

Written evidence submitted by Muslim Women's Network (COR0088)

Introduction

1. Muslim Women's Network UK (MWNUK) is a national Muslim women's organisation (www.mwnuk.co.uk) that has been advancing equality, promoting women's empowerment and connecting voices for change for over 16 years. We are a small national charity (reg. no. 1155092) that works to improve social justice and equality for Muslim women and girls. We find out about the experiences of Muslim women and girls through research and our helpline enquiries. We identify policy and practice gaps and use this information to inform decision makers in government as well as informing our community campaigns at a grassroots level.
2. We also develop resources and train women so they are better aware of their rights. We have a separate website for our national helpline (www.mwnhelpline.co.uk) that provides advice and support on a range of issues including: domestic abuse, forced marriage, honour based violence, sexual exploitation and abuse, female genital mutilation, hate crimes, discrimination, mental health etc.
3. The impact of our work is particularly felt in reducing the vulnerability of Muslim women and girls, reducing the prejudice they face, and giving them greater access to rights and services – all of which allow them to contribute to society like any other citizen. We are also creating a critical mass of voices to influence change with more women being confident to challenge discriminatory practices within their communities and in society and to influence policy makers.
4. Although we work predominantly with Muslim/BAME women and girls and will primarily focus on the experiences of Muslim/BAME women and girls within our Evidence, the points we raise may equally apply to non-Muslim/non-BAME women and girls generally (and in certain cases, men and boys).

Evidence

5. As the only national charity working with and providing a frontline service to Muslim women and girls in the UK, it is perhaps no surprise that we deal with female victims of abuse on a regularly basis – which continues to be the case during the Covid-19 crisis we find ourselves in. Our Helpline evaluations show that domestic abuse has consistently appeared as a top five issue since the MWN Helpline's inception in January 2015. Forced marriage, sexual abuse/violence, sexual exploitation, so-called revenge pornography, so-called honour based abuse and FGM are also key issues that are regularly dealt with by the MWN Helpline. Further details and statistics relating to these issues can be found on our MWN Helpline Data Dashboard: <http://www.mwnuk.co.uk/muslim-women-helpline-dashboard.php>
6. The support we provide to our beneficiaries ranges from providing practical and emotional support, liaising with police officers, refuges, social workers and other key stakeholders, providing case work support, providing counselling services, and providing assistance through emergency funds. Informed by our service users'

experiences, we also raise awareness of the issues so that victims and potential victims are better aware of their rights and the support available to them (such as through resource production, workshops and outreach activities) and we also campaign for change.

7. Given the very real need for our services, we made the decision to continue to operate our MWN Helpline despite the difficulties and hurdles we face in during these unprecedented times. Recently we have also launched our members platform, 'We Rise', through which our members are able to share their views, thoughts, questions and concerns (www.mwnwerise.co.uk). All this allows us to provide specific insight into the issues faced by female victims of abuse during the Covid-19 pandemic and our recommendations within this Evidence are based on the lived experiences of our beneficiaries.
8. We would like to thank the Home Affairs Committee for holding an Inquiry into domestic abuse and the risks of harm within the home during the crisis. We now make the following submissions to the Inquiry:

Summary

9. There has been a very real increase in abuse and risks of harm since the 'stay at home' guidance has been issued, specifically because restrictions have been placed on victims and potential victims being able to safely seek support and advice or even take preparatory steps to escape without alerting their abuser to their plans.
10. It is not only in respect of domestic abuse and child abuse that the risks have increased but also in respect of forced marriage and sexual exploitation (particularly as perpetrators are now more likely to use the online model of grooming to target victims).
11. There is a clear need for more support to be provided to frontline organisations, particularly specialist BAME support services, to ensure that necessary, specialist support can continue to be provided to victims and potential victims of abuse. Faith and culturally sensitive counselling in particular needs to be prioritised. Third sector organisations are severely lacking in funds and resources and urgently require more support so that they can continue to operate during the crisis.
12. There is an urgent need for more temporary and permanent accommodation to be made available for victims facing abuse, and their children. Such accommodation needs to be safe, affordable and also needs to be fit for purpose; this includes ensuring that kitchens and other facilities are available for use by them.
13. It is also vital that decision making by the government first takes into account the lived realities of victims of abuse and takes steps to reduce financial dependency and destitution. A key example of where the government has not considered the impact on victims of abuse is the decision for the Child Maintenance Service to stop chasing defaulting parents who are not making maintenance payments during this crisis, a decision which is now being used by abusers to continue to harm their victims.

