

COVID-19 AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS

The Women's Equality Network (WEN) Wales call on all political parties and candidates to put gender equality and women's rights at the heart of the 2021 Senedd election.

We call for all political parties to commit to measuring the impact and mitigating the consequences and effects of COVID-19 on women in Wales so that gender equality and women's rights is not detrimentally impacted by the pandemic. Political parties must commit resources to recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic, including initiatives to 'build back better', rather than reinstate the status quo when this does not serve all women and is detrimental to gender equality.

Political Parties must:

- *ensure women are safe at home*
- *ensure women are safe at work*
- *prioritise women's health*
- *urgently tackle poverty in Wales*
- *ensure there are high-quality childcare & caring provisions for all*

i. Ensuring women are safe at home

The Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015 has placed the eradication of all forms of violence against women in Wales as a priority for current and future Welsh Governments. Access to specialist VAWDASV support services, including refuge provisions, the promotion of information around access to specialist services and the accountability of abusers – including work with police forces across Wales – has never been more needed.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted that home is not a safe place for many women and children across Wales who live with the everyday realities of domestic abuse, sexual violence, online abuse, stalking and harassment, forced marriage, so-called honour-based abuse and female genital mutilation (FGM). Disabled women, including those living with long-term ill health, are at high risk of domestic abuse.¹ Women's health is therefore a priority which we discuss further in section iii.

¹ <https://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/WWA-and-Disability-Wales-2019-report-Final-ENG.pdf>

Address

WEN Wales
c/o International House
10 Churchill Way
Cardiff
CF10 2HE

Contact

admin@wenwales.org.uk
wenwales.org.uk

Info

Charity Number:
1145706
Company Number:
07891533

To ensure all women and their children have access to a place of safety and to help mitigate the shockwaves of COVID-19 we call for the following commitments from political parties in their manifestos for the 2021 Senedd Cymru elections.

Under the next Welsh Government:

- Violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence must remain a strategic priority. Funding to the violence against women specialist sector must reflect the increased demand for specialist services following 'lockdowns' during the COVID-19 pandemic and ensure that no survivor is turned away from specialist VAWDASV services due to lack of provision. COVID-19 has demonstrated that now more than ever specialist services need to be in receipt of secure and sustainable funding for prevention, protection and support with a commitment to ending VAWDASV, not just managing a crisis response.
- A fund must be developed that can be used to support survivors with No Recourse to Public Funds and insecure immigration status so that all women have equal access to protection, safety and support. We believe strongly that No Recourse to Public Funds should be abolished.
- Decisions around the distribution of provisions need to recognise the specific forms which violence against disabled women may take, particularly where the primary 'carer' is the perpetrator; accessible information on violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence should be available in a range of formats; and publicity campaigns aimed at tackling domestic abuse should include disabled people and diversity across different forms of impairments in different communities, recognising that disabled people are not a homogenous group.
- Our communities must be supported to challenge VAWDASV in all its forms, encouraging active bystanders and ensuring survivors know that support exists and how to access it.
- Adequate provisions must be funded to support survivors for whom Welsh or English are not their first language, and to ensure that survivors from all communities across Wales are able to access appropriately tailored support and services, including those from all Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities. The so-called 'BAME community' in Wales is not a homogenous group – policies must reflect and be able to adapt to the unique needs of each community.

Address

WEN Wales
c/o International House
10 Churchill Way
Cardiff
CF10 2HE

Contact

admin@wenwales.org.uk
wenwales.org.uk

Info

Charity Number:
1145706
Company Number:
07891533

ii. Ensuring women are safe at work

It is imperative that women in employment are protected from harm across all working sectors in Wales. Employers that cannot ensure the safety of all staff, including pregnant women, must comply with current Health & Safety legislation. Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) should be used as a last resort. PPE reportedly does not fit many women's bodies appropriately², because of a default male design. Appropriate PPE for all body-types must be available when needed. We also call for the extension of the two-tier risk assessment for BAME workers to be rolled out to all workers, not just those in the Health and Social Care sectors³ as a matter of urgency.

