



WRITTEN EVIDENCE TO THE WOMEN & EQUALITIES COMMITTEE IN RESPECT OF ITS INQUIRY INTO COVID-19 AND THE IMPACT ON PEOPLE WITH PROTECTED CHARACTERISTICS

April 2020

Introduction

1. Muslim Women's Network UK (MWNNUK) is an award-winning, national Muslim women's organisation (www.mwnuk.co.uk) that has been advancing equality, promoting women's empowerment and connecting voices for change for over 16 years. We are a small national charity (reg. no. 1155092) that works to improve social justice and equality for Muslim women and girls. We find out about the experiences of Muslim women and girls through research and our helpline enquiries. We identify policy and practice gaps and use this information to inform decision makers in government as well as informing our community campaigns at a grassroots level.
2. We also develop resources and train women so they are better aware of their rights. We have a separate website for our national helpline (www.mwnhelpline.co.uk) that provides advice and support on a range of issues including: domestic abuse, forced marriage, honour based violence, sexual exploitation and abuse, female genital mutilation, hate crimes, discrimination, mental health etc.
3. The impact of our work is particularly felt in reducing the vulnerability of Muslim women and girls, reducing the prejudice they face, and giving them greater access to rights and services – all of which allow them to contribute to society like any other citizen. We are also creating a critical mass of voices to influence change with more women being confident to challenge discriminatory practices within their communities and in society, and to influence policy makers.
4. Although we work predominantly with Muslim/BAME women and girls and will primarily focus on the experiences of Muslim/BAME women and girls within our Evidence, the points we raise may equally apply to non-Muslim/non-BAME women and girls generally (and in certain cases, men and boys). Where we make recommendations or ask for change, we therefore do so on behalf of those who may be affected or may benefit from the same.

Evidence

5. As the only national charity working with and providing a frontline service to Muslim women and girls in the UK, we provide support and advice on a range of issues. This includes domestic abuse, forced marriage, sexual exploitation, honour based abuse, discrimination, financial issues, relationships and mental health matters. Our MWN

Helpline statistics relating to all 42 issues that we deal with can be found at our MWN Helpline Data Dashboard: <http://www.mwnuk.co.uk/muslim-women-helpline-dashboard.php>

6. The support we provide to our beneficiaries ranges from providing practical and emotional support, liaising with police officers, refuges, social workers and other key stakeholders, providing case work support, providing counselling services, and providing assistance through emergency funds. Informed by our service users' experiences, we also raise awareness of the issues so that victims and potential victims are better aware of their rights and the support available to them (such as through resource production, workshops and outreach activities) and we also campaign for change. Recently we have also launched our online members platform, 'We Rise', through which our members are able to share their views, thoughts, questions and concerns on all issues (www.mwnwerise.co.uk).
7. Given the very real need for our services, we made the decision to continue to operate our MWN Helpline despite the difficulties and hurdles we face during these unprecedented times. Unsurprisingly, the Covid-19 pandemic has become another reason for calls to our MWN Helpline; in most cases however Covid19 has been the cause or contributed to an escalation of wider issues, such as domestic abuse and mental health issues. The range of our activities and services provides us with detailed insight into the issues faced by, and the needs of, Muslim and other ethnic minority women and girls both generally and specifically due to the current pandemic. Our comments and recommendations within this Evidence are thus drawn directly from the lived experiences of our service users and beneficiaries.
8. We would like to thank the Women & Equalities Committee for holding an Inquiry into the impact of Covid-19 on people with protected characteristics. We now make the following submissions to the Inquiry:

Summary

9. There has been an increase in the risks of not just domestic abuse but also forced marriage, online grooming, financial abuse, coercive control and spiritual abuse as a result of the pandemic. However, whilst there has been a general increase in reporting of domestic abuse cases (to helplines, charities and police), this does not necessarily translate to an increase in reporting by Muslim/BAME women and girls at risk. Rather Muslim women are finding it harder to seek help due to no longer having safe time or space to make contact with emergency services or charities, without alerting their abuser.
10. A key issue is the lack of financial support and the availability of safe, affordable, habitable, temporary and permanent accommodation which is then trapping victims in abusive situations. There is an even bigger shortage of such specialist BAME focused accommodation. We consider this shortage to be a direct result of the needs of BAME refuge providers and other specialist support service providers being overlooked for many years, which is now causing greater harm to victims. It is vital that funding is directed to such services immediately.
11. There is a dire need for more specialist support and specialist counselling services for Muslim and BAME women and children in particular during this difficult time. We ask that providers of such counselling services, such as MWNUK, be given funding and resources (including a marketing budget so that awareness can be raised of such services) to ensure that all those in need are given the assistance they need. However, it is also important to be wary of new 'pop up' listening services which are

being launched during the pandemic as such services could end up doing more harm than good.

12. It is imperative that efforts are placed into raising awareness of the risks of online harms, such as online grooming and intimate image based abuse. Awareness raising strategies must take into account the specific risks relating to Muslim and other ethnic minority victims.
13. Efforts also need to be placed into raising awareness of the laws around forced marriage so that victims who are currently being subjected to physical and/or emotional pressure during this lockdown can be reminded that they have the right to refuse to be married and that forced marriage is a crime. Resources already exist and it is simply a case of re-circulating the same.
14. Those with disabilities have been especially affected by the pandemic and lockdown, and we feel the pandemic has highlighted the prevalence of a lack of understanding over invisible illnesses and disabilities, as well as what 'vulnerable' means and how 'vulnerability' can change depending on the circumstances.
15. Support for pregnant women and new mothers must be prioritised in order to avoid an increase in health complications and post-natal depression and anxiety. There appears to be a lack of communication and understanding of the guidelines involved, and more needs to be done to ensure pregnant women and new mothers are feeling safe and supported.
16. We ask that gender and ethnicity disaggregated data is made available so that we can properly assess the impact of Covid19 on women, and specifically BAME women.
17. Covid-19 is having a very clear impact on Muslim/BAME women who are already on lower salaries and this situation is exacerbated further where women are single parents or carers. It is crucial that support packages are reviewed so that women are not pushed into destitution and forced to remain in abusive situation. A 'one size fits all' approach to support for individuals is not going to be helpful.
18. We ask that support packages are made available for organisations working on the frontline to assist those affected by Covid19. This includes providing immediate and long term support, with a particular focus on specialist BAME services. We ask that the importance of those providing support to victims of abuse, specialist counselling services, specialist BAME refuge providers is finally recognised and they are provided with the necessary funds and resources to help vulnerable BAME individuals in need.
19. There is also a need to review existing funding practices of the government. Ultimately the crisis has highlighted a critical need for the government to review its funding strategy and ensure that specialist BAME services are specifically prioritised; we would like to see funds ring-fenced to ensure that BAME services can also receive support.

