To Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP, Rt Hon Priti Patel MP, Rt Hon Robert Jenrick, Rt Hon Robert Buckland MP, Rt Hon Elizabeth Truss MP, and Rt Hon Therese Coffey MP,

We write to you as a group of concerned organisations and individuals working to support abused women and children to access safety and protection in this period of national crisis.

As you are aware, there has been a rise in domestic abuse cases linked to the Coronavirus lockdown [a]. The enforced isolation has meant that many women and children are more likely to be trapped in abusive situations. This can lead, and has led already, to increased homicides. Since the lockdown was announced on 23rd March 2020, 12 women and two children have been killed by abusive partners and family members, mainly in their homes. There may also be another four homicide cases to add to this list [b]. Although it is still early days, women's organisations like Southall Black Sisters have already reported increased anxiety and fear amongst the women they support. Some organisations have also noted an increase in referrals. For instance, the charity Refuge highlighted a 25% increase in calls to the national helpline in the first week of the lockdown [c]. Women's Aid reported a 41% increase in users visiting its Live Chat between 26 March and 1 April compared to the previous week, as well as a marked increase in visitors across all its digital support services [d]. We fear that isolation also puts vulnerable women and children at greater risk of suicide and self-harm.

To meet what is a growing gap in protection, on Friday 27 March, many of us called on hotels to offer safe accommodation to women and children experiencing abuse [e]. Working with Jess Phillips MP, Chair of the APPG on Domestic Abuse, we have now received overwhelmingly positive responses from a range of key hotel and hostel providers, who are willing to make accommodation available for survivors of abuse and violence across the UK at hugely subsidised rates (to cover their running costs). Private hotel and hostel providers are ready to work with the women's sector to provide safety for those who need it most.

In Europe and elsewhere, countries have responded to spikes in domestic abuse in various ways. In France, the government is already accommodating domestic abuse victims in hotels and has set up support in shopping centres and alert systems in pharmacies nationwide [f]. In Italy, the public prosecutor in Trento has confirmed protections for victims of assault, in mandating that perpetrators of assault will have to leave their homes rather than their victims [g]. In Australia, the Perth government is considering using hotels to house domestic abuse survivors[8] and the national government has announced 150 million Australian dollars specifically for domestic abuse support services [h].

The UK is yet to see any such co-ordinated and coherent national government-led strategy and action plan, including a clear public awareness campaign to support all abused women and children across the country. The government has stated that it has allocated an emergency fund worth £3.2million to support 'rough sleepers and the homeless' [i]. The Home Secretary has said that £1.6bn has been made available to local authorities, which includes support for victims of domestic abuse,[j] but there is no specific guidance to local authorities to use the funds to

ensure the safe exit of those trapped in abusive homes, including abused migrant women subject to the ‘no recourse to public funds’ condition and women who do not have leave to remain (such as refused asylum-seekers).

On Wednesday 8 April, the government announced further measures to support the entire charity sector. Whilst this is welcome, our concern is that it is still not clear what proportion will be given to specialist domestic abuse services to meet additional support costs, and it does not address the problem of securing safe accommodation. More needs to be done to truly step up and protect these women and children.

It is, as a result, unclear how local authorities are responding, but we are worried that abused women and children remain at risk. Southall Black Sisters was recently alerted to a shocking case in which the police and social services told a woman and her child at high-risk of harm, to ‘stay put’ in an abusive household in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, instead of supporting her exit. Social services told her that it would offer ‘counselling’ to her abusive husband instead. At local and regional levels, there has been no coordinated effort taken by local authorities to develop and put into place an immediate and effective action plan to protect abused and vulnerable survivors. Even where some action has been taken, it is inconsistent, ineffective and lacking in economic viability, with councils left to pay commercial rates for accommodation that they have sourced. There appears to be confusion and chaos on the ground.

For all these reasons, we request that the government makes an immediate commitment to underwrite the costs of hotels and hostels willing to offer accommodation to women and children who experience abuse, including migrant women subject to ‘no recourse to public funds’ and without leave to remain. This must be accompanied by additional funds to specialist services to provide support to women in such accommodation.