14. Awareness raising campaigns are also necessary so that victims and potential victims (and their parents), particularly those in Muslim and other ethnic minority communities, are informed of the risks surrounding online grooming, so-called revenge pornography and sexual exploitation. This is especially important given that a lot more children and young adults will be spending time online.

Prevalence of these issues since the Government issued 'stay at home' guidance on 23rd March

15. Our Helpline statistics show that domestic abuse continues to be an issue during the Covid-19 crisis and our cases also show that the 'stay at home' guidance is adding to the harms and risks of harms experienced by women and girls. This is occurring in three key ways:
 - a) by removing the availability of 'safe time' or 'safe space' during which victims or potential victims could safely make a call to emergency services or third sector organisations (like MWN UK) to seek help and support. The closure of schools and nurseries has in our opinion had the most impact in this respect as 'school runs' would usually be the best opportunity for victims to safely make a call without their abusers suspecting that they are taking any steps to escape. There is also no safe time or space to be able to pack their belongings without arousing suspicion, or even trying to leave the house with their children without alerting their abuser as to their intentions.
 - b) by providing abusers with the perfect excuse and environment by which to isolate, control and harm victims (coercive control)
 - c) by exacerbating already tense and fragile situations so as to increase the risk of harm or escalating pre-existing abusive situations so as to increase the level of harm inflicted on the victim. This is best demonstrated by the following MWN Helpline case that we have been dealing with during the Covid-19 crisis:

"Domestic abuse has already been inflicted on the victim during the course of the marriage but the issues are being escalated due to the lockdown. The husband keeps telling the wife to send the children to school (which she cannot) as he does not like having the house 'dirty'. He is also refusing to provide any financial support. This is taking a toll on both the victim and her children and she wants to leave".

16. It is very clear that domestic abuse has been increasing since the 'stay at home' guidance has been issued, as has been noted in the media on several occasions; the most concerning report is of course that domestic abuse related murders have more than doubled in the last few weeks¹. However, we also feel compelled to make the point that even the reports of increases of abuse are very unlikely to highlight the true scale of the situation. If we look at our own MWN Helpline statistics and compare the number of domestic abuse cases dealt with during the lockdown in comparison to this time last year, then the number of domestic abuse cases have during lockdown dropped by half. Whilst a small part of this may be due to operational reasons arising from needing to switch to working remotely, we believe a key factor involved is the lack of safe time/space available to victims. If victims and potential victims are constantly around their abusers then they are simply unable to seek help.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/apr/15/domestic-abuse-killings-more-than-double-amid-covid-19-lockdown>

17. We must point out that we have specifically increased our availability through online means (emails and webchat) to take into account the fact that victims may no longer be able to safely call us. Whilst this is likely to assist to a certain extent, we also need to be mindful that victims and potential victims still need to use such online means in a safe manner, which may not be possible if their abuser is constantly around. Indeed, their abusers may be constantly monitoring their activities. As such it is very important to consider alternative ways that victims may be supported and provided opportunities to seek help; this is only possible if the differing experiences of all victims are taken into account. We are supportive of recent calls for supermarkets to provide ways for victims to seek help through them. However it must be borne in mind that not all victims will be provided with the opportunity to leave the house at all. The abuser may be the one that goes shopping, insisting that the victim stays at home. However the victim may live with extended family members or there may even be surveillance at home (as part of the campaign of abuse and control by the perpetrator) and so even if the abuser leaves the house, that does not mean the victim is able to call or email for help. Additionally, even if victims are able to leave the home for some reason, they may not be able to seek help due to language barriers, disabilities or indeed due to their insecure immigration status. It is crucial that we look at all the reasons why victims and potential victims are unable to seek help and take steps to assist.
18. Abuse in the form of financial control is also very prevalent and much easier for abusers to inflict. This can include forcing victims to transfer their salaries and/or welfare benefits on the basis that victims do not need the money since they are 'staying at home', forcing victims to hand over their debit or credit cards so that the abuser can be 'in charge' of expenditure and leave the house to shop whilst the victim remains at home or even going as far as forcing the victim to take out credit cards and loans online. Coercive control has always been very real but the risks are now exacerbated even further because the victim has no means of seeking support or even to think of an 'excuse' to not cooperate with the abusers demands without further aggravating their abuser. It is very important that banks are asked to remain vigilant in this respect.
19. We are also aware of issues around child contact with a non-resident parent. Whilst we do appreciate that for the majority of parents the decision to stop physical contact will have been made having taken into the account the safety and welfare of the child as well as other members of the family, there are nevertheless a number of individuals who are using the lockdown as a means by which to break contact between a parent and child and inflict harm on both parent and child in this way. We would ask that guidance be issued to encourage parents in such a situation to take a pragmatic approach and rely on technology to continue to maintain contact, such as through the use of video chats.
20. It is also very important to remember that the risks of harm are not limited to domestic abuse but also include risks of sexual abuse, financial abuse, honour based abuse and child abuse. If we look at our recent MWN Helpline figures relating to sexual abuse during lockdown and compare it to the same time period in 2019, it is noteworthy that the number of rape/sexual assault cases remain constant. This is despite the fact that it will be even harder for victims to seek help and support for the same reasons as

