

Written evidence submitted by Nordic Model Now! (MRS0089)

About us

Nordic Model Now! (NMN) is a secular feminist grassroots women's group campaigning for the Nordic Model, the equality and human rights-based approach to prostitution. All members are unpaid volunteers and the group includes survivors of prostitution. We run on a shoestring and have no funding other than (mostly small) donations from supporters. See <http://nordicmodelnow.org/> for more information.

Summary

We start with general concerns about the measures the Government has put in place in response to the virus. We then provide a general introduction to the very high levels of inequality affecting people with protected characteristics (PCs) preceding the Covid-19 crisis and that this is because the Government has failed to implement equality mainstreaming measures. We follow this with some general and specific observations on the impact of the Covid-19 measures on women in particular, and finally we discuss the impacts on the most marginalised women, particularly those who are in prostitution or are turning to it under the coercion of extreme poverty. We end with recommendations for change.

Introduction

The Government's response to Covid-19 has been historically unprecedented. Never before have healthy people been quarantined *en masse*, with concomitant significant negative impacts on the economy and loss of ancient freedoms, for an indeterminate period.

This response has been implemented without proper consideration of the long-term consequences of the measures, and their [disproportionate](#)¹ impact, particularly on historically disadvantaged groups (i.e. people with protected characteristics). Already we are seeing an [increase in deaths](#)² caused **by the measures** rather than the virus, including a significant increase in [domestic homicide](#),³ and this is likely to increase as the [social](#)⁴ and [economic catastrophe](#)⁵ caused by the measures unfolds.

More targeted measures (such as the quarantining of people infected with the virus and their close contacts, putting extra resources into protecting the old and vulnerable, the temporary banning of large events, etc.) might have been as effective in slowing the spread of the virus without causing so many negative consequences for individuals, the social fabric, and the economy.

Equality mainstreaming

This crisis has brought into sharp focus the lack of equality mainstreaming at the heart of Government decision making. By equality mainstreaming, we mean the explicit consideration of the impact of all policies, legislation and measures on different groups – in particular those covered by the protected characteristics laid out in the Equality Act 2010.

We need to remember why the protected characteristics and the public sector equality duty (PSED) were created in the first place. The aim was not to prevent people's feelings being hurt – but rather to end discrimination and redress the institutional and systemic disadvantaging of particular social groups.

But since 2010, instead of a gradual ending and redressing of these historical wrongs, we've seen the opposite – a steady **increase in inequality** as it relates to the historically disadvantaged groups covered by the protected characteristics, particularly [women](#),⁶ Black, Asian and other minority ethnic (BAME) people, disabled people, and children.

Because of Government actions since 2010, women have again been driven into economic dependence on male partners – giving them disproportionate power within the relationship and therefore making it more likely they will be abusive and violent. Welfare [changes](#)⁷ and [defunding](#)⁸ of specialist services for abused women have made it hard, if not impossible, for many women to leave a violent partner.

This increase in inequality has happened alongside an explosion in the availability of pornography – [most](#)⁹ of which features brutal misogynistic violence – and the pornification of the wider culture. This normalises both prostitution and male violence against women and girls (VAWG). It grooms girls to think that what's important is how they look, pleasing men and attracting male attention, and it grooms boys to become “users, takers, and pornography makers.” In other words, it grooms children to become fodder for the sex trade.

Since 2010 there has been a change in the way the [Home Office](#)¹⁰ and the police view prostitution. Gone is the understanding that prostitution is an institution of male dominance and a form of VAWG. Instead, the latest [police guidance](#)¹¹ now considers prostitution to be inevitable and not inherently harmful, and that most women who engage in it do so out of ‘choice’ that mustn't be questioned or challenged, and the guidance implies it would be wasting time to enforce legislation that penalises men who buy sex (punters) and brothel keepers. This contradicts binding obligations under [CEDAW](#)¹² and the [Palermo Trafficking Protocol](#)¹³ and has served to further normalise prostitution and men's sexual exploitation of women and girls.

As a result of all these factors, along with the rise of zero-hour contracts, poverty wages, student debt, etc, large numbers of women, particularly single mothers, BAME and disabled women, have extremely precarious finances and are never far from destitution. In the last few years many women have [turned to prostitution](#)¹⁴ under the coercion of extreme poverty, and many more are pimped and trafficked by ‘boyfriends’ and others who take advantage of their vulnerability.