How people have been affected by the illness or the response to it

20. The MWN Helpline was launched in January 2015 and for the last five years, domestic abuse cases have consistently featured as the number one reason for calls. In 2019 32% of calls to the MWN Helpline related to domestic abuse. Unsurprisingly the MWN Helpline has continued to receive calls relating to domestic abuse since the

'stay at home' guidance was issued. For some, the pandemic and lockdown has led to fragile relationships becoming abusive whilst for others it has exacerbated pre-existing abusive situations. There have been a number of reports in the media highlighting the increase in domestic abuse cases; we know that the National Domestic Abuse Helpline has seen a 25% increase in domestic abuse related calls since the lockdown¹, and there have been 4000 domestic abuse related arrests in just six weeks in London alone². However, it is imperative that the Women & Equalities Committee notes that this does not translate to an increase in calls received from Muslim or BAME victims of abuse. The true scale of the abuse, or risk of abuse, faced by Muslim and BAME women and girls during the lockdown cannot be known because many will be unable to seek help or support. The biggest impact of the lockdown has been a removal of the safe time and space that victims and those at risk will have had to safely seek help, or even make plans to escape without alerting their abuser as to their intentions. Muslim/BAME women in particular will have utilised the time during school runs to make calls or take other preparatory steps but this option is no longer available to them. A comparison of our own MWN Helpline statistics highlight that the number of domestic abuse cases dealt with by us during the lockdown has reduced considerably in comparison to this time last year. We attribute this directly to the lockdown and it increases our fears that there are many more Muslim/BAME women who are in danger of abuse but are unable to seek help.

21. Whilst we of course understand and appreciate that the 'Stay at home' guidance has been issued for all our protection, an unfortunate but expected consequence has been to provide the perfect environment for abusers to isolate, abuse and control their victims (including children). They now have the perfect excuse as they can simply state they are enforcing the government guidelines for their own protection or that of their partner or other family members. Whilst the government has made clear that the lockdown rules do not apply if someone is at danger of abuse, it is not easy to simply leave; nor is it easy to seek assistance from the police especially for Muslim women and girls. In June 2019, we published a report entitled 'Muslim women's experiences of the criminal justice system'. In this report we highlight a range of barriers faced by Muslim women which hinder their ability to seek help and obtain justice. These include police and other criminal justice agencies not correctly identifying the risks associated with honour based abuse and not taking action in a timely manner (even when a perpetrator has breached a non-molestation order). Whilst a key reason for these issues will be linked to funding cuts that have adversely affected our emergency services for a very long time, the crucial point to note is that these issues will, in our opinion, only become more augmented during the Covid19 crisis. This in turn will impact the ability for Muslim women in particular, to seek help from the criminal justice system. Our report can be accessed using the following link: https://www.mwnuk.co.uk/go_files/resources/Muslim_Women_and_Criminal_Justice_FINAL.pdf
22. A related impact is that financial abuse and coercive control has become easier due to victims being unable to leave the home. For example, victims could be forced to transfer their salaries and/or welfare benefits on the basis that the victim does not need the money since they are 'staying at home', forcing victims to hand over their

¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-52157620>

² <https://news.sky.com/story/coronavirus-4-000-domestic-abuse-arrests-in-london-in-just-six-weeks-police-say-11978358>

debit or credit cards so that the abuser can be 'in charge' of expenditure and leave the house to shop whilst the victim remains at home or even going as far as forcing the victim to take out credit cards and loans online. Coercive control has always been very real but the risks are now exacerbated even further because the victim has no means of seeking support or even to think of an 'excuse' to not cooperate with the abuser's demands without further aggravating their abuser. This is perhaps best demonstrated by the following comment shared with us:

"I've been lying to my husband about my real salary because if he knew what it was then he would take all of it and spend it on himself. It is only because he thinks I get paid less that I manage to keep some of it and buy things for me and the children. Nothing fancy, simple things that he won't pay for like sweets, phone top ups so I can speak to mum, emergencies like trainers for school. But I think he has cottoned on since being home.... He's started asking for my card even though I say there is nothing in there as I have already transferred my salary to him. I'm scared of what he will do if he finds out. I haven't spoken to my mum in weeks as he doesn't like her. Funny thing is we're only still together because my mum says I cannot leave him..."

23. We are also concerned that the lockdown has increased risks of other forms of abuse including forced marriage, FGM, sexual abuse and sexual exploitation. Our MWN Helpline statistics highlight that the number of rape/sexual assault cases remain consistent to patterns and trends from previous years despite the fact that it will be even harder for victims to seek help and support for the same reasons as victims of domestic abuse. To us this means that the true scale of sexual violence and abuse during lockdown is very likely to be much higher, with victims unable to seek support or make plans to escape.
24. Although calls relating to forced marriages have reduced, the victims that are still managing to find ways to contact us are highlighting the extreme toll that is taking place on their mental health; just last week we had a victim contact us to tell us that she was feeling suicidal due to a potential forced marriage. Others have informed us as to how the pandemic itself is being used as a blackmailing tool to add emotional pressure on the victim, such as stating that a parent or grandparent could die due to Covid19 and the victim should agree to their wishes to keep them happy. Although the issue of emotional blackmailing and physical force is always a live issue, the situation is now exacerbated due to the lockdown as victims, and potential victims, are trapped with the perpetrators.
25. To this effect, it is worth highlighting the flexibility of the rules around the creation of Islamic marriages which could have a serious impact on the number of forced marriage cases during lockdown. Although it is more likely that any wedding may be planned for some time after the lockdown has ended and/or crisis has been averted, being able to force a victim to agree to marriage in the first place is the key step to ensuring victims feel compelled to go ahead with the marriage as they will be made to feel guilty about wedding plans to be made and told to think about the dishonour that a cancelled wedding will bring to the family. It is also important to note that, whilst not usually the norm in the UK, in Muslim communities it is not actually necessary to have the bride and groom physically present in one place for an Islamic-only marriage to be performed. Islamic only marriages can be conducted by Skype, Zoom or even over the phone. Once an Islamic marriage has been entered into, female Muslim victims in particular are trapped because the dissolution of an Islamic marriage is dependent on either the husband pronouncing divorce (talaq) or a Shariah Council (or similar body) pronouncing divorce in the place of the husband. We would like to refer the Committee to our 2016 Written Evidence to the Home