victims of domestic abuse; the true extent of sexual violence and abuse during lockdown is bound to be substantially higher.

21. Leading on from the above, we wish to share that we have seen a reduction in forced marriage cases and not dealt with any sexual harassment or FGM cases since the 'stay at home' guidance has been issued by the government. However we do not believe that this is because there has been a reduction in these abuses, or the risks thereof, but rather that victims and potential victims are no longer able to seek help.
22. We are also concerned that the increased use of online platforms during lockdown, including social media and whatsapp groups, are likely to see an increase in online based grooming. This is especially the case for children who are no longer in school and are perhaps spending more time online as part of their home-schooling activities, or generally out of boredom. Parents may not be able to supervise the online activities of their children as much as before (due to added burdens of working from home and looking after children at the same time, needing to home-school, needing to look after elderly parents etc), and perpetrators of abuse are likely to take advantage of the unprecedented times to groom victims. In June 2019 we launched a report titled 'Muslim women's experiences of the criminal justice system'², in which we highlight how risks of harm are exacerbated for female Muslim victims of so-called revenge-pornography due to concepts of shame and dishonour that are prevalent in Muslim and other ethnic minority communities. Crucially we wish to refer you to case study 6 within our report in which a female Muslim victim was blackmailed by her friend; her friend threatened to share a completely non-sexual photograph of her with a male friend with her family if she didn't pay her money. The risk for the victim was that, even though the photograph was completely non-sexual and just of her standing with a male friend, her family were likely to interpret that as evidence of her being in a relationship with said male friend. This would increase risks of forced marriage or honour based violence for the victim. We share this case study to highlight how even wholly benign or 'innocent' (for want of a better word) images and messages can create a risk of honour based abuse for victims and if victims can be groomed into providing sexually explicit images or texts then the risks will naturally be exacerbated. Indeed in our 2013 report, Unheard Voices, we discuss in detail the online model of grooming and our fears are very much based on the research previously conducted on this very real and live issue.³
23. Spiritual abuse is also a similar risk during this crisis though not necessarily due to the 'stay at home' guidelines. At a time when many individuals are facing financial losses and suffering health issues, it came as no surprise to us that many individuals have taken advantage of the situation to peddle 'Islamic' cures. This is highly dangerous as it could mean that individuals do not seek appropriate medical help when they need to, or do not practice social distancing and proper hygiene, due to such shams.

Measures or proposals to help support victims of domestic abuse and child abuse at this time

² https://www.mwnuk.co.uk/go_files/resources/Muslim_Women_and_Criminal_Justice_FINAL.pdf