BAME women disproportionately work in low-paid⁴, front-line jobs, from the health and care sector⁵, cleaning sector and retail. Political parties must outline how they will ensure that the next Welsh Government creates a safe environment to work in. Many BAME women feel that they cannot challenge unsafe working conditions as they cannot risk losing low-paid jobs.

For years, disabled people have been calling for flexible work practices to enable them to work from home⁶. For many, this request was denied until lockdown was imposed. Workers must be allowed to continue to work-from-home, with cultures of presenteeism challenged and broken down. Whether women are working from home or from external workplaces, policies must be in place to ensure that women's health is protected by employers. Further discussion on women's health can be found in the section iii below.

For some, workplaces are particularly important spaces to be part of, whether physically or digitally, and this can be especially the case for survivors of violence against women. Policies that protect staff must be appropriately adapted to home-based working and staff trained to recognise coercion, bullying and abuse of either a cohabiters (such as an intimate partner) or colleague, with appropriate violence against women policies in place within workplaces.

² <https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/PPEandwomenguidance.pdf>

³ <https://gov.wales/launching-risk-assessment-support-bame-workers>

⁴ https://chwaraeteg.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/TGC-Barriers-to-BAME-Women_Summary-Report.pdf

⁵ <https://seneddresearch.blog/2020/04/15/coronavirus-equality-issues/>

⁶ <http://www.disabilitywales.org/home-working-during-the-covid-19-crisis/>

Address

WEN Wales
c/o International House
10 Churchill Way
Cardiff
CF10 2HE

Contact

admin@wenwales.org.uk
wenwales.org.uk

Info

Charity Number:
1145706
Company Number:
07891533

We call on the next Welsh Government to:

- ensure that work is safe and that protective provisions such as PPE are appropriate for all members of staff, including women.
- implement widespread testing and tracing for COVID-19 to ensure that all workers are safe.
- ensure that pregnant women are not forced to work in unsafe conditions, with increased risk of contracting COVID-19. Guidance must be implemented to protect all working pregnant women are who feel unsafe at work.
- ensure work practices and policies are updated across Wales' workforces to allow workers to choose to work-from-home with appropriate support while still being protected under work policies and able to access personal and professional development opportunities, post-pandemic.
- ensure that employers are encouraged to reframe their sexual harassment workplace policies. Not only is there a 'double-burden' on those that experience unwanted physical contact, but employers must also be aware of the non-physical forms of sexual harassment which may occur.
- extend the two-tier risk assessment for BAME workers to be rolled out to all workers, not just those in the Health and Social Care sectors⁷ as a matter of urgency

iii. Prioritise women's health

While COVID-19 is a global health pandemic, the restrictions that have come with it have compounded pre-existing health inequalities faced by women in Wales. If not adequately addressed as we move beyond pandemic restrictions, women's health will be impacted further. These inequalities have been laid out in our 2020 Feminist Scorecard⁸, which was written in the months prior to the coronavirus outbreak. The Feminist Scorecard details how the Welsh Government must improve to ensure that women's health through the life course is no longer a taboo subject.

Access to women's health services across Wales are currently patchy and inconsistent⁹; this must be drastically improved upon, as a priority, by the next Welsh Government.

⁷ <https://gov.wales/launching-risk-assessment-support-bame-workers>

⁸ <https://wenwales.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Feminist-Scorecard-Report-2020-Eng.pdf>

⁹ Ibid.

Address

WEN Wales
c/o International House
10 Churchill Way
Cardiff
CF10 2HE

Contact

admin@wenwales.org.uk
wenwales.org.uk

Info

Charity Number:
1145706
Company Number:
07891533

Women must have access to high quality and the most appropriate healthcare services in a timely manner.

Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, we wrote to the Health Minister to call for Welsh Government to enable early abortion services to be procured via tele and video conference tools and called for reform regarding the authorisation of abortions so that medicines that terminate pregnancy could be taken at home. It is essential that this practice continues going forward. We also called for a change to the need for two doctors' signatures to authorise the termination of pregnancy. One signature from a professional such as a midwife, nurse or doctor should suffice, rather than two signatures, exclusively from doctors. Our call for these provisions extends well beyond the COVID-19 crisis.