We make this demand, along with the wider call for emergency funding to ensure specialist services can continue current levels of service delivery amidst this crisis.

We believe that the offer made by the hotels/hostels represents a vital opportunity for the government to work with the women’s sector and with hotels to deliver a national action plan on violence against women and girls and covid-19. As of today, hotels and specialist services are ready to support abused women and children. We are waiting for the government to play its part. The government must guarantee the immediate safety of those at risk of abuse.

We urge you to act now before more women and children come to harm.

We look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

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

and

1. Claire Waxman, London Victim's Commissioner
2. Sophie Linden, Deputy Mayor for Policing and Crime
3. Nicki Norman, Acting Chief Executive, Women's Aid Federation of England
4. Fiona Dwyer, CEO, Solace Women's Aid
5. Dawn Jeffrey, Director, Welsh Women's Aid
6. Dr Mary-Ann Stephenson, Director, Women's Budget Group
7. Maureen Connolly, CEO, Birmingham and Solihull Women's Aid
8. Sarah Green, Director, End Violence Against Women Coalition
9. Baljit Banga, Executive Director, Imkaan
10. Umme Immam, Executive Director, The Angelou Centre
11. Natasha Walter, Director, Women For Refugee Women
12. Estelle du Boulay, Director, Rights of Women
13. Sam Smethers, Chief Executive, Fawcett Society
14. Karen Ingala Smith, Chief Executive, nia
15. Dr Nicola Sharp-Jeffs, CEO, Surviving Economic Abuse
16. Rena Sodhi, Interim Director, London Black Women's Project
17. Nik Noone, CEO, Galop
18. Gurpreet Virdee, Director, Women and Girls Network
19. Harriet Wistrich, Director, Centre for Women's Justice
20. Vivienne Hayes, CEO, Women's Resource Centre
21. Donna Covey CBE, Chief Executive, Against Violence and Abuse (AVA)
22. Sandhya Sharma, Group Coordinator, Safety4Sisters North West
23. Loraine Masiya Mponela, Chairperson, Coventry Asylum and Refugee Action Group
24. Lisa-Marie Taylor, CEO, FiLiA
25. Jemima Olchawski, CEO, Agenda
26. Christine McNaught, CEO, FWT – A centre for women/Coventry Women's Partnership
27. Diana Nammi, Executive Director, Iranian and Kurdish Women's Rights Organisation (IKWRO)
28. Alison Moore, CEO, Refugee Women Connect
29. Jo Todd, CEO, Respect
30. Zlakha Ahmed, CEO, Apna Haq
31. Shaminder Ubhi, Director, Ashiana Network
32. Kate Allen, CEO, Amnesty International
33. Councillor Dr Kindy Sandhu, Coventry City Council
34. Sarbjit Ganger, Director, Asian Women's Resource Centre
35. Vicky Marsh, Trustee, Women Asylum Seekers Together (WAST) Manchester

[a] https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/mar/26/warning-over-rise-in-uk-domestic-abuse-cases-linked-to-coronavirusI
[b] https://kareningalasmith.com/2020/03/09/2020/
[c] https://www.refuge.org.uk/25-increase-in-calls-to-national-domestic-abuse-helpline-since-lockdown-measures-began/
[d] https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/apr/08/labour-urges-emergency-aid-for-domestic-abuse-services
[e] https://southallblacksisters.org.uk/press-releases/press-release-sbs-compassion-in-politics-call-on-hotels-to-offer-rooms-to-abused-women-and-children/
[f] https://www.france24.com/en/20200330-france-to-put-domestic-violence-victims-in-hotels-as-numbers-soar-under-coronavirus-lockdown
[g] https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/y3mj4g/france-is-putting-domestic-abuse-victims-in-hotels-during-coronavirus-lockdown
[h] https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/australasia/coronavirus-homeless-housing-hotels-australia-rough-sleepers-five-star-perth-a9437966.html
[i] https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/australianz/rise-in-family-abuse-cases-in-australia-linked-to-covid-19
[j] https://www.gov.uk/government/news/3-2-million-emergency-support-for-rough-sleepers-during-coronavirus-outbreak