

Who is WEN Wales?

1.1 WEN Wales is a representative women’s network¹ and human rights organisation. Our vision is a transformed Wales, free from gender discrimination. We call for a Wales where all women and men have equal authority & opportunity to shape society and their own lives.

1.2 WEN Wales is the welsh member of the four nations organisation, the UK Joint Committee on Women (UKJCW), the UK representative at the European Women’s Lobby.

1.3 WEN Wales submitted a Wales shadow report to the UN Committee for the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and spoke on behalf of women in Wales at the UK examination in February 2019. Our CEDAW shadow report and four nations shadow report can be found on our website: www.wenwales.org.uk/CEDAW

Response to the Inquiry:

2.1 In relation to COVID-19 and the impact on women, WEN Wales’ members stated that they are most concerned about the impact of the pandemic in five areas:

- Economic impact & the risk of women falling into poverty
- Impact of the coronavirus on disabled women and girls
- Impact of the coronavirus on BAME women and girls
- Violence against Women and Girls & the risk of increased VAWG during the crisis
- Health impacts on women during the COVID-19 crisis

Economic impact

3.1 We are concerned that many low-income families and women will be pushed into poverty by the crisis. The immediate priority must be to provide an urgent safety net for these groups. BAME women are especially vulnerable. They have lower incomes,

¹ Over 1500 individual members and organisational members, including women’s rights and allied organisations from across the third sector, academia, international and national NGOs.

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a higher proportion of income from the alternative economy, fewer savings, little or no access to credit or loans, and a very short period over which they can survive if their incomes stop.

3.2 In the **short term**, we urge the UK Government for **Universal Credit to be reformed urgently** to cope with increased demand: by **removing the five week waiting period, by extending the pay-back period, as well as by changing the eligibility criteria** so those who cannot look for work due to self-isolation or childcare responsibilities can receive payments during the pandemic. The UK Government must **increase the rates of child benefit, carers' allowance, parental leave payments and benefits payments for disabled women.**

3.3 In the **longer term**, we suggest a serious investigation into the implementation of a Universal Basic Income for Wales and other parts of the UK to remove the stigma of claiming benefits, allowing all people to live with dignity.

Impact of the Corona Virus on BAME women

4.1 The rapid rate at which restrictions have been introduced has had an immediate effect on BAME women and their families' capacity to survive. BAME women and their families are under immediate strain. Figures show that BAME women are more likely to be living with dependent children and more likely to be living in large families. Research from the Runnymede Trust² shows that BAME communities experience high rates of child poverty. **Removing the five-week wait for Universal Credit payments is critical for BAME communities.**

4.2 Opportunities to communicate with other women informally at the school gates or doctors' appointments are now removed and isolation and vulnerability is greatly heightened. Many BAME women do not possess mobile phones and cannot connect with their support networks. Many families do not have access to WIFI or computers. They are feeling frustrated as their children are not able to keep up with schoolwork.

4.3 Women who have already experienced domestic violence and other forms of violence against women, are feeling trapped and frightened. We are therefore calling

² <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/>

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for **specific targeted financial support for BAME women** and families as a matter of urgency.

Impact for Violence Against Women

5.1 WEN Wales welcomes that the Domestic Abuse Bill has returned to the Commons, at this unprecedented time, when protections for violence against women desperately need to be strengthened and we are thankful for the Welsh Members of Parliament who joined the debate.

5.2 The removal of the no recourse to public funds restrictions in Wales is very welcome, however it is essential that this is clearly communicated so that it is delivered in practice. Women across the UK should not be subjected to forms of VAWG because they have no recourse to public funds.

5.3 We are aware that the UK VAWG sector has written to the Prime Minister outlining major concerns regarding COVID-19 and VAWG. This letter can be found on Welsh Women's Aid's website³ and highlights:

- 1) Resourcing the specialist support sector
- 2) Crisis response planning and coordination involving VAWG and abuse experts
- 3) Strong public messaging and guidance on VAWG
- 4) Equal protection for migrant survivors

5.4 WEN Wales would like to bring the Committee's attention to our member Welsh Women's Aid's own submission to this inquiry regarding the impact of violence against women and COVID-19 in Wales.

Impact of COVID-19 Crisis on Women's Health

6.1 Arrangements need to be made to help those – especially women, who make up the majority of carers – who are disabled, isolated and/or caring for others and are on lower incomes, to pay the inevitably increased utility costs, such as water, electricity and gas.

³ <https://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/VAWG-sector-letter-PM-Covid-19-pandemic-FINAL-logos.pdf>

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6.2 This is a major concern to many of women in Wales who are living with chronic illness, who are often single parents, and on reduced incomes. While we recognise too that Universal Credit payments are going to increase, this will not help those on legacy benefits such as Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) or Personal Independence Payment (PIP), many of whom are in Wales and are living with long term illnesses.

6.3 We are deeply concerned that personal protective equipment (PPE) being used in the NHS and by key workers across the UK is purportedly designed to fit a “6ft 3in rugby player”, with health professions, experts and unions stating that women key workers’ lives are at risk due to ill-fitting PPE equipment.⁴ As 75% of workers in the NHS are female, the vast majority of staff with PPE are using equipment that is ‘default male’ and therefore inappropriate.⁵

6.4 The COVID-19 crisis must not be allowed to threaten women’s human rights and damage progress towards gender equality. For this reason, we urge the Committee to continue to closely follow the impact that Brexit is having on women’s rights and gender equality, as Brexit has the potential to roll back progress towards gender equality and weaken women’s rights which have been protected by the UK’s membership of the European Union.

6.5 WEN Wales calls on the UK Government to ratify the Istanbul Convention without delay and to incorporate the UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Violence against Women (CEDAW) into domestic law, as recommended by the United Nation’s CEDAW Committee in March 2019.

WEN Wales would like to thank the Women and Equalities Committee for the opportunity to feed into this consultation. Please do contact WEN Wales if we can be of any assistance during this crisis in reaching out to our 34k strong network of women and girls in Wales.

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/24/sexism-on-the-covid-19-frontline-ppe-is-made-for-a-6ft-3in-rugby-player>

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