We call on the next Welsh Government to:

- ensure the continuation of telemedicine for abortion consultations.
- the authorisation of abortions should require one signature, not two, from a health profession, e.g. a nurse, midwife, or doctor (not doctors exclusively).
- invest in high quality research into women's health and treatment and ensure that Wales-based clinical trials have a 50:50 between women and men (excluding medical procedures exclusively for women/men)
- make 'Menstrual Well-being Throughout the Life Course' a mandatory element of the school curriculum.
- make menopause the subject of a dedicated Public Health Wales campaign¹⁰.
- open specialist Mother and Baby Units (MBU) in Wales.
- ensure the provision of a pan-Wales diagnostic and management service for endometriosis, which includes the provision of specialist nurses in every health board¹¹.

¹⁰ <http://www.ftww.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/FTWW-Making-the-Case-for-Better-Menopause-Services-in-Wales-Report.pdf>

¹¹ <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-03/endometriosis-care-in-wales-provision-care-pathway-workforce-planning-and-quality-and-outcome-measures.pdf>

Address

WEN Wales
c/o International House
10 Churchill Way
Cardiff
CF10 2HE

Contact

admin@wenwales.org.uk
wenwales.org.uk

Info

Charity Number:
1145706
Company Number:
07891533

- open at least two dedicated recurrent miscarriage clinics in Wales¹².
- ensure all patient facing healthcare practitioners receive mandatory training to include specific health conditions and
- processes related to the health needs of people with protected characteristics.
- make co-production of service design and delivery, including information and resources, a priority, in keeping with the spirit of the Social Services & Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 and the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.

iv. Urgently tackling poverty in Wales

The COVID-19 public health crisis threatens to become a massive economic crisis. It is essential that the next Welsh Government and all political parties are committed to ensuring that more women, men and children in Wales do not fall below the poverty line. It is essential to act on the knowledge that the COVID-19 pandemic coincides with the potential massive economic implications that Brexit will have on Wales and to mitigate these specifically, and not exclusively through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic.

While we do not yet know the full extent of how the COVID-19 crisis has impacted levels of poverty in Wales, statistics show that leading into the pandemic, Wales was already suffering from the largest increase in the economic inactivity rate in the UK, at 2.3%.¹³ Universal Credit claims have soared in Wales during the pandemic, with over 122,000 individual claims for Universal Credit from 1st March to 12th May 2020.¹⁴ At its peak, the Department of Work and Pensions received more than six thousand new claims per day as the effects of 'lockdown' took their toll on households.¹⁵

We also know anecdotally that more unpaid care is being given as individuals support vulnerable family members and friends who may be shielding or self-isolating. This additional care is likely to be given disproportionately by women¹⁶. The foodbank charity Trussell Trust has reported its latest figures, which show that April was the

¹² <http://www.ftww.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Miscarriage-report-FINAL.pdf>

¹³ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/regionallabourmarket/may2020>

¹⁴ <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/1232/documents/10384/default/>

¹⁵ <https://www.itv.com/news/wales/2020-05-22/universal-credit-claims-up-120-000-in-wales-since-coronavirus-outbreak/>

¹⁶ <https://blogs.unicef.org/evidence-for-action/caring-in-the-time-of-covid-19-gender-unpaid-care-work-and-social-protection/>

charity's busiest month ever across the UK, with an increase of 89% of all people fed by the charity in Wales, with an increase of 101% children fed, compared to April 2019.¹⁷

Health and social care play a role in women's poverty in Wales.¹⁸ Women with pre-existing health conditions and impairments are amongst the most likely to be in poverty in Wales^{19 20}. There needs to be both preventative measures in place to stop these women falling into poverty and support for those already in poverty.

We call for the next Welsh Government to implement a Universal Basic Income²¹ as a way of tackling poverty in Wales and continue the work of commencing the socio-economic duty as soon as possible. We echo the Wales' anti-poverty coalition calls for the next Welsh Government to urgently tackle the poverty and environmental crises.

We echo the Wales' anti-poverty coalition calls for the next Welsh Government to urgently tackle the poverty by and environmental crises by:

- producing a tackling poverty strategy which delivers a decent standard of living for everyone whilst living within our environmental limits.
- reviewing the effectiveness of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act to ensure that everyone in Wales has a decent standard of living whilst living within our environmental limits. This includes a national conversation with our current and future generations.
- focusing economic policies on wellbeing economics to address our poverty and environmental crisis²².