Affairs Select Committee to highlight the issues around Muslim women, Islamic divorce and Shariah Councils and why this has such an impact on Muslim women: http://www.mwnuk.co.uk/go_files/resources/772640-Shariah%20Council%20Inquiry%20-%20MWNUK%20Submission.pdf

26. We have been campaigning for law reform on the issue for over five years and hope that the pandemic now highlights just how the issue of religious-only marriages is linked to abuse and discrimination. If the law was changed so that it becomes an offence to conduct a religious marriage that is not capable of becoming a lawful marriage or ensuring that a lawful marriage has taken place, then this would stop abusers from taking advantage of the loophole of religious-only marriages to trap victims during this lockdown. We also ask that efforts are placed into raising awareness of the laws around forced marriage so that victims who are currently being subjected to physical and/or emotional pressure during this lockdown can be informed that they have the right to refuse to be married and that forced marriage is a crime. Charities like MWNUK have already created a number of awareness raising videos over the years, and we know the government has held online awareness raising campaigns themselves (which we have supported). Therefore the resources are already in place and it is simply a case of re-circulating the same. We have of course been raising awareness ourselves but a multi-agency approach coordinated and supported by the government will of course have much more impact and reach than small charities like us.
27. We also ask that the government also remains vigilant of the fact that victims or potential victims of forced marriage or FGM may be taken abroad as soon as restrictions on travel are relaxed or lifted, especially with the upcoming summer holidays. We hope that sufficient resources will be allocated to ensure that victims are not removed from the UK for such purposes. Of course, forced marriages and FGM can be performed in the UK and so the government should not assume that the risks are not of ongoing concern.
28. A further concern relates to the undoubted increased use of online platforms during lockdown, including social media and whatsapp groups; we feel that this increases the risks of online grooming. This is especially the case for children and young adults who are no longer in school or college and are perhaps spending more time online as part of their home-schooling activities, or generally to pass time and socialise with friends. Parents may not be able to supervise online activities as much as before (due to the added burdens of working from home and looking after children at the same time, needing to home-school, needing to look after elderly parents etc), and perpetrators of abuse are likely to take advantage of the unprecedented situation to target and groom victims for sexual exploitation. Our report on Muslim women's experiences of the criminal justice system³ highlighted how risks of harm are exacerbated for female Muslim victims of so-called revenge-pornography due to concepts of shame and dishonour that are prevalent in Muslim and other ethnic minority communities. Case study 6 of our report is especially relevant to this situation. It involved a female Muslim victim who was being blackmailed by her friend; her friend threatened to share a completely non-sexual photograph of her with a male friend with her family if she didn't pay her money. The risk for the victim was that, even though the photograph was completely non-sexual and just of her standing with a male friend, her family were likely to interpret that as evidence of her being in a relationship with said male friend. This would increase risks of forced marriage or honour based abuse for the victim. This case, which is derived from our MWNUK

³ https://www.mwnuk.co.uk/go_files/resources/Muslim_Women_and_Criminal_Justice_FINAL.pdf

Helpline, proves how even wholly non-intimate images and messages can create a risk of honour based abuse for victims. The concern is that if perpetrators manage to successfully groom victims and persuade or coerce them into providing sexually explicit images or texts then the risks of honour based abuse become live, which the abusers can use to their advantage. Our 2013 report 'Unheard Voices', which focused on Asian victims of sexual exploitation, highlighted in detail how victims can be exploited in such a way. Our fears are therefore very much based on the findings previously conducted on this issue and are based on the lived experiences of victims of sexual exploitation. A copy of this report can be found here: http://www.mwnuk.co.uk/go_files/resources/UnheardVoices.pdf

29. It is therefore imperative that efforts are placed into raising awareness of the risks of online harms such as online grooming and intimate image based abuse. Awareness raising strategies must take into account the specific risks relating to Muslim and other ethnic minority victims. In July 2019, we responded to the Home Office & DCMS consultation in respect of the Online Harms White Paper and made recommendations as to how the risks of online harms can be tackled. A copy of our response can be found here: [http://www.mwnuk.co.uk/go_files/resources/926086-Online%20Harms%20White%20Paper%20Response%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.mwnuk.co.uk/go_files/resources/926086-Online%20Harms%20White%20Paper%20Response%20(1).pdf)
30. Steps have been taken by us to open up the avenues by which those at risk of abuse may be able to seek assistance. Although we have always had online means of communication available, we have specifically increased our capacity to deal with texts, emails and webchats and have raised awareness of the availability of our online services much more since the lockdown. However we are also very aware of the fact that some victims may still be restricted from accessing help because they are constantly around or indeed constantly monitored by their abuser. It is therefore imperative that we think of alternative means by which to access and assist all victims; the lock down should not mean locked away completely.
31. We have also placed a lot of effort into raising awareness of the help available for female Muslim victims of abuse and urged them to seek help, including calling the police if they are in immediate danger. We have created videos in different languages (English⁴, Bengali⁵, Urdu⁶, Gujarati⁷ and Arabic⁸) which we have been sharing; however we have very limited funds and in turn limited means to share these videos and it would be helpful if marketing assistance could be provided to charities like us that are trying to raise awareness of the issues.
32. Recent calls for supermarkets to provide ways for victims to seek help is certainly a step in the right direction and we welcome such proposals. We would also like to thank Boots for assisting by making available their spaces for victims to make calls and seek help. However it is important to remember that not all victims will be provided with the opportunity to leave the house to go to the shops. The abuser may be the one that goes shopping, insisting that the victim stays at home. The victim

⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zROAgHiD_g4

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SXor-TDVGMw>

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=19C9vjffTgU>

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b488mThebD4>

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ilRI3-xBWOY>

may live with extended family members or there may even be surveillance at home (as part of the campaign of abuse and control by the perpetrator) which means that the abuser's absence nevertheless makes it impossible to seek help. There may also be language barriers, IT illiteracy issues, mobility issues, learning difficulties, disabilities or even concerns around insecure immigration status which prevent a victim from seeking help. It is vital that we consider a range of options by which all victims, in all their varying circumstances, can nevertheless seek help.

