

Dear

## **Covid-19 and safety for women and children facing domestic abuse**

We are writing to you on behalf of organisations from the Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) sector, who provide protection and support to thousands of women and children in the UK, to ask for your help.

As a result of coronavirus, thousands of women and children across the country face the prospect of being forced to stay at home for several months with an abusive partner, husband, or family member.

We know that in times of conflict and crisis, the rate of domestic abuse, sexual abuse (including child sexual abuse) and exploitation, doubles and even triples against women and children.

Data from China, for example, shows that during the epidemic, domestic violence increased three times over. We are worried that many of the women and children that Southall Black Sisters and other women's groups work with will be forced to stay in already abusive households, and that the stress and anxiety caused by Covid-19 might also mean that other women and children become subject to abuse for the first time. There is a risk that Covid-19 will not be the only epidemic we have to deal with in the coming months - we are facing an epidemic of abuse.

Women, like this recent caller to Southall Black Sisters, will have to live in unbearable conditions of abuse and isolation:

"I don't know how long this situation with the virus will last but I'm sure that it's going to be difficult and very stressful for us. It is not obvious and tricky, the gaslighting and the crazy making... I've reached a point like today when my hands are shaking during an argument and I can't stop it! I need your help and your experience to make this self-isolation bearable for me and my son."

You can prevent such experiences from happening to more women and children - or at the very least, limit the scale of the problem. You can make a difference to some of the most vulnerable women who otherwise have no one to turn to for security, comfort and support.

One of the main reasons why women and children struggle to escape domestic abuse is because they do not have an alternative safe place to stay. Refuges are unable to cope with current levels of demand; 64% of referrals to refuges in England were declined in 2018-19.

Migrant women find it especially difficult to seek shelter because they have no recourse to public funds and cannot access government benefits or housing, meaning they have no safe accommodation and no money with which to meet their basic needs.

While the rooms of your hotel are unoccupied, will you offer a hotel in a publicly undisclosed space, free of charge, to women fleeing a domestic abuser so that they are safe and secure? Specialist women's support services would need to have an ongoing role in supporting women and children in any such hotel bed scheme to ensure it was safe.

You will no doubt have already heard that Gary Neville is allowing NHS workers to stay in the rooms of his hotels if they need protection from a family infected with Covid-19. London Mayor Sadiq Khan is also working with Intercontinental Hotels Group (IHG) to [block-book rooms for rough sleepers](#). Similarly compassionate leadership is needed to protect women and children at risk from a very different epidemic - the epidemic of domestic abuse.

Our aim with this letter is to ensure that those women and children who need it have immediate protection. We are also calling on Government to lead on national action with the Violence Against Women and Girls sector and migrant organisations to ensure sustainable solutions for those who face abuse amidst this crisis. We know your offer of help may help to push the Government to act.

We would gladly work with you to make this scheme work.

We look forward to hearing from you,

Yours sincerely,

Pragna Patel, Director of Southall Black Sisters  
Jennifer Nadal, Co-Director of Compassion in Politics

With support from:

Jess Phillips MP  
Carolyn Harris MP  
Claire Waxman, London Victim's Commissioner  
Nicki Norman, Acting Co-Chief Executive, Women's Aid Federation of England  
Suzanne Jacob, CEO, SafeLives  
Dr C Quinn, CEO, Rape Crisis England & Wales  
Yasmin Rehman, CEO, Juno Woman's Aid  
Sarah Green, Director, End Violence Against Women Coalition  
Baljit Banga, Executive Director, Imkaan  
Natasha Walter and Marchu Girma, Directors, Women for Refugee Women  
Mary-Ann Stephenson, Director, UK Women's Budget Group  
Priya Chopra, Chief Executive, Saheli  
Gisela Valle, Director, Latin American Women's Rights Service  
Sandhya Sharma, Group Coordinator, Safety4Sisters

Nik Noone, CEO, Galop  
Rena Sodhi, Interim Director, London Black Women's Project  
Diana Nammi, Executive Director, IKWRO  
Nicola Sharp-Sheffs, CEO, Surviving Economic Abuse  
Karen Ingala Smith, CEO, NIA  
Umme Immam, Executive Director, The Angelou Centre  
Sam Smethers, Chief Executive, Fawcett Society  
Sarbjit Ganger, Director, Asian Women's Resource Centre  
Shaminder Ubhi, Director, Ashiana Network  
Samsunear Ali, Head of National Services, Bawso  
Vivienne Hayes, CEO, WRC  
Jemima Olchawski, CEO, Agenda  
Eunice Manu, WAST Co-ordinator, WAST Manchester  
Harriet Wistrich, Founding Director, Centre For Women's Justice  
Diana Covey MBE, Chief Executive, AVA  
Dawn Jeffrey, Director, Welsh Women's Aid  
Fiona Dwyer, CEO, Solace Woman's Aid  
Jo Todd, Chief Executive Officer, Respect  
Zlakha Ahmed, Chief Executive, Apna Haq  
Estelle du Boulay, Director, Rights of Women  
Christine McNaught, CEO, FWT – A Centre for Women  
Kate Allen, CEO, Amnesty International  
Councillor Dr Kindy Sandhu, Labour and Co-operative Council, Coventry Council