³ http://www.mwnuk.co.uk//go_files/resources/UnheardVoices.pdf

24. In the first instance, it is imperative that those organisations providing support to victims of abuse are given all the support and resources necessary to continue to assist those in need. A recurring theme, particularly within specialist BAME organisations, that has been brought to our attention are the limitations faced due to a lack of sufficient phone and laptops to enable remote working. Not all charities and voluntary groups are able to purchase laptops and mobile phones to enable remote working which either means shutting down during this crisis or reducing services. It is therefore imperative that the government provides assistance to frontline organisations working with victims so that they are equipped with the technology and any other resources necessary to continue assisting victims.
25. It is also very important for key frontline organisations to be provided with additional funds that can be used to specifically provide financial assistance to those individuals facing hardship as a result of the pandemic, and the economic impact of the same. We provide funds through our MWN Hardship Fund for example, and requests for support from our Hardship Fund is likely to increase due to the crisis. However, the 'stay at home' provisions mean that fundraising will be severely affected. Whilst we are predominately grant-funded, last year for example we raised almost £8000 through our individual fundraisers. This level of fundraising will not be possible this year and this in turn will affect the support we can provide to victims of abuse.
26. Additionally, we feel that there is a very obvious gap in the support packages made available to the charity sector. Whilst we are grateful that the furlough provisions have been extended to the charity sector and allows charity workers to be placed on furlough and receive 80% of their salary, what has been missed is that there will be charity workers who are able to work (and are needed to continue to work in order to continue supporting victims of abuse) but who may not be able to work their full hours. For example, a charity worker who usually works 35 hours a week may now only be able to commit to 20 hours a week due to caring responsibilities or even due to health or mental health reasons. As an under-funded organisation, the charity cannot justify paying them a full salary if all those hours cannot be worked. However, reducing their hours to 20 hours would result in a significant reduction in their salary and therefore furlough would be the more appropriate option for them. However, placing them on furlough means a loss of 20 hours of work – or 20 hours of support that could have been given to a victim of abuse. It would therefore be useful if support could be provided from the government so that the charity worker in the example above can still work their 20 hours and the remainder (or a proportion thereof) can be met by the government. It is also important to consider the mental health needs of all key workers and consider rewards or incentives that can be given to boost morale during very difficult times.
27. There is also a dire need for more faith and culturally sensitive counselling services to be made available. This is perhaps best demonstrated by the following case from our MWN Helpline (a case that we have been dealing with since the lockdown):

"Aasma has been physically and emotionally abused by her mother. Recently she moved into a refuge and feels safe for the first time. However, the move has also been emotionally draining and she wanted to speak to the MWN Helpline about the Islamic perspective in respect of maintaining a relationship with parents".

The above case highlights why faith and culturally sensitive counselling is important more than ever; the 'stay at home' guidance is likely to exacerbate feelings of loneliness and could lead to victims of abuse returning to the abusive situations that they had managed to escape.

28. Linked to the above, we are somewhat concerned by the number of new 'listening services' that have been started since the lockdown. Whilst we are sure the intentions are most likely to be noble and with an intention to assist, we are concerned that such 'pop-up' services are likely to detract victims of abuse away from the specialist services and may not be able to provide the expert knowledge and support that the victims or potential victims need. We are also worried as to whether such pop-up services will have appropriate safeguarding procedures in place to assist victims or potential victims. This is especially concerning because we know that the Covid-19 crisis is creating novel and increasing demanding situations. We would therefore ask that such new services be encouraged to sign-post to established helplines and service providers instead and guidance should be issued to that effect.
29. It is also crucial to ensure that appropriate support is made available for individuals with mental health issues and disabilities as they are particularly vulnerable during this crisis. The following MWN Helpline case highlights why this is especially vital:

"Reema is a victim of domestic abuse. She has been diagnosed with bi-polar disorder which her husband and in-laws constantly use against her, in a bid to undermine the credibility of her allegations. She was due to start cognitive behaviour therapy but this has been delayed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. She is feeling very lonely and isolated"

Although Reema has been able to seek support from our MWN Helpline, there will be many others unable to do so and it is crucial that support needed by such individuals is not delayed or stopped.

30. The crisis has also reduced opportunities that would have otherwise been available to uncover instances of actual and suspected abuse, such as through health visitor visits. Although we are aware that other forms of contact is still in place, in the form of telecare, the ability to assess whether an individual may be at risk of abuse has been significantly reduced. It is nevertheless important to utilise such contact opportunities as best as possible to assist victims at risk.
31. Help also needs to be provided to victims and potential victims who need to leave an abusive situation and/or relocate for their safety and wellbeing. This includes urgently making available more safe, temporary accommodation and taking steps to make available more permanent accommodation. Temporary accommodation, such as refuges, also need to be fit for purpose during a time of crisis so that individuals have the necessary facilities available to use in a safe and hygienic manner (such as kitchens and bathrooms). We received a call recently from a service user who has been placed in a hotel with her five children and was provided with food parcels by charities which included oil and pasta shells; however the items provided could not be used by her as she only has access to a microwave. With many restaurants and takeaways now closed and the social distancing measures in place, it is harder than

ever for her to be able to source hot and healthy food. Financial assistance should also be provided to allow travel to refuges and other safe spaces.