33. We can endeavour to utilise all other possible opportunities for contact with potential victims of abuse. Schools and nurseries for example still have ways by which to contact parents and utilise such contact to carry out welfare checks without arousing suspicion. We are aware that a number of schools and nurseries are already leading the way in this respect by contacting students and having ad-hoc conversations with parents to discuss any concerns not limited to educational issues, such as any financial issues. We would therefore recommend that support is provided to schools and nurseries to be able to consider any risks of abuse and take necessary safeguarding actions. We are aware however of the pressures already being placed on such key workers and it is vital that appropriate support and resources are provided so that they are not overburdened. Schools and contact sessions with teachers are also the perfect opportunity for students to raise concerns, such as in respect of forced marriage. However we are also very aware of the fact that, due to lockdown, it will not be as easy to have conversations about abuse and harms as the perpetrator may be monitoring conversations or constantly around and so it would be useful to develop a strategy by which to safely ask questions without alerting the abuser. MWN Helpline are happy to assist in providing guidance so that all matters can be dealt with in a faith and culturally aware manner.
34. Of course not everyone has such opportunities available to them (they may not have school-age children, their children may have always been home-schooled or there may be language barriers for example) and so it is very important to consider other ways that those at risk of abuse could reach out for support. We ask that banks in particular are asked to remain vigilant of physical, emotional and financial abuse and take the opportunity to contact their customers to carry out welfare checks; they have legitimate reasons to contact customers (such as to check a transaction) and an abuser should not find it unusual. Moreover, knowing that there will be such checks in place could deter some perpetrators. However we understand that all sectors are currently under immense pressure and to ask some sectors to go beyond their usual role could be even more overwhelming. We would therefore ask that appropriate support, training and resources are provided to assist. Our key recommendation is ultimately that given the unprecedented times and the risks of harm involved, it is time to be inventive and look at other forms of contact that victims still have. At MWNUK, we are always considering ways in which we can provide support in a discreet manner, in the event that an abuser asks questions and we would like this to now be followed by everyone.
35. A further impact has been to put a strain on relationships between parents and children generally but particularly in respect of those children with parents in two households. We understand of course that the lockdown makes it much more difficult to continue with child contact arrangements in a safe manner and we also appreciate that most parents will make decisions having taken into account the safety and welfare of the child, but it is certainly an added strain. We are also aware, from our own MWN Helpline cases, that some parents are unfortunately misusing the pandemic to subtly break contact and alienate a non-resident parent; in at least one case this is just one part of a history of abuse between the resident and non-resident parent. Whilst we understand that it may not be possible for children to physically

meet the non-resident parent during these unprecedented times, parents should be encouraged to take a pragmatic approach and maintain contact through technology (i.e. video chats). Not all parents will have the means to have smart phones or laptops however and we feel some support should be made available to assist those who would not be able to have contact with their child without technology. We are concerned that any breaks could have an impact on the mental health and wellbeing of both parent and child, and depending on the circumstances it could even be the start (or continuation) of parental alienation.

36. Leading on from the above, there has been a very clear impact on the mental health and wellbeing of a large cross-section of society. Whilst we discuss those with pre-existing mental health issues in more detail below, it is clear that the Covid19 crisis is specifically causing mental health issues in individuals who did not previously have such concerns. Additionally financial stress and relationship issues may be causing mental health issues but conversely mental health issues associated with Covid19 may be causing relationship issues and impacting work (and through work, finances). The lockdown has in particular affected those already isolated (perhaps living alone or in a different city or have been disowned by family). The biggest concern is that such individuals will not therefore be on the radar and despite being vulnerable, may not receive the appropriate support. This can have serious long term consequences. We have certainly seen an increase in the number of calls to our MWN Helpline where individuals simply want to have a conversation for their mental health and wellbeing and we would ask that charities like MWNUK are supported to raise awareness of their services so that more individuals can seek help (we discuss the support needed for the charity sector in more detail below).
37. There is most certainly a dire need for more specialist support and specialist counselling services for Muslim and BAME women and children in particular during this difficult time and we ask that providers of such counselling services be given funding and resources (including a marketing budget so that awareness can be raised of the availability of such services). It is also imperative that we move outside the usual methods of counselling and look at making available online, text-based counselling; this can then be utilised by those individuals in need of counselling support but who are unable to freely speak to a counsellor by phone, skype or the likes of Zoom (which may be due to an abuser being around, or simply because privacy cannot be guaranteed as a result of everyone staying at home).
38. However, we must raise our concerns about the number of new 'listening services' that have been launched since the lockdown. Whilst we appreciate and commend the noble intentions of those involved, the crux of the matter is that we are in very delicate times. Where an individual has reached out for support, it is vital that the support provided to them is professional, non-judgmental, faith and culturally sensitive and takes into account all safeguarding considerations and any other risks (including ensuring that personal data is kept safe and confidential). We do not feel that such pop-up listening services will be well-equipped to deal with the range of issues involved and are concerned that the one opportunity to provide the correct support may be lost. This is especially concerning because we know that the Covid-19 crisis is creating novel and increasingly demanding situations. We therefore ask that such new services be encouraged to sign-post to already established helplines and service providers instead so that the correct support can be provided during these critical times, especially to Muslim/BAME communities.
39. A related concern is the risk that such pop-up services could indeed be very easily set up by potential abusers themselves. We have noticed that a significant number of these new services are simply using mobile phones and there is no main contact

number that can be called. Our concern is that this makes it very easy for someone to take advantage of the situation, set up a helpline service and use this as an opportunity to abuse and exploit vulnerable individuals. Our concerns stem from the fact that a service user has previously raised concerns with us about a voluntary food bank service provider, with no actual legal entity, using the excuse of dropping food parcels to target and exploit vulnerable victims of abuse. Whilst the matter was reported to the police, for various reasons (including victim's fear of the repercussions), it was not pursued further. However, this experience now keeps us vigilant at all times, which is why we are raising our concerns in this respect.

