

Evidence submitted by Refugee Women Connect (COR0014)

Summary of Evidence

1. Refugee Women Connect recognise that gendered aspects of the refugee experience create additional stratifications of disadvantage to an already vulnerable population. We are currently working with our service users to mitigate crisis brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Although this situation is still unfolding, our service users are already reporting worrying concerns, often rooted in the lack of funds and resources available to asylum seekers in comparison to the home population. These concerns include;
 - The inability to receive important health advice or home schooling without access to phones or digital technology
 - The unsuitability of multi-occupancy accommodation and the lack of support services or social networks.
 - Subsisting on payments capped at over 50% of standard rates of benefits,
 - Women's fears of not having enough money to buy food for 14 days if self-isolation is required and concerns that essential items like nappies and formula milk are already very difficult to obtain.
 - That poor social networks and limited access to support services during lockdown will cause many women and their families risk going hungry.

Feedback from service users

2. On Monday 23rd March, service users were approached for feedback on the challenges of facing COVID-19 from inside the asylum system. Below are our findings.

Circulation of information

3. General feedback from our service users is that reliable information relating to COVID-19 is hard to come by meaning there is a general feeling of uncertainty. Many women are not using social media for safety reasons and some do not have access to a television so are instead receiving information through friends. Women state that there is so much uncertainty about COVID-19 that they are 'terrified' to leave the house. Many are single mothers and the responsibility of providing for their families falls on them; they feel pressured to provide for their children but feel they do not have enough knowledge to protect and provide for their families adequately. Many women have described an overwhelming fear that their children will contract COVID-19 if they leave the house but as single mothers do not have the option of leaving their children at home. Feedback and discussions with our service users suggest that calls from the government to only leave the house for food when necessary and solitary exercise have not been properly communicated and/or received; whilst stating they feel scared, many women have spoken about travel they still wish to make to visit friends they identify these trips as an essential of maintaining their mental health and reducing the negative impact of social isolation. Women suggested regular updates from involved organisations would be useful to ensure they are kept up to date with current events and have reliable, accurate information.

Health

4. Our service users state that access to health care is a concern during the current crisis. Our women say that they feel unable to approach their GP, with one woman stating that she believed her GP to be closed.
5. Service users highlight concerns about their practical ability to self-isolate. Many women live in houses of multiple occupancy (HMO) with shared cooking facilities and bathrooms. These

accommodations are often overcrowded and unsanitary. One woman is classed as 'vulnerable' under COVID-19 descriptors as she is three months pregnant. She feels her current accommodation is inappropriate due to large families sleeping in the same room, lots of foot traffic in the property and unsanitary shared facilities. She does not feel able to self-isolate or safeguard herself against COVID-19 in her current accommodation. This has been raised with her accommodation provider but no solution has been offered.

6. Many women have highlighted how the current crisis is having a negative impact on their mental health. Women have stated they feel 'scared', 'worried for the future' and 'lonely' amongst others. The usual support networks our service users access have been disrupted and the types of support they are offered have changed format which is causing many women to feel unsettled. We have had increased reports of severe anxiety and panic attacks which require staff intervention. There was overwhelmingly positive feedback for Refugee Women Connect to continue activities via group video calls and for consistent wellbeing checks to be made by staff as women felt this would help lift their moods and reduce feelings of isolation. Reassurance that support organisations remain open despite COVID-19 are crucial.

Education for children

7. Supporting children at home to learn whilst schools are closed is challenging for our service users, the majority of which do not have access to broadband connections or laptops. One woman has three school age children who have been advised that online learning resources have been arranged by the school for the children to complete. The woman has only one smart phone, no broadband and no laptop or computer access. She has raised the issue with her children's school but has not been provided another solution. Another woman is struggling to access the resources provided by her child's school as the format is incompatible with the tablet she has access to. Another woman has taken her children to a local internet café to do their school work but the shop has closed under government guidelines.

Impact on immigration status

8. Service users have consistently expressed their concern regarding their immigration status particularly relating to current claims they have open with the Home Office. Many women have stated that the Home Office is now 'closed', an impression they have been given largely because of the texts they have received suspending reporting appointments. Due to this perception, many women believe that no decision will be made on their case for the duration of the crisis and that they are unable to make further submissions during this time. Other women state that they believe the Further Submissions Unit in Liverpool to be fully closed, rather than just being closed for face to face appointments. This means women are delaying submitted their further submissions, consequently delaying their entitled access to Section 4 support. Women have stated that they are very concerned about what this means for their cases and that they hope that the Home Office will make up for lost time when they 'open' again.

Accessing essential living items

9. Access to food and other essential living items is the most cited concern of our service users. Women are struggling to source all their essential items from their local shops and are having to travel on public transport to multiple shops trying to source what they need. This is costly due to the need to pay for the bus and also increases their risk of being exposed to COVID-19. In particular women are finding it very difficult to find nappies or powdered milk from the shops; some women stated they had been looking for a week for supplies and had not been able to find anything despite visiting many shops.

10. Women highlighted a lack of money as a key pressure during this time. Many women are living on £37.75 per person per week and therefore cannot stock up on items when they see them meaning weekly shops are essential. One woman expressed her concern that if she fell ill and had to self-isolate she would not be able to go to the shops but also does not have enough money to ensure she has two weeks worth of food in her house. The suggestion that accommodation providers could provide essential living items to those in self-isolation is generally seen as a good safety net, though one woman expressed her concern that she finds her housing provider unreliable and unwilling to help at the best of times. It was also cited by many women that temporarily increasing payments would allow them to buy more food than normal and prepare for self-isolation as other members of society are able to do.
11. Women are also finding it hard to find cleaning supplies at present which is of great concern. The general consensus was that it would be helpful for their housing provider to support them during this time with small amounts of cleaning supplies. For women not accessing asylum support it would be helpful if charitable organisations such as support groups or foodbanks could help with this.
12. It has also been highlighted to us that there is a lack of suppliers of halal food in the city. There is one market in particular which they use but this frequently requires extensive travel on public transport which is being advised against and is also difficult due to a reduced timetable. Clients have suggested that local shops begin to stock halal foods for the duration of the pandemic to reduce the need for unnecessary travel.

Recommendations

13. An immediate increase in subsistence payments to ensure no woman or her family are without food during quarantine, are able to afford cleaning products and can buy data or phone credit essential for communication.
14. Ensure all women under the care of the Home Office have phones and that contact information is kept up to date for the purpose of receiving appropriate health advice and asylum claim updates in the correct languages. Phones are also a lifeline to support services including mental health and crisis support.
15. A strategy is put in place to address the social and health needs of asylum seeking women and their families in order to mitigate undue suffering at this difficult time. Particular consideration should be given to the mental and physical wellbeing of families and how the needs of children (including education) are safeguarded.
16. A safety net is introduced to ensure that symptomatic individuals who need to self-isolate do not have to leave the house to collect essential living items. We suggest housing providers should be involved in provision of this service under the AASC contracts and a specific contact number introduced to increase the ease of accessing this service and reduce the of requesting support through third parties.
17. Ensuring children are provided with appropriate learning resources regardless of access to computers/tablets or broadband to ensure they are afforded equal opportunity to learn.