32. Unsurprisingly, the Covid19 crisis has increased the risks of abuse and risks to health for individuals with insecure immigration status. Although these vulnerabilities remain live at all times, we strongly urge that data-sharing between the NHS and Home Office be halted temporarily and at least temporarily lift the ban on recourse to public funds. We also hope that the Home Office is able to prioritise and expedite the processing of Domestic Violence (DDV) Concession applications.
33. Finally, it would be very useful if it could be made clear to those living with vulnerable and extremely vulnerable individuals (in terms of risk relating to Covid-19 itself) that they must take all relevant precautions to ensure that such individuals can be protected. We wish to share the following MWN Helpline case study:

"Although there has not been any physical abuse involved in the relationship as of yet, Sameera and her husband have always had issues which she puts down to their inability to communicate effectively with one another. However now tensions are very much increasing and whilst the husband has still not been physically abusive, he does appear to be showing signs of emotional abuse – one key example being that he is not correctly following social distancing rules and is continuing to go to work (even though he does not have to) despite the fact that he knows that Sameera is considered extremely vulnerable (a letter was sent to her by the NHS to confirm this) and has various other health needs".

The above is particularly concerning as it would appear that the husband is ultimately endangering the life of the service user. This could be a tactic employed by others as a means to inflict harm on individuals and we therefore feel guidance is necessary to address this issue.

Measures or proposals to reduce or avert domestic abuse and child abuse at this time

34. In the first instance, we think it is vital that victims and potential victims, particularly those in Muslim and other ethnic minority communities, are informed of the risks surrounding online grooming, so-called revenge pornography and sexual exploitation. This is especially important to decrease the risks of harm mentioned at para. 17 above.
35. Individuals will be at greater risk of forced marriage due to the lockdown as they will be spending much more time around those who may be applying emotional pressure – and will be exposed to greater amounts of pressure. Indeed, the pandemic itself could be used as the means to place emotional pressure, such as suggesting that a parent or grandparent may be dying soon due to Covid-19 and just want to see the victim married before they die. In some cases, the wedding itself may be planned for some time after the lockdown has ended and/or crisis has been averted but getting the victim to agree to marriage in the first place would be the key step to apply more pressure and force the victim to feel guilty for agreeing to the marriage and allowing plans to be made. It is also important to note that in Muslim communities it is not actually necessary to have the bride and groom physically present in one place for an Islamic-only marriage to be performed; they can very easily be conducted by Skype,

Zoom or even over the phone. This is why it is imperative more than ever that the laws are changed so that it becomes an offence to conduct a religious marriage that is not capable of becoming a lawful marriage or ensuring that a lawful marriage has taken place. This way abusers cannot misuse the loophole of religious-only marriages to trap victims during this lockdown. It is also important to raise awareness of the laws around forced marriage so that victims who are facing emotional pressure during lockdown can be reminded that they have the right to refuse to be married and that forced marriage is a crime. Many charities, including MWNUK, already have videos which could be shared and so it is not necessary to re-invent the wheel but rather the government can assist by promoting the videos and other resources currently available.