Specific impacts on people due to them having a protected characteristic

40. We know that the Committee will undoubtedly keep this in mind but we feel it is worth reminding ourselves that when considering the specific impact on people with protected characteristics, it is vital to consider the intersectionality of the issues involved. We have highlighted the range of abuse, and the increased risk of abuse, that many female Muslim/BAME women and girls are facing and whilst we of course appreciate that anyone can be a victim of abuse, the fact of the matter is that women and girls are statistically more likely to be at risk of violence and abuse as there is a very gendered element involved. Thus one of the key impacts on women and girls has been the increase in abuse and risks of abuse for them.
41. This specific impact is exacerbated for Muslim BAME women in particular due to the fact that they tend to find it the hardest to find unemployment, tend to be the lowest paid when they do and more often than not have caring responsibilities (such as looking after children or the elderly) which means they have to work part time hours. The Covid19 pandemic has had a very clear financial impact on Muslim/BAME women and this then impacts their ability to seek support in the event of facing abuse. Although the government has stated that individuals placed on furlough are able to receive 80% of their salaries (up to £2500), we are already seeing instances where the government is no longer upholding this commitment, such as in the case of nursery workers and so we are already seeing individuals (predominantly women) who are adversely affected by the pandemic and government decision making. We find this deeply concerning. Moreover, where women are already on low salaries due to a combination of being on lower salaries and needing to work part time, losing 20% of their income places a significant burden on their finances and resources. Indeed the financial dependence being caused by Covid-19 is resulting in many victims of abuse deciding to remain at home with their perpetrator than to leave for safety, as leaving could mean financial destitution. This is being demonstrated by our own MWN Helpline cases where a victim of abuse wants to relocate with her children but is unable to due to the lockdown and her financial situation. It is vital that the support packages are reviewed to ensure that the measures are truly supporting individuals and not pushing them towards abuse and destitution.
42. The key issue, as is usually the case where abuse is involved, is the lack of financial support and the availability of safe, affordable, habitable, temporary and permanent accommodation. There is an even bigger shortage of such specialist BAME focused accommodation. We consider this shortage to be a direct result of the government overlooking the needs of BAME refuge providers and other specialist support service providers, which is now causing greater harm to victims.
43. Even if a space is available in a refuge, women who are employed are usually required to pay rent, utilities and service charges which in our experience can be quite substantial and in turn unaffordable. In many instances it can actually be cheaper to rent privately. However, women are already losing significant proportions

of their income due to the current pandemic and trying to find private rental accommodation will be more difficult than ever. We ask therefore that consideration is given to provide financial support and subsidies that could assist in such circumstances so that no victim is forced to remain in an abusive situation due to not being able to afford to leave. We also ask that some form of relief be provided in respect of rental payments to reduce the financial burdens arising as a result of Covid-19. Our fear is that, if individuals are expected to pay their full rent despite earning less, not only can it increase mental health issues, relationship issues, financial dependency and/or lead to financial destitution, but it could also lead to an increase in sexual abuse meted out by landlords (i.e. 'sex for rent').

44. Temporary accommodation, such as refuges, also need to be fit for purpose during a time of crisis so that individuals have the necessary facilities available to use in a safe and hygienic manner (such as kitchens and bathrooms). We received a call recently from a service user who has been placed in a hotel with her five children and was provided with food parcels by charities which included oil and pasta shells; however the items provided could not be used by her as she only has access to a microwave and no means to cook hot food. Others have informed us of the difficulties they have faced trying to follow social distancing guidelines whilst sharing a kitchen with other households. With many restaurants and takeaways now closed and the social distancing measures in place, it is harder than ever for her to be able to source hot and healthy food. Financial assistance should also be provided to allow travel to refuges and other safe spaces.
45. There is also a very clear link to types of housing and mental health matters during Covid19. Those who live in flats without access to a garden, terrace or balcony for example have shared their difficulties in trying to navigate social distancing guidelines when everyone around them will be going to the same places to exercise. Additionally one woman who lives in a flat with her children says that she lives in fear of complaints about noise; she feels that the walls are too thin and now that everyone is home all the time it is likely to eventually lead to arguments and the thought of that in itself is making her feel anxious.
46. Linked very much to the issue of abuse, is that of spiritual abuse which affects those within faith based communities. Spiritual abuse is where religious texts or beliefs (or misinterpretations thereof) may be used to manipulate victims and minimise or rationalise abusive behaviours and control the victim. It could also involve causing harm when allegedly trying to get rid of an evil force or spirit that is believed to have possessed the victim. We are particularly concerned about the possible abuse and emotional pressures which may be inflicted on Muslim LGBT+ individuals due to being trapped at home during the lockdown.
47. At a time when many individuals are facing financial losses and suffering health issues, it is also perhaps unsurprising that some individuals have taken advantage of the situation to peddle 'Islamic' cures that will allegedly protect them from Covid-19 or protect their jobs and businesses. This is highly dangerous as it could mean that individuals do not seek appropriate medical help, practice social distancing guidelines or proper hygiene due to such bogus claims.
48. We mentioned above how mental health issues are on a general increase due to Covid-19. Long-term mental health conditions are of course disabilities but not everyone will have had a formal diagnosis and therefore may be struggling without anyone aware of their support needs. This is especially problematic for Muslim and other faith/ethnic communities due to the level of stigma and lack of understanding involved. South Asian women between the ages of 25 and 39 are two to three times

more vulnerable to suicide and self-harm⁹; this is very likely to be as a result of abusive cultural practices within families, the culture of shame and honour and the ostracisation involved which then prevents South Asian women from seeking help. Muslim BAME women then have the added hurdle of being told that any mental health matters they are experiencing is 'supernatural' or due to the fact that they are of weak faith. They are therefore prevented from seeking help as they do not want their commitment to their faith called into question. It is due to issues like this that we started our faith and culturally sensitive MWN Counselling service and are currently devising ways to allow counselling to be provided through a range of methods (not just telephone counselling) so that we can provide assistance to a wide range of women. We are looking in particular at making available online counselling in a safe and secure manner. However, our funds and resources are limited and it is imperative that urgent support is made available for specialist counselling services, particularly for those in faith communities. The need for the same is perhaps best demonstrated by the following MWN Helpline cases:

"Aasma has been physically and emotionally abused by her mother. Recently she moved into a refuge and feels safe for the first time. However, the move has also been emotionally draining and she wanted to speak to the MWN Helpline about the Islamic perspective in respect of maintaining a relationship with parents".

"Seema has OCD and the current pandemic has deeply exacerbated her issues. She is constantly in the bathroom performing Wudhu (ablution; ritual washing before prayers). Her family are getting sick of it and this is straining relationships."

"Runa is a victim of domestic abuse. She has been diagnosed with bi-polar disorder which her husband and in-laws constantly use against her, in a bid to undermine the credibility of her allegations. She was due to start cognitive behaviour therapy but this has been delayed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. She is feeling very lonely and isolated"

49. Thankfully all the above service users were able to seek support from our MWN Helpline. However there will be many others unable to do so and it is crucial that support needed by such individuals is not delayed or stopped, especially because those with mental health issues, disabilities or health issues may also be at an increased risk of abuse. We wish to share the following MWN Helpline case study to highlight the issue:

"Although there has not been any physical abuse involved in the relationship as of yet, Sameera and her husband have always had issues which she puts down to their inability to communicate effectively with one another. However now tensions are very much increasing and whilst the husband has still not been physically abusive, he does appear to be showing signs of emotional abuse – one key example being that he is not correctly following social distancing rules and is continuing to go to work (even though he does not have to) despite the fact that he knows that Sameera is considered extremely vulnerable (a letter was sent to her by the NHS to confirm this) and has various other health needs".