Given these developments, it is not surprising that there are now epidemic levels of male VAWG, nor that there has been official reluctance to deal with it robustly. For example, rape is now effectively [decriminalised](#)¹⁵ and the [family courts](#)¹⁶ are often unable to deal appropriately with perpetrators of domestic violence.

To summarise:

1. Large numbers of women, particularly single mothers, BAME and disabled women, (and their children), are never far from destitution.
2. Large numbers of women (and their children) are at risk of violence and abuse from their male partners.
3. Large numbers of women are reliant on prostitution for raising the money for basic survival.
4. Large numbers of women are pimped by their partners (or others) who control them using violence and/or forms of coercive control.
5. Men now have virtual impunity to harass, abuse, buy sexual access to, and rape women and children.
6. The worsening social, economic and cultural inequality between the sexes has fed men's sense of entitlement *en masse*, leading many to believe that they have the 'right' to always have their own way – which is a key factor underpinning male VAWG.

All of this – including that the majority of those negatively impacted are covered by the protected characteristics of sex (women), race, disability and age (children) – was known before the Covid-19 crisis hit.

While the Government may not have deliberately set out to create this situation, it is the **predictable consequence** of their policies, their refusal to [implement the spirit and letter of the PSED](#),¹⁷ and blindness to the consequences of their actions. The PSED is the law of the land. How can the Government justify ignoring it?

General implications of the lockdown for women and children

The total lockdown means that everyone not deemed an 'essential' essential worker is effectively imprisoned in their homes along with their children, with brief excursions for shopping, exercise, and other essentials.

It is clear that, in the current climate of male entitlement and impunity explained above, this will lead to an increase in male VAWG and child abuse – not only because of the psychological pressure of imprisonment in the home, but because families are spending more time together out of sight of the community and its informal supervision.

Just as gender-neutral measures [invariably favour men](#)¹⁸ over women, the blanket lockdown favours those who are advantaged over the systematically disadvantaged, including women trapped in abusive relationships, single mothers, and BAME and disabled people.

Being in lockdown with your family in a spacious house with all mod cons, highspeed broadband, a garden, and a secure income is a very different experience than a single person

who's been laid off living in a tiny bedsit with no facilities, or a single mum with small children in a cramped flat, who's behind with her rent and can't pay the loan shark, or a [family of five](#)¹⁹ living in a single room on a low wage.

While the family in the spacious house may emerge from the lockdown largely unscathed, this is not the case for many others – and we should not be surprised if some of them don't emerge at all – because of suicide, VAWG, or because the stress of the situation so weakened their immune system that they succumbed to the virus. For mothers, and particularly single mothers, the additional emotional and practical load that coping with the lockdown requires is substantial and may push some over the edge.

The closure of public services, like libraries, public playgrounds, community centres, and mental health services, is likely to have a disproportionate impact on disadvantaged groups who are more likely to rely on them.

After the lockdown, those from disadvantaged groups may find their life chances significantly further reduced through the damage they have suffered – meaning that the lockdown will **increase** the severe inequality that already exists – particularly of women, BAME and disabled people, and their children.

All of this was predictable and could have been avoided or mitigated had the Government adopted an equality mainstreaming approach.

Examples of specific impacts

There are many ways that those with protected characteristics are disproportionately impacted during the lockdown. Here are just a few examples:

- There are few periods when women are more in need of social support than during pregnancy and the months after giving birth (PC: pregnancy and maternity). We are concerned that enforced isolation will have a devastating impact on pregnant women and new mothers, leading to an increase in postnatal depression and postpartum psychosis, and long-term negative consequences for both mother and child.
- We are concerned that not only children's education will be adversely affected but also their mental health and social development through the lack of opportunities to play with other children and to be out of the home in a safe environment.
- We are concerned about the impact of closures of face-to-face services on people with addictions and other mental health difficulties, and those who are socially isolated.

Emergency financial measures

We are concerned that the Chancellor's emergency measures disproportionately favour those who are already advantaged compared to those with protected characteristics. We support the [analysis and recommendations](#)²⁰ of the Women's Budget Group.

Prostitution

1. The factors that drive women into prostitution are getting worse

The realities that drive many women into prostitution – in particular extreme poverty and coercion by ‘boyfriends’ and others – have not gone away in this crisis and for many women they have got worse.

The Chancellor’s emergency measures have made little if any difference to these women’s finances. Sexual entertainment venues (SEVs) and brothels do not treat women working in them as employees and so they are not eligible for employee benefits like sick pay, annual leave, and furlough pay.