We also call for political parties:

- to recognise the lived experiences of disabled women and the impact that conditions such as living with ill-health or impairments can have in relation to women being in poverty and put in place preventative measures to stop these

¹⁷ <https://www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/06/APRIL-Data-briefing-external.pdf>

¹⁸ Chwarae Teg & Bevan Foundation, 2019. Trapped. Poverty amongst women in Wales today, <https://chwaraeteg.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Trapped-Poverty-amongst-women-in-Wales-today.pdf>

¹⁹ <https://senedd.wales/laid%20documents/cr-ld10252/cr-ld10252-e.pdf>

²⁰ <https://wbg.org.uk/analysis/2018-wbg-briefing-disabled-women-and-austerity/>

²¹ <https://en.unesco.org/inclusivepolicylab/news/can-universal-basic-income-solve-global-inequalities>

²² <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620979/rr-welsh-doughnut-2020-sustainability-social-justice-010320-en.pdf?sequence=1>

Address

WEN Wales
c/o International House
10 Churchill Way
Cardiff
CF10 2HE

Contact

admin@wenwales.org.uk
wenwales.org.uk

Info

Charity Number:
1145706
Company Number:
07891533

women falling into poverty, while also acting to lift those already in poverty out of it.

- ensure that COVID-19 recovery strategies do not overshadow or replace post-Brexit strategies, but rather work alongside one another.
- implement a Universal Basic Income as a way of tackling poverty in Wales.

v. *Ensure there are high-quality childcare & caring provisions for all*

Women in Wales need a childcare provision that offers affordable, accessible and high-quality childcare for all children from six months, similar to provisions offered to key workers during the first lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic, regardless of the employment status of parents. Political parties must also put provisions in place to protect and enhance nurseries across Wales.

Women's ambitions, achievements and health can be curtailed by a lack of affordable and flexible childcare and social care. Women aged 45-54 were over twice as likely as other carers to have reduced their working hours as a result of caring responsibilities.²³ Women disproportionately take responsibility for unpaid child care and this inequality has been identified as a contributory factor to the gender pay gap.²⁴

Social care is an enormously valuable sector to work in. It provides vital services for people, young and old, who need support, while also substantially contributing to the economy. Nevertheless, the care sector continues to be characterised by low wages and insecure hours. In Wales, 80% of the people employed in 'human health and social work activities' are women.²⁵ There is an urgent need to develop policy solutions for the social care workforce that recognise and reflect its true economic value.

Carers, both paid and unpaid, must be properly rewarded. Respite for carers must be a priority for the future Welsh Government, particularly given the intense, additional strain that both paid and unpaid carers have been under due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Welsh society must value women's work, with front-line workers paid fairly as the nation recovers from the pandemic.

²³ Employers for Carers and Carers UK (2015) Caring and isolation in the workplace

²⁴ Gender Pay Gap, Second report of session 2015-16, Women and Equalities Committee, House of Commons.

²⁵ Annual Population Survey, July 2018-June 2019: <https://gov.wales/annual-populationsurvey>

Address

WEN Wales
c/o International House
10 Churchill Way
Cardiff
CF10 2HE

Contact

admin@wenwales.org.uk
wenwales.org.uk

Info

Charity Number:
1145706
Company Number:
07891533

We are calling for political parties to:

- offer affordable and accessible childcare for all children from six months (including disabled children and children with additional learning needs), to all parents, including to non-working parents.
- collect robust equality data as part of the evaluation and monitoring of the Childcare Offer to ensure equality of access and eligibility.
- commit to providing childcare hubs for asylum seeker families.
- progress existing plans to ensure all care workers in Wales are paid fairly and have access to training and clear routes for career progression if they want it.
- allocate funding to give carers a choice of quality respite services and monitor local authority spending on respite care and evaluation of the effectiveness of the funding.

Address

WEN Wales
c/o International House
10 Churchill Way
Cardiff
CF10 2HE

Contact

admin@wenwales.org.uk
wenwales.org.uk

Info

Charity Number:
1145706
Company Number:
07891533