights of ALL women. We address violence against women and their children throughout all of our work. We support women and their children affected by domestic violence and abuse through our many services such as floating support, Housing Options Hub, MARAC IDVA's and refuges, to name a few. As well as responding to the effects of domestic violence and abuse, we also acknowledge the impact that prevention and early intervention initiatives can have on the long-term safety of women and their children. Which is why we invest significant time and resources throughout the year into educating, training and inspiring others to act and create change. We also campaign for change, by engaging with government consultations and inquiries to ensure women's experiences are heard.

COVID-19 has significantly impacted how BSWA operates, with much of the organisation working from home and only able to offer telephone or email-based support. However, with six refuges and a specialist Housing Options Hub this is not the case across all services. Refuges have carried on being serviced as usual, except face to face support sessions have now turned into over the phone sessions with women given creche and a private room to allow her privacy and space to take the call. Our specialist Housing Options Hub has set up a similar style of support, with women given private meetings rooms to take calls in and any forms needed to be signed are left outside the allocated room where she can collect them safely. The Housing Options Hub has been especially important to keep open as it provides a safe space for women and their children who are at immediate risk of being homeless, or for those who already are.

The Committee is conscious that there may be many more equality impacts and is keen to hear from individuals and from organisations on these questions:

1. How have people been affected by the illness or the response to it?

Women and their children who are affected by domestic violence and abuse have been faced with a variety of issues in light of COVID-19. Below is a breakdown of these.

Safety concerns of isolation:

- Isolation is a tactic that is used by perpetrators to further control women as part of the domestic violence and abuse they are subjected to. Therefore, we are not completely in the dark as to the risks a nation-wide lock down posed on women and their children living in abusive households. However, we are developing better solutions to reaching these women and ensuring they know they are not alone.
- Perpetrators using tactics employing isolation to further control using the children.

- Perpetrator not allowing her out for exercise or to go to the shops etc, further isolating and controlling her physical whereabouts.
- To further isolate and keep women from communicating at all with friends and family.
- Unable to escape the home if and whenever she needs to, even for a short while.
- To keep women from working.
- Worry that some women will choose to go back to or live with their abusive partners which could put them at higher risk of danger.
- Police are an already overstretched service; how quickly will they be able to respond to incidents in light of their new duties to patrol streets etc, once police numbers have decreased due to illness, how will the police prioritise response to emergency calls?
- Safety concerns for children who are deemed to be vulnerable, especially since schools have closed.

Safety pathways for women and accessibility of support:

- Penalised if seen out in public and not complying with Gov guidance by wider society, police have pledged that women are protected by law to do this if escaping an abusive household.
- Access to secure, appropriate sex-based accommodation.
- Women unable to access support via their phones, depending on how safe they are taking confidential calls/ going online and access to their phones.
- Delay in response due to particularly overstretched services.
- Access to internet-based support may be limited if the household does not have access to the internet, or her use of internet is restricted as part of the control she is subjected to by the perpetrator.
- Women enduring abusive behaviour, which does not initially meet thresholds for police response to protect them, or not enough evidence (especially if it is coercive control) to meet criteria for criminal justice involvement, not being deemed as an 'emergency'.
- Courts and tribunals being delayed in some cases, which can result in a lack of trust in the criminal justice system for women, and increase their risk of danger.

Food poverty:

- Lack of cheap, essential foods and goods being available readily.
- Access to foodbanks are now limited due to number of people they are supporting.
- Safe places to shop and get the items women need, without putting herself at risk.
- Lack of cheap, essential foods and goods being available which don't need cooking or to be stored in a fridge (for those in TA or emergency accommodation where they don't have access to a kitchen).
- Rationing food among a family often leads to Mum sacrificing her portion to her children.

Financial insecurity:

- Women make up the majority of those on zero-hour contracts and part time self-employed, who have been offered little in the way of financial security by the Government.
- Women are also over represented in the retail and hospitality industries and teaching, which has seen huge redundancies in the last couple of weeks.

- Women are more likely to be in insecure and low paid employment or as ‘disguised self-employment’ which means they should be on the books as full-time employees but are not.
- Women have been given less protection under government crisis budgeting and therefore are at high risk of a knock-on effect on things such as rent, debt and food.
- Women who are given money by abusive partners may not receive this during this time, limiting their freedom.
- Women are overrepresented in care roles, both paid and unpaid and in the health sector. The majority of those in need of care are women too.