36. We must also remain vigilant of the fact that victims or potential victims of forced marriage or FGM may be taken abroad as soon as restrictions on travel are relaxed or lifted, especially with the upcoming summer holidays. It is important to remain live to the risks of such abuses and ensure that resources are allocated to prevent victims from being removed from the UK for such purposes.
37. It is also imperative that financial independence can be maintained during this crisis. We are deeply concerned that it is women, particularly Muslim/BAME women, that are being affected the most financially by the economic turmoil. Although the government has stated that individuals placed on furlough can receive 80% of their salaries, we are already seeing instances where the government is no longer upholding this commitment, such as in the case of nursery workers. Additionally, where women are already on low salaries due to a combination of low pay and needing to work part time, losing 20% of their income places a significant burden on their finances and resources. Indeed the financial dependence being caused by Covid-19 is resulting in many victims of abuse deciding to remain at home with their perpetrator than to leave for safety, as leaving could mean financial destitution. This is being demonstrated by our own MWN Helpline cases where a victim of abuse wants to relocate with her children but is unable to due to the lockdown and her financial situation. It is vital that the support packages are reviewed to ensure that the measures are truly supporting individuals and not pushing them towards abuse and destitution.
38. Leading on from the above, some employers are choosing not to place employees on furlough for various business reasons (in particular to continue servicing clients) but are nevertheless reducing salaries. Employees affected by such decisions are therefore having their salaries reduced despite still working their usual hours and potentially also having to look after children or elderly at the same time. Current government packages do not appear to have taken into account this scenario and as such, support is not available for such individuals. This is very much linked to the issue of abuse and risk of harms as this can lead to not just financial dependence but also physical dependence on their abuser, if for example they need their abuser to help with childcare whilst they continue to work.
39. We were also very concerned to hear that the Child Maintenance Service is no longer chasing defaulting parents during the Covid-19 crisis, with no alternative process in place to ensure that payments continue to be paid (and paid on time). We are already seeing that abusers are using this decision wholly to their advantage by refusing to make maintenance payments during this crisis, despite knowing that this could

severely impact the non-paying parent's financial resources and ultimately their children. This situation is exacerbated further due to shortages in food and difficulties in being able to secure online deliveries; if maintenance payments are not made on time or at all, this could logistically affect the ability to obtain food and other essential items. This is then exacerbated even further for Muslims given that Ramadhan is starting soon. It is therefore essential that the Child Maintenance Service starts contacting defaulting parents again, or that an alternative process is urgently put in place. At present the Child Maintenance Service website simply states, 'you may have to wait longer to get money that is owed to you'. However we do not know how long this crisis will last and individuals could be waiting a significant period of time and accruing debts and falling into destitution in the meantime. We would also strongly urge that special penalties are introduced for those who are very clearly defaulting simply to harm, harass, abuse or coerce a non-paying parent in light of the recent changes.

40. We also ask that the Child Maintenance Service rely upon tangible proof of a reduction in the paying parent's income before reducing the maintenance sums owed to the non-paying parent. Additionally, where the reduction in maintenance sums is Covid-19 related, further assistance should be made available.
41. We also ask that some form of relief be provided in respect of rental payments to reduce the financial burdens arising as a result of Covid-19. Otherwise not only can it increase financial dependency and/or lead to financial destitution, but could lead to an increase in sexual abuse meted out by landlords (i.e. 'sex for rent').
42. To expand on our comment made at para. 31 above, the issue of housing and rent costs is of course very much linked to the ability for victims of abuse to escape. In addition to making safe spaces available, we also need to ensure that such spaces are affordable. Even if space is available in a refuge, women who are employed (even if they are nevertheless on a low income) are usually required to pay rent, utilities and service charges which in our experiences can be quite substantial and in turn unaffordable. In many instances it can actually be cheaper to rent privately. However, as a result of the crisis, women are already losing significant proportions of their income and therefore trying to find rental accommodation will be very difficult; indeed, trying to view properties given the social distancing guidelines can be problematic. We would therefore ask that consideration be given to provide support and subsidies so that no victim is forced to remain in an abusive situation due to not being able to afford to leave.
43. We would also ask that banks and other financial institutions are asked to remain vigilant of potential instances of financial abuse and ask questions. This may deter perpetrators and help protect victims.

Preparedness of responders and service providers to address the needs of victims during the pandemic

44. We must begin by noting and thanking the emergency services, third sector and all other keyworkers for the strength, resilience and tenaciousness that has been shown to adapt and address the needs of society as a result of the crisis. For the purposes of the Inquiry, we would especially like to thank the family courts for very quickly adapting

their procedures so that the likes of non-molestation orders can still be obtained through virtual hearings, and victims can still be protected.

