

Dear Home Secretary and Lord Chancellor,

We are writing to you as organisations who are deeply concerned about the devastating impact of Coronavirus on women with existing vulnerabilities such as poverty, homelessness, poor mental health and past experiences of trauma, and who are victims of sexual abuse and sexual violence.

This issue can be related to, but is often distinct from, domestic abuse – also a significant and pressing concern – affecting women including those who are being systematically targeted for sexual exploitation, or who find themselves with no option but to turn to ‘survival sex’, exchanging sex to meet immediate needs such as food, shelter or to provide for their children.

At this time, we are seeing women who are facing untold danger, including experiences of physical and sexual violence for which it is impossible to escape. Many of the vital services that aim to protect women from the worst consequences of involvement in selling sex or sexual exploitation, such as community hubs and drop-in centres, have had no choice but to close their doors during this pandemic, and to suspend outreach. Although we have developed strategies to engage with women wherever possible, we know that some will be left without access to a vital lifeline and route to safety.

In particular, we draw your attention to the following:

- Some of the women we work with are finding themselves destitute as a result of Coronavirus, leading to them becoming involved in ‘survival sex’ for the first time, or returning to selling sex. Often, they find it challenging to engage with welfare services, are struggling to access other sources of support, such as food banks, and cannot raise income even through the most desperate of measures, such as begging. We have seen more women selling sex on street, as well as those selling sex online, both of which leave them vulnerable to abuse. There is also a risk that without the right support, women leaving prison are particularly vulnerable to becoming involved in selling sex where they are targeted by pimps and perpetrators on release.
- We are also witnessing more examples of sexual violence and assaults at home, and we are deeply concerned that more women will experience significant harm, or even death, as a result of this policy. We are seeing early indications that women are finding it difficult to access sexual violence services in some areas during the pandemic. Equally, we are finding that some safeguarding services are struggling to respond even when a referral is made, which is creating a significant barrier to the collaboration and consistent communication that is essential to keep women safe.
- We understand that police forces are experiencing huge pressure on their resources, however we are alarmed that there has been a withdrawal of support for women experiencing sexual violence or sexual exploitation. For example, within some police forces there has been a reduction in the availability of police officers trained to respond to sexual offences. We know from experience that this will lead to fewer women reporting crimes. We have also seen police sexual exploitation investigations placed on hold during this pandemic, meaning that women who are currently experiencing exploitation are further delayed from accessing support and justice.

Across the voluntary sector, services are providing vital support to women during this time. In doing so, we are helping some of the most vulnerable in our communities, as well as relieving pressure on the NHS and other frontline services. However, we urgently need the contribution of central government and local partners to help us offer support to women within an ever more challenging context. Therefore, we are asking the Government to ensure that:

- Women who are victims of sexual violence or sexual exploitation, or who are involved in selling sex, are fully considered as part of local and national plans, and that there is a clear message to perpetrators that prosecution of sexual offences will continue despite COVID-19.
- There is clear national guidance to ensure a consistent response from the police and safeguarding services across the country, with a requirement to ensure that sufficient numbers of trained staff are available to support victims who may require support relating to a sexual offence.
- There is access to single-sex accommodation for women fleeing sexual violence or exploitation, and that women in these circumstances have automatic priority need for housing.
- Charities working with women involved in sex work, survival sex and/or sexual exploitation are funded sustainably to continue delivering their specialist support throughout the pandemic. This includes ensuring they are considered as part of the Government's vital package of financial assistance to charities delivering frontline services.

We recognise that the challenge facing Government and our public services is unprecedented. However, we have never been more concerned for the women we support. We urge you to consider their needs during this pandemic, and would value the opportunity to work alongside you to ensure their safety and wellbeing.

Yours sincerely,

Stephen Bell OBE, CEO, Changing Lives

Laura Seebohm, Executive Director – External Affairs, Changing Lives

Donna Covey, CEO, Against Violence and Abuse

Nathan Dick, Head of Policy, Revolving Doors

Joy Doal MBE, CEO, Anawim Women's Centre

Sir Paul Ennals CBE, Chair, Fulfilling Lives Newcastle Gateshead

Angela Everson, Chief Executive, WomenCentre Calderdale and Kirklees

Rick Henderson, CEO, Homeless Link

Joanna Jones, GROW

Rokaiya Khan, CEO, Together Women

Fay Maxted OBE, CEO, The Survivors' Trust

Cris McCurley, Partner, Ben Hoare Bell LLP

Jemima Olchawski, CEO, Agenda

Professor Jo Phoenix, Chair in Criminology, Open University

Harriet Wistrich, Founding Director, Centre for Women's Justice