Housing insecurity:

- Women living in temporary or emergency accommodation which are formally hotels, B and B’s and hostels are at risk of being immediately at risk of homelessness again since some are shutting their doors to protect their staff.
- Backlog of housing applications which women need assistance filling out, once the crisis is declared over, which means there may also be a risk of more urgent cases (due to end of contracts etc).
- Due to a rise in the need for housing and to place all homeless and rough sleepers, women may be at risk of being placed in unsuitable and unsafe housing which puts them at risk, or is not big enough for their families.
- Shortage of bed spaces in women-only refuges already means even more insecurity for women trying to get into safer supported accommodation.
- Unregulated social housing standards could be affected even more, putting women at higher risk of danger, especially those which do not have secure locations.

Health and wellbeing impact:

- Women are more likely to be working in professions exposed to the virus like health, social care, teaching and in supermarkets, and thus more likely to get it.
- Due to this they are also more likely to be carriers of the virus, which is especially difficult to manage as they are also mostly carers and have dependents.
- Women do not have safe access to abortion, since clinics have closed down.
- Women are finding it more difficult to get access to emergency and long-term contraception due to the increased use of GP surgeries and local pharmacies.
- Women may ration their food supplies and give their portion of food to someone else, at the detriment of their health.
- The mental health impact of women being in isolation is worrying, especially in regards to PTSD if they were subject to isolation as part of the abuse they were subjected to at the hands of perpetrators (same problem for children).
- It is currently proving difficult to get hold of food vouchers, especially for replacement free school meals for children.

2. Have there been specific impacts on people due to them having a protected characteristic?

Yes, please see the detailed response above.

3. Are there any unforeseen consequences to measures brought in to ease the burden on frontline staff?

There are a number of unforeseen consequences as a result of measures brought in to ease the burden on frontline staff.

Firstly, everyone employed at BSWA are women. We already know that women bear the significant brunt of care and household duties. We predict and have already seen how the line between work and home can be easily blurred when it comes to balancing work with home, whilst working from home. We have support in place for staff who are struggling with this, but ultimately this comes down to societal inequality and the double burden falling on women. During times of crisis this is exacerbated and can also raise stress for women who are juggling it. It is important for society to recognise this, as some newspapers have already reported, so as to shift balances of power coming out of the crisis. Guidance for carers, and those with primary household responsibility needs to be provided by the Government to support women.

Secondly, some of the guidance issued by the Government which is meant to set out support for businesses and employers is missing information which means organisations have had to read between the lines and make an informed decision. This includes a lack of clarity in guidance issues to key workers surrounding what to do if key workers live with vulnerable people; what to do if key workers are themselves classed as vulnerable; a lack of guidance for refuge staff and lack of clear PPE use; a lack of clarity around expenses accrued by staff by working at home; and absolutely no economic or comprehensive support package for charities on the frontline working hand in hand with public services protecting some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

Furthermore, much of the support work being carried out is extremely sensitive, given the issue at hand. Although we completely understand the need to work from home and to socially distance, and we support this measure, it also makes supporting women and women to receive support that bit more difficult. Not all staff working from home may have the facilities to be able to work from a private study room where they can ensure the privacy of their clients and of their work from others in the household, easily able to adhere to GDPR laws also. Many of our staff are having to be extra vigilant and creative about the way they work and ensure the privacy of their support calls. This is especially difficult for women who are supporting over the phone but have small children they are also looking after, especially if they are single parents. These members of staff are being given some support, since BSWA staff are classed as key workers and thus some children can still attend school. However, it is also difficult for those of which live in house shares, or are live-in carers for relatives.

On the flip side, women who are service users have also been finding it a particular challenge to access support privately at home. Some women may live with their abusers, meaning they cannot take phone calls of support without being put at further risk of danger. Alternatively, some women will also have children in the house that they do not want overhearing their private conversation. These conversations of support are often particularly in depth and women describe the abuse they have experienced. Therefore, it would not be suitable or healthy for women not to be given a safe space to take these calls.