⁹ http://www.mwnuk.co.uk/go_files/factsheets/143970-Mental%20Health%20+%20MC%20Leaflet_WEBFINAL.pdf

The above is particularly concerning as it would appear that the husband is ultimately endangering the life of the service user. This could be a tactic employed by others as a means to inflict harm and we therefore feel steps need to be taken to protect such vulnerable individuals.

50. Those with disabilities have been especially affected by the pandemic and lockdown, and we feel the pandemic has highlighted the prevalence of a lack of understanding over invisible illnesses and disabilities, as well as what 'vulnerable' means and how 'vulnerability' can change depending on the circumstances. One individual stated for example that whilst she is fully capable of performing her job, that does not mean that she does not need support in other ways and it is almost like there is now a 'scale of disabilities' and she is being deemed as 'not disabled enough to be worthy of assistance'. It is clear that a lot more needs to be done to harness understanding and provide support. As well as finding it difficult to access essential items, we are also aware of the serious hurdles that those with disabilities have faced due to welfare cuts and in trying to access Universal Credit and trying to obtain much needed support and aids so that they can continue to work. For elderly Muslim and BAME women, this can be worsened by language barriers and also opens them up to abuse (including financial abuse). We are also aware of the anxiety that some elderly and those with health conditions are currently feeling as a result of rhetoric around 'herd immunity' as it has made them fearful that they are not 'valuable enough' to be supported and given necessary treatment.
51. A lot of focus has already been placed on the significant number of cancellations of vital operations and appointments due to the pandemic. Given that the NHS has faced savage cuts for such a long time, it was entirely expected that there would be such repercussions during this crisis. However it is very real people that are being affected and there will be a direct impact on the health, wellbeing and quality of living of those whose important operations and appointments are being postponed.
52. Pregnant women and new mothers are also being deeply affected by the crisis. Whilst there are certainly positive examples of where pregnant women have been provided with all the support needed, there is also room for improvement (though we completely appreciate the exceptional burdens that have been placed on medical professionals and NHS staff generally which will be why experiences of pregnant women will vary during this pandemic). One Muslim woman informs us that her first appointment with the midwife was only recently and felt very 'military' like as there was a sense of urgency to complete the checks and have her leave the hospital as soon as possible; this meant she was unable to process the emotions arising from a first appointment. However she also commented that she was glad that she was not kept waiting and everything was done quickly, as she could then leave the hospital and return to the safety of her home. From her comments it is apparent that the midwife and all others involved were professional and efficient and the care itself cannot be faulted, but it would be useful to remember that pregnancy can be an overwhelming experience for women, especially first time mothers, and they may need added support; otherwise this could lead to a development of anxiety, pre-natal/post-natal depression or other mental health issues.
53. A number of pregnant Muslim women have also raised concerns about the lack of information that has been made available to pregnant women, and the lack of communication, particularly in terms of being able to contact GPs and midwives regarding any concerns or to make appointments. We are told that guidelines around pregnant women wearing masks when attending hospital appointments is inconsistent and women are not being kept up to date as to what the latest requirements are. This then causes a lot of confusion and worry when attending

hospitals, and causes anxiety for the pregnant women in general. A significant number of Muslim women are reporting feeling anxious about giving birth during the pandemic as well as coming home after birth and trying to isolate/maintain social distance. We are very worried that this could lead to an increase in post-natal depression and strongly urge that regular and appropriate support is provided to pregnant women during these unprecedented times. More and more women are considering home births but do not know who to contact to discuss this as an option and we are of course concerned as to how the health and safety of the mother and baby can be ensured where more women begin to choose to have a baby at home. We do hope that we are finally able to realise from this crisis, just how crucial the NHS is and why support to it needs to be prioritised.

54. The crisis has also reduced opportunities that would have otherwise been available for health professionals to uncover instances of actual and suspected abuse. Although we are aware that other forms of contact is still in place, such as in the form of telecare, the ability to assess whether an individual may be at risk of abuse has been significantly reduced. It is nevertheless important to utilise such contact opportunities as best as possible to assist victims at risk, We appreciate that we are asking for a difficult balancing act to be exercised, between protecting pregnant women from Covid-19 and protecting them from abuse or the onset of mental health issues, and hope that all the necessary support and resources can be provided to make this happen. We also ask that the exceptional circumstances that pregnant women find themselves should be considered and provisions put in place so that those who are unable to work from home (due to being a keyworker or due to the type of work they do not being one that can be completed remotely from home) but are afraid of going into work should be allowed to remain at home and receive full pay, rather than feel compelled to go into work or go onto Statutory Sick Pay, both of which will only lead to an increase in anxiety and hardship. We also feel it would be beneficial if maternity leave provisions could be temporarily extended for women currently on maternity leave.
55. From statistics released so far it appears that ethnic minorities are particularly affected by Covid-19 and we are pleased that an Inquiry will be held to understand why. However, it is imperative that any such Inquiry is not only transparent and impartial, but also that it is deemed to be transparent, impartial and one which makes decisions based on facts. If the public do not have trust and confidence in the Inquiry then it would only hamper efforts to address any risks. Given the concerns that have been raised about appointments relating to the Inquiry, we ask these concerns are given due consideration so that the true aims of the Inquiry can be achieved. We also ask that gender and ethnicity disaggregated data is made available so that we can properly assess the impact of Covid-19 on women, and specifically BAME women. It was just two months ago that a report by Professor Sir Michael Marmot highlighted that the life expectancy of women living in the poorest communities in England has declined since 2011¹⁰ and we therefore believe that a similar analysis in respect of Covid-19 related deaths (and cases generally) is likely to provide similar insights and highlight the gender inequalities involved. However, even the Marmot Review had unfortunately neglected to provide a further breakdown based on ethnicity which we feel would have highlighted the disparities in health even more; we therefore ask that ethnicity disaggregated data is made available as soon as possible. We can only address the factors creating inequalities if we have a true understanding of all the issues at hand.