Women in prostitution who operate as sole traders or similar are unlikely to have paid enough National Insurance contributions or to have records covering the required period to be eligible for the emergency measures granted to the self-employed.

Women who also work full or part-time in areas like retail, hospitality, childcare and cleaning are [disproportionately](#)²¹ likely to be laid off.

And of course, women who have no recourse to public funds are hardest hit of all.

As a result, even larger numbers of women than before the crisis are now facing situations of extreme financial distress. The cumulative reductions over the last ten years in the social security system, including the bedroom tax, the two-child limit, the cap on housing payments, etc. along with delays, sanctions and clawbacks of advances, mean that Universal Credit does not cover many women’s rent and other outgoings, leaving many unable to feed themselves and their children.

What exactly does the Government expect women to do in this situation? Allow their children to starve to death? Lie down and die? Or defy the lockdown and turn to prostitution?

And if women do turn to prostitution as a last resort, will the Home Office, the CPS and the NPCC still consider it to be a free choice?

2. Practicing prostitution during the lockdown

The unequal power relations that women find themselves in as a direct result of Government policies over the last 10 years mean that it is no surprise that we are hearing reports of landlords and loan sharks [demanding sexual access](#)²² to women who are late with rent or payments.

We are hearing that in some areas there has been little change in the numbers of women in street prostitution nor in the numbers of punters kerb crawling.

We are also hearing that the lockdown has led to a sharp fall in demand from men for indoor prostitution. So many women are turning to web-camming and private sexual image galleries through [AdultWork](#)²³ and other online platforms, such as [OnlyFans](#)²⁴ – which come with significant risks of harassment and [content being stolen](#)²⁵ and shared.

Many women are so desperate financially that some are defying the lockdown and taking bookings for indoor prostitution – putting themselves and their families at risk from the virus in addition to all the normal risks of prostitution. They are [reporting](#)²⁶ a shift in the balance of power towards the punter – meaning punters push for lower prices, and more dangerous practices.

It is significant that now that it risks exposing men to the Covid-19 virus, many men have stopped or reduced their use of prostitution. This shows that prostitution [is not essential](#)²⁷ and that men can stop using prostitution when they understand that it puts themselves at risk. However, a significant minority have continued, showing that they have no regard for the safety and well-being of the women they are purchasing for sex.

3. Closure of services

The closure of face-to-face services during the lockdown is of particular concern.

- **Sexual health clinics** – The detection and treatment of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) is particularly important for women involved in prostitution and delay is likely to lead to lasting damage. As these clinics are how many women access a supply of condoms, their closure is likely to lead to a rise in the transmission of STIs and unwanted pregnancies. Provision of free condoms has already been significantly reduced and closure only exacerbates this issue further.
- **Addiction services** – It is well documented that many women in prostitution have substance abuse problems, often developed as a mechanism to cope with the unwanted physical and sexual contact. Women who have recently left prostitution are reporting that the closure of addiction services is jeopardising their recovery.
- **Support and exiting services** – While we have long argued that these services are inadequate and poorly funded, they do provide a lifeline to many vulnerable women and their closure – or moving from a face-to-face to an online service – is therefore catastrophic. Many of the most vulnerable women may not have Internet access and so are unable to use online options and much of the support street-based services provide is practical, for example supplying the women with necessities such as condoms, food and toiletries.

Recommendations

We are dividing our recommendations into two – those that are needed rapidly for the duration of the Covid-19 crisis, and long term changes to end the discrimination against women and others with protected characteristics that we have set out above and to redress the historic and systematic disadvantaging of these groups.

Immediate measures

1. Single mothers and other marginalised women need access to rapid financial support so that they are not left with the choice between destitution and prostitution.

2. The provision of safe and affordable housing for women who are destitute and who are involved in prostitution.
3. The immediate abandonment of the no recourse to public funds rule for migrant women.
4. The police and other authorities must be trained to understand that men pimping their partners is part of the picture of coercive control and domestic violence.
5. Face-to-face services that women rely on should be reopened at the very earliest opportunity.
6. Immediate commissioning of specialist support for women involved or at risk of involvement in prostitution, with an emphasis on tailored support to ensure every woman has genuine practical alternatives and to help them permanently exit the sex trade.