Additionally, due to being a charity, the majority of BSWA's funding derives from grants and various funding streams. In return for the money investment, funding schemes set out expectations of how this money is used, this could include the type of project it is used for, but also it defines how many staff, how many people the project should support and the types of outcome expected as a result of the support being implemented. This is very difficult to achieve in circumstances where lots of women are unable to receive calls due to the danger or appropriateness of it, for reasons detailed previously. Therefore, it is a worry that some of these targets either will not be achieved or will be surpassed and this staff will be working beyond what they are contracted to do. Managers responsibility lies in supporting their teams, and staff well-being is closely monitored at BSWA with employee assistance plans built in. However, we have already seen how domestic violence and abuse is exacerbated in the current climate and thus planning for an insurgence in women seeking support is only sensible. It is worrying that frontline organisations, such as specialist support agencies like BSWA, may not be able to meet the demand the service experiences from service users due to lack of funding and thus, capacity. This is an injustice to the women seeking support as well as the frontline staff who may experience burn out.

To add to the previous issue, it is also difficult for organisations which larger reserves to apply for a lot of funding or grants due to the restrictions they set into place. BSWA is one such organisation which is penalised for having a large reserve. However, as this crisis has proven, reserves are really important for charities to have because they provide a slight safety net for charities facing crisis, such as COVID-19. This presents a catch-22 as many of these grants are for larger sums of money which would fund comprehensive services, such as the ones BSWA runs. Therefore, organisations with the capacity, sustainable network and reputation, and specialist knowledge are not able to access these funds which could provide specialist support services for hundreds of people. It's also important to remember that reserves are not just for crisis, but may be used to secure the long-term sustainability of organisations with projects such as buying refuge premises, which would provide desperately needed spaces to women in the local areas.

Lastly, as a result of social distancing and lockdown measures introduced nation-wide, a stream of funding that BSWA relies on has been completely cut off. As many charities are also reporting and suffering from, BSWA is no longer able to host fundraising activities, or have supporters donate money which has been raised through activities. This includes the Birmingham 10k run, and other 40th anniversary fundraising activities we and others had planned throughout this year. It has also meant that our charity shops have had to cease business until further notice. These shops raise approximately £2000 per week for the charity, funds which are relied upon to keep services running.

The Government has said current measures will be reviewed in three weeks' time, and measures in the Coronavirus Act be voted on again in 6 months' time:

1. What needs to change or improve, which could be acted on in three weeks' time?

Two of the most vital changes that must take place cannot wait three more weeks. They need to be set out as soon as possible.

The first being support for women and their children who live in abusive homes. Women and their children must be acknowledged and protected. In order to do this, the Government needs to put a plan in to place which sees specialist support organisations taking over willing hotels and bed and breakfasts to provide refuge style accommodation for women and their children escaping abusive homes. Although hotels and bed and breakfast accommodation are not ideal, they provide a quick solution to the lack of housing issue that we have been battling for so long. Alternatively, more secure and longer-term accommodation is sourced by local authorities which allows for a similar operation, for specialist organisations to facilitate.

The second change supports the first, for specialist support charities such as BSWA to be involved in the national and local response to COVID-19, to be given comprehensive support and a funding package which matched the need on the ground as decided by the specialist organisations. Without the funding match, organisations which carry out this life saving work will not be able to help the majority of people, let alone exist. We have already seen across the country front line organisations which have ceased to exist, due to insolvency or running out of funding. It is not acceptable for organisations like these to be left to disappear, leaving hundreds of vulnerable people exposed.

2. What needs to change or improve, which could be acted on in 6 months' time?

In six months' time, specialist front line support charities must already have received the support and funding needed to meet demand and must be supported in recovery. We do not know when this crisis is going to end and when the exit strategy from lockdown is going to begin, so we cannot predict exactly what is going to be necessary in six months. However, it is not difficult to imagine, that there will be a surge of demand for support services by women, especially for refuge spaces and accommodation. In particular, by the women who were prevented from accessing support while abusers were around more at home. As a specialist support service, we have already started to deal with complex cases which highlight this through a very recent case where a man told the woman that no one would come to help her because of lockdown, this was particularly powerful as the woman's first language wasn't English and shows an abuser using this situation to further control. These women will be seeking support, which we predict will be crisis level support because they will finally have some space and freedom to seek it. Normal high demand of the services will continue and the issues which we face already as an industry will be further stretched due to dealing with another level of crisis response, on top of the crisis we see during 'normal' times. These issues include housing, criminal justice response and protection, financial security, immigration security, physical and mental health support and access to specialist support services.

April 2020