45. The ability to prepare for such a pandemic was of course stunted by the wholly unprecedented circumstances we find ourselves in but we must nevertheless make the comment that responses have all been limited due to the limited funds and resources that have been made available in recent years; the preparedness of responses and service providers has in our opinion been hindered by years of austerity measures.
46. At the MWN Helpline, we have been receiving a lot more calls from the likes of social workers requesting support to provide assistance that we consider to fall within the remit of the local authorities. This could for example be assistance to provide food, clothing etc. There is also a dire need for both permanent and temporarily accommodation, as a result of which many victims are being forced to remain at home with their abusers. Various refuges have had to reduce their services due to the difficulties of following social distancing rules in housing with multiple families. Indeed, given the increased risks of abuse, it will be even higher demand for spaces and even less refuge and other temporary accommodation spaces available. Ultimately years of shortages in housing has meant that local authorities are not able to provide spaces and services to victims in need. This then places a burden on the charity sector, who in turn are unable to meet the increasing demands due to a lack of funds and resources. Indeed we feel that a key reason for the current issues being faced by Muslim and other ethnic minority victims of abuse is linked to the lack of funding and support given to BAME specialist services, particular BAME refuges and specialist support providers. It is vital that funding is specifically made available for such services, particularly BAME refuge providers, to ensure that the needs of BAME victims are met. This does also feed into wider discussions about the lack of priority given to specialist BAME organisations, in favour of larger mainstream organisations, and the financial and administrative burdens arising as a result. These are issues we have discussed in detail in our response to the Ministry of Justice's 2018 Consultation on Transforming the response to domestic abuse⁴.
47. Those that have been provided with accommodation are also not receiving the support they need during the lockdown; we have received calls to our Helpline for example, from female victims of abuse (with children) who are unable to have any hot food as they either do not have access to a kitchen or it is very difficult to use any available kitchen due to social distancing measures and they are struggling between eating healthily and maintaining social distance to protect themselves and their families from Covid-19.
48. We also wish to make the point that, whilst the police and courts have of course been working extremely hard during these difficult times and must be commended for their efforts, it was only last year that we had published a report that highlighted the issues and barriers faced by Muslim women when attempting to obtain justice, and the failings on the part of the criminal justice system in this respect⁵. These issues

⁴ http://www.mwnuk.co.uk//go_files/resources/779026-MOJ%20Domestic%20Abuse%20Consultation%202018.pdf

included not recognising the risks associated with honour based abuse, not providing victims' with updates on a regular basis and not taking action in a timely manner. We understand that a lack of funds and resources were a key factor in such issues arising and we are concerned that, at a time when the burdens on the criminal justice system will be more than ever before, that these issues will also continue to occur and may be exacerbated by the crisis.

Effectiveness of Government advice, co-ordination and support for responders and service providers

49. As mentioned above, we have all found ourselves in unprecedented times and therefore all stakeholder agencies must be commended for the hard work and adaptability shown during this crisis. However, we do feel that effectiveness of government advice has been limited due to the lack of funds and resources that have been made available, especially to the charity sector. We also feel that greater support could be provided to keyworkers and to the service providers.
50. We feel that support packages and guidance issued has not fully taken into account the diverse needs and lived realities of victims and potential victims of abuse, nor organisations like MWNUK which provide them with support. As a result, the support packages are lacking and decisions taken, such as suspending the Child Maintenance Service's ability to chase defaulting parents who do not pay maintenance, are increasing abuse and risks of harm. It is vital that decisions are made after considering the impact on those most vulnerable during this crisis, and ensure that appropriate funds and resources are made available to address needs.

Final Comments

51. For the avoidance of doubt, all names referred to above are pseudonyms and all case studies have been anonymised.
52. As a point of clarification, we must explain that where our comments and examples have been limited to Muslim and BAME girls, this is due to the nature of our organisation and its work. As a national Muslim women's charity our work predominantly deals with Muslim and BAME women and girls albeit we also work with individuals of other faiths and are therefore also aware of issues of relevance to other faith and non-faith communities. We are also aware that some of the issues experienced by Muslim and BAME women and girls can also be experienced by non-Muslim, non-BAME women and girls, as well as men and boys. In turn we wish to clarify that where we make any recommendations, we do so on behalf of all those within wider society who may be affected.
53. We would like to thank the Home Affairs Committee for holding this Inquiry and thank you for providing us with the opportunity to give Evidence. We hope it proves to be useful in your considerations.

(COR0088)

Nazmin Akthar
Co-Chair

April 2020