Long term measures

1. The immediate implementation of equality mainstreaming across all government departments.
2. The rethinking of the social security system so that a minimum liveable income is guaranteed for all.
3. Investment in training and decent jobs for women.
4. The rethinking of all policies relating to prostitution and the sexual exploitation of women and girls in the understanding that prostitution is an institution of male dominance and a form of male VAWG.
5. Investment in a nationwide network of high-quality services for women involved in prostitution to include trauma-informed care, woman-focused addiction services, and individually tailored support to exit and build a life outside.
6. Ending of men's impunity to harass, sexually assault and rape women and girls.
7. Ending of men's impunity for buying sex and pimping women – through a well implemented [Nordic Model approach](#).²⁸
8. Health and social workers to be trained about the realities of prostitution so they understand the choice narrative as a form of victim blaming.

Note that most of these recommendations were included in the CEDAW Committee's recent [Concluding Observations](#)²⁹ to the UK.

Please also see our [submission](#)³⁰ to the committee's 2019 inquiry into prostitution.

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¹ <http://ukhumanrightsblog.com/2020/04/21/a-disproportionate-interference-the-coronavirus-regulations-and-the-echr-francis-hoar/>

² <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/apr/15/sharp-rise-in-ill-patients-dying-at-home-since-coronavirus-outbreak>

³ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/coronavirus-domestic-abuse-uk-killings-women-girls-a9467131.html>

⁴ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/15/urgent-studies-needed-mental-health-coronavirus-lockdown>

⁵ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/19/nearly-seven-million-jobs-at-risk-if-lockdown-lasts-for-months>

⁶ <http://wbg.org.uk/analysis/assessments/>

⁷ <http://nordicmodelnow.org/2018/04/10/submission-to-the-women-equalities-committees-inquiry-on-the-implementation-of-sdg5/>

⁸ <http://www.womensaid.org.uk/what-we-do/campaigning-and-influencing/campaign-with-us/sos/>

⁹ <http://vaw.sagepub.com/content/16/10/1065.abstract>

¹⁰ <http://nordicmodelnow.org/2019/05/01/the-independent-review-of-the-modern-slavery-act-ignores-womens-human-rights/>

¹¹ <http://nordicmodelnow.org/2019/04/29/a-sexist-prism-national-police-guidance-on-policing-prostitution/>

¹² <http://nordicmodelnow.org/facts-about-prostitution/fact-cedaw-requires-countries-to-fight-pimping/>

¹³ <http://nordicmodelnow.org/2019/02/20/submission-to-the-home-affairs-committees-inquiry-into-modern-slavery-from-nordic-model-now/>

¹⁴ <http://nordicmodelnow.org/2018/11/07/submission-to-un-special-rapporteur-on-extreme-poverty-human-rights-in-the-uk/>

¹⁵ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/rape-prosecutions-uk-disclosure-mobile-phones-cps-a9160556.html>

¹⁶

http://www.naccc.org.uk/downloads/NewsItems/APPG_Inquiry_report_Domestic_Abuse_Child_Contact_and_the_Family_Court.pdf

¹⁷ <http://nordicmodelnow.org/2019/03/15/submission-to-the-women-equality-committee-inquiry-into-the-enforcement-of-the-equality-act/>

¹⁸ <http://nordicmodelnow.org/2018/04/20/the-domestic-abuse-bill-nice-try-but-it-doesnt-come-close/>

¹⁹ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/12/virus-hitting-hardest-modern-equivalent-victorian-slums>

²⁰ <http://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/FINAL.pdf>

²¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/19/nearly-seven-million-jobs-at-risk-if-lockdown-lasts-for-months>

²² <http://www.newsweek.com/landlords-sex-free-rent-female-tenants-1116559>

²³ <http://nordicmodelnow.org/2019/07/11/online-pimping-a-new-dystopia/>

²⁴ <http://www.spectator.co.uk/article/there-s-nothing-empowering-about-the-sex-work-on-onlyfans>

²⁵ <http://www.click.scot/news/blog/click-response-to-onlyfans-content-leak/>

²⁶ <http://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/otilliestadman/coronavirus-sex-workers>

²⁷ <http://nordicmodelnow.org/2020/04/10/facts-about-the-global-sex-trade-exposed-by-the-covid-19-pandemic-and-how-to-solve-them/>

²⁸ <http://nordicmodelnow.org/what-is-the-nordic-model/>

²⁹

<http://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=6QkG1d%2fPPRiCAqhKb7yhslldCrOIUTvLRFDjh6%2fx1pWANA8ZYaHoRL%2bOJRr72WCF11aFvFUALICWsm8eKNbzUHij4YKzONNGD0TNbffd0YmuaoJLkR9otjorXpuEqC4v%2f>

³⁰ <http://nordicmodelnow.org/2019/11/08/prostitution-wheres-the-harm/>