¹⁰ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-51619608>

56. Unsurprisingly, the Covid-19 crisis has increased the risks of abuse and risks to health for individuals with insecure immigration status. Although these vulnerabilities remain live at all times, we strongly urge that data-sharing between the NHS and Home Office be halted temporarily and at least temporarily lift the ban on no recourse to public funds. We also hope that the Home Office is able to prioritise and expedite the processing of Domestic Violence (DDV) Concession applications. We would also like clarification of the varying immigration and asylum related circumstances that individuals may find themselves in; such as what would happen in the event that a spouse's income falls below the threshold limit due to being placed on furlough. It feels like ineffective communication is a key issue; for example, we had initially understood that the Home Office was allowing automatic visa extensions for all NHS workers but then it appears that this only applied to Tier 2 workers. We ourselves are finding it difficult to understand the approach that will be taken by the Home Office on certain immigration matters and can only imagine therefore the anxiety and confusion that may be in the minds of those affected.
57. We have discussed above the financial impact on BAME women which then restricts their ability to seek help in abusive situations. However it is important to bear in mind that the repercussions on women, particularly Muslim/BAME women, can be profound regardless of whether or not they are in an abusive situation. In 2016 the Women & Equalities Committee itself had found that Muslim women face triple discrimination in the workplace, whether when trying to obtain employment or whilst employed. They are also statistically the lowest paid. Whilst we are grateful to the government for providing support in such unprecedented times through the furlough provisions, where someone is already paid a low salary, a further 20% cut can still have devastating consequences. The situation can be exacerbated where single parents and carers are involved. We do not think a one-size fits all approach is the best way to deal with the issues because the circumstances of individuals can vary so significantly.
58. We understand that the first set of claims for furlough will have now been made and we would ask that gender and ethnicity disaggregated data be provided so that we can assess what kind of furlough decisions are being made. Are women, and separately Muslim/BAME women, being disadvantaged by the decisions being made in any way? We know that the government has stated that employees needing to look after children can also be placed on furlough but decision-making is still left at the discretion of the employer and they may not necessarily take into account the burdens of childcare. Similarly, women may be reluctant to request to be placed on furlough as they may worry that this will have a negative impact on their career progression and could potentially place them first in line for redundancies should such a decision need to be made.
59. We are aware that some employers are choosing not to place employees on furlough for various business reasons but are nevertheless reducing salaries. Employees affected by such decisions are therefore having their salaries reduced despite still working their usual hours and potentially also having to look after children or elderly at the same time. Current government packages do not appear to have taken into account this scenario and as such, support is not available for such individuals. Additionally, where companies have announced they will be going into administration, we are informed that there has been a lack of communication and information as to what will happen to their employees, leading to an increase in anxiety.
60. We also wish to make the point that the situation is especially intense for carers, whether its those caring for children, the elderly, relatives or partners with caring

needs. With schools and nurseries now closed, the work of carers will have more than doubled but with no means of respite. We hope that consideration can be given to the needs of carers during these unprecedented times and support packages put in place which can help relieve some of the burdens upon them.

61. The above also raises a key issue about the financial means of parents and carers to provide the appropriate resources needed to allow home-schooling. Not all families will have access to laptops, nor the means to purchase one, but it appears that almost all home-schooling is dependent on the use of laptops and online technology. This in itself can cause serious issues. We ask that support packages are made available so that children can continue to access education, which is a fundamental right, without causing financial hardship to the families. We would also ask checks are put in place to ensure that all home-schooling is in accordance with the principles of equality and diversity and that parents or carers are not using the pandemic as an opportunity to adapt lessons to any discriminatory ways of thinking. Additionally not all parents or carers will be able to access learning materials (whether due to IT illiteracy or language barriers) and we hope that support measures are being put in place to better assist parents and carers in this regard. A pandemic should not mean a compromise on a child's right to quality education that will prepare them for their futures.
62. We were also very concerned to hear that the Child Maintenance Service is no longer chasing defaulting parents during the Covid-19 crisis, with no alternative process in place to ensure that payments continue to be paid (and paid on time). We are already seeing that abusers are using this decision wholly to their advantage by refusing to make maintenance payments during this crisis, despite knowing that this could severely impact the non-paying parent's financial resources and ultimately their children. This situation is exacerbated further due to shortages in food and difficulties in being able to secure online deliveries; if maintenance payments are not made on time or at all, this could logistically affect the ability to obtain food and other essential items. It is therefore essential that the Child Maintenance Service starts contacting defaulting parents again, or that an alternative process is urgently put in place. At present the Child Maintenance Service website simply states, 'you may have to wait longer to get money that is owed to you'. However we do not know how long this crisis will last and individuals could be waiting a significant period of time and accruing debts and falling into destitution in the meantime. We would also strongly urge that special penalties are introduced for those who are very clearly defaulting simply to harm, harass, abuse or coerce a non-paying parent in light of the recent changes.
63. We also ask that the Child Maintenance Service rely upon tangible proof of a reduction in the paying parent's income before reducing the maintenance sums owed to the non-paying parent. Additionally, where the reduction in maintenance sums is Covid-19 related, further assistance should be made available to the resident parent.
64. We also ask that the rules for self-employed individuals are changed so that maternity leave is exempt from any earnings assessment. Additionally, we feel that a general review needs to be carried out of the impact on self-employed individuals who may have started a business less than three years ago; whilst their earnings may have been lower in previous years, they may well have been able to earn a higher amount this year had it not been for the pandemic. We would ask that a one-size fits all approach should not be taken and individuals should be given the opportunity to at least state their case as to why the calculations should be adjusted to take into account their particular circumstances.

Unforeseen consequences to measures brought in to ease the burden on frontline staff

65. We must state that none of the consequences arising from Covid-19 or the measures introduced were unforeseen by us. In fact, we feel that the charity sector has been warning of the crippling effect of austerity measures and budget cuts for such a long time and we are now seeing the impact of the chronic under-funding that emergency and frontline services have had to endure over the years.
66. As mentioned, we have continued to operate during the pandemic in order to ensure that we can continue to assist those in need and now our helpline service is being provided remotely, away from our offices. We know that others have similarly moved to operating remotely rather than closing down during the pandemic. A recurring theme, particularly within specialist BAME organisations, that has been brought to our attention are the limitations faced due to a lack of sufficient phone and laptops to enable remote working. Not all charities and voluntary groups are able to purchase laptops and mobile phones to enable remote working which either means shutting down during this crisis or reducing services. It is therefore imperative that the government provides assistance to frontline organisations working with victims so that they are equipped with the technology and any other resources necessary to continue assisting victims.
67. Key frontline organisations also need additional funds that can be used to specifically provide financial assistance to those individuals facing hardship as a result of the pandemic. We provide funds through our MWN Hardship Fund for example to those in a crisis situation or facing destitution and we believe requests for support from our Hardship Fund is likely to increase in the near future. However, the 'stay at home' provisions mean that fundraising will be severely affected for us and undoubtedly for many other charities. Whilst we are predominately grant-funded, last year we raised almost £8000 through our individual fundraisers which is a significant amount for charities like us. This level of fundraising will not be possible this year and this in turn will affect the support we can provide. We would therefore ask that these issues be taken into account when considering any future support packages.
68. Additionally, we have been receiving a lot more calls from the likes of social workers requesting support to provide assistance that we consider to fall within the remit of the local authorities. This could for example be assistance to provide food, clothing etc. There is also a dire need for both permanent and temporary accommodation, as a result of which many victims are being forced to remain at home with their abusers. Various refuges have had to reduce their services due to the difficulties of following social distancing rules in housing with multiple families. Indeed, given the increased risks of abuse, it will be even higher demand for spaces and even less refuge and other temporary accommodation spaces available. Ultimately years of shortages in housing has meant that local authorities are not able to provide spaces and services to victims in need. This then places a burden on the charity sector, who in turn are unable to meet the increasing demands due to a lack of funds and resources. Indeed we feel that a key reason for the current issues being faced by Muslim and other ethnic minority victims of abuse is linked to the lack of funding and support given to BAME specialist services, particular BAME refuges and specialist support providers. It is vital that funding is specifically made available for such services, particularly BAME refuge providers, to ensure that the needs of BAME victims are met.
69. This does also feed into wider discussions about the lack of priority given to specialist BAME organisations, in favour of larger mainstream organisations, and the financial and administrative burdens arising as a result. The funding criteria for the Tampon

Tax for example has meant that only larger, mainstream charities with funding of at least £1-2 million are able to apply for funding. However specialist BAME organisations would not have such high income. Whilst the criteria does allow different organisations to come together and form a consortium, given that almost all specialist BAME charities have lower incomes, this could easily mean that coalitions will need to consist of 10 – 20 organisations to meet the criteria; this of course would be impossible to manage administratively and would also not be cost-effective, ultimately meaning that BAME charities are locked out from the application process. These are issues we have discussed in detail in our response to the Ministry of Justice's 2018 Consultation on Transforming the response to domestic abuse¹¹. Ultimately the crisis has highlighted a critical need for the government to review its funding strategy and ensure that specialist BAME services are specifically prioritised; we would like to see funds ring-fenced to ensure that BAME services can also receive support. It is noteworthy that repeat funding tends to be given to larger, mainstream organisations whilst smaller, BAME organisations are constantly having to seek grants and donations. Surely this in itself is cause for concern?

70. Additionally, we feel that there is a very obvious gap in the support packages made available to the charity sector. Whilst we are grateful that the furlough provisions have been extended to the charity sector and allows charity workers to be placed on furlough and receive 80% of their salary, what has been missed is that there will be charity workers who are able to work (and are needed to continue to work in order to continue supporting victims of abuse) but who may not be able to work their full hours. For example, a charity worker who usually works 35 hours a week may now only be able to commit to 20 hours a week due to caring responsibilities or even due to health or mental health reasons. As an under-funded organisation, the charity cannot justify paying them a full salary if all those hours cannot be worked. However, reducing their hours to 20 hours would result in a significant reduction in their salary and therefore furlough would be the more appropriate option for them. However, placing them on furlough means a loss of 20 hours of work – or 20 hours of support that could have been given to a victim of abuse. It would therefore be useful if support could be provided from the government so that the charity worker in this example can still work their 20 hours and the remainder of their salary (or a proportion thereof) can be met by the government.

71. We are also very aware of the toll that the current pandemic is likely to take a toll on frontline workers, particularly in respect of their mental health. Many charities will be trying to strike the right balance between continuing to support service users whilst protecting the health and welfare of charity workers. We would welcome any support and advice that can be provided in this respect. In this regard, we would suggest that the government allows us to take a flexible approach so that some employees, such as those struggling to continue to work due to health reasons or caring responsibilities, can be placed on furlough and their hours can be given to someone else.

Reviewing the measures

72. As we are sure that the Committee will appreciate, we are in wholly unprecedented times with new information being brought to our attention on a regular basis. The landscape is constantly changing as is the physical, mental and financial impact on

¹¹ http://www.mwnuk.co.uk/go_files/resources/779026-MOJ%20Domestic%20Abuse%20Consultation%202018.pdf

the country at large and on frontline workers. Given such unique circumstances, we feel that a second review date of six months time is too far away and would ask that, as a maximum, the second review should not be more than 3 months after the first review. In fact, in an additional suggestion we would suggest that a review is carried out every 8 weeks.

73. In terms of immediate improvements and changes which need to be made, we ask that support packages are made available for organisations working on the frontline to assist those affected by Covid19. This includes providing immediate and long term support, with a particular focus on specialist BAME services. We ask that the importance of those providing support to victims of abuse, specialist counselling services, specialist BAME refuge providers is finally recognised and they are provided with the necessary funds and resources to help vulnerable BAME individuals in need.
74. There is also an urgent need for the provision of adequate PPE and availability of testing. This is especially the case for the emergency services but also other frontline key workers and also carers. Indeed we would ask that the availability of personal protective equipment be kept under review and consideration be given to any such equipment which could be given to the charity sector, working with vulnerable individuals. Although there has been a shift to online and telephone based working and service delivery, the fact of the matter is that isolation, anxiety and abuse are on the increase due to the limitations on face-to-face activities and any support that can be provided to safely assist vulnerable individuals (without compromising the health and welfare of frontline keyworkers within the charity sector) would be very much welcome.

Final Comments

75. As a point of clarification, we must explain that where our comments and examples have been limited to Muslim and BAME girls, this is due to the nature of our organisation and its work. As a national Muslim women's charity our work predominantly deals with Muslim and BAME women and girls albeit we also work with individuals of other faiths and are therefore also aware of issues of relevance to other faith and non-faith communities. We are also aware that some of the issues experienced by Muslim and BAME women and girls can also be experienced by non-Muslim, non-BAME women and girls, as well as men and boys. In turn we wish to clarify that where we make any recommendations, we do so on behalf of all those within wider society who may be affected.
76. We would like to thank the Women & Equalities Committee for holding this Consultation and thank you for providing us with the opportunity to give Evidence. We hope it proves to be useful in your considerations.

**On behalf of Muslim Women's Network UK,
Nazmin Akthar
Co-Chair**

30th April 2020

**54-57 Allison Street
Digbeth
Birmingham
B5 5TH
board@mwnuk.co.uk**