



National Assembly of Women

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Affiliated to the Women's International Democratic Federation - an NGO with consultative status with ECOSOC at the United Nations and registered in the Special Register of International Labour Organisations (ILO)

Statement from the National Assembly of Women 29th April 2020 in response to evidence given by Liz Truss MP to the Women and Equalities Select Committee April 22nd 2020

The National Assembly of Women notes the statement made by Liz Truss MP, the Minister for Women and Equalities on 22nd April 2020 in which she set out the priorities for the Government Equalities Office to the Women and Equalities Select Committee.

The socio-economic crisis that has been created by Covid-19 has compounded pre-existing gender inequality faced by women across our society, with women from BAME communities at far greater levels of inequality. Women already constituted the majority of people living in poverty, are more likely to be in low paid or insecure employment and struggling with debt. Women also carry out the majority of unpaid work, caring for children, elderly and vulnerable adults and are at a higher risk of domestic violence.

In regard to the impact on women of the current Covid-19 crisis and the planned recovery, we would like to make the following comments:

- **Health and social care**

The majority of workers in the health and social care sector are women - 77% and 83% respectively [Women's Budget Group]. The shortage and unequal distribution of appropriate personal protective equipment has placed staff and their families at risk. This needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

- **NHS funding and staffing levels**

NHS workers, including outsourced departments, cleaners and catering staff have continued to work for long hours and on wages that do not reflect their social worth. Underfunding of the NHS and staffing shortages were prevalent prior to the Covid-19 crisis. As hospitals begin to schedule treatment for non-Covid patients and the demand in A&E increases this issue will reappear. A review will be vital to consider improved Government funding for the NHS. This should include a salary review, bringing back in-house previously outsourced services and reinstatement of bursaries for student doctors, nurses and other health professionals.

- **Social care provision**

The shocking state of our social care provision has been starkly exposed during the Covid-19 crisis. The plethora of private care providers has made it more difficult to co-ordinate the distribution of PPE and ensure the safety of residents and staff. It is imperative that this is addressed immediately. The Government should reinstate the legal duty and funding necessary for local councils to provide social care and give them the power to take over care providers, employing staff on comparable NHS pay and conditions.

- **Young women workers**

The closure of restaurants, retail shops and leisure facilities has affected young women workers to a greater extent than young men - 36% compared to 25% [Institute of Fiscal Studies]. These sectors already operate on low wages so coping on reduced money during the furlough or risk of future redundancy will affect women more than men. The extension of the furlough scheme to employees who have caring responsibilities, including for children, should be widely publicised to employers and employees and the Government should introduce a paid parental leave scheme for parents of



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children who are not covered by the furlough scheme. The Government needs to develop a fully funded child care strategy as part of the exit strategy from the lockdown.

- **Domestic abuse**

The Government estimates that the societal cost of domestic abuse is £66 million each year. The overwhelming majority of those suffering domestic abuse are women – 1.6 million women a year ending March 2019 [ONS] and calls to the Domestic Abuse Helpline have increased by 25% since the lockdown. Although extra funding was promised in February by the Government for refugees this will be far short of what is urgently needed to support this desperate demand for help.

- **Benefits and Universal Credit**

The benefit system, particularly the roll-out of Universal Credit, was problematic prior to the lockdown. In July 2019 there were 2.3 million people on Universal Credit of which 53% were women, a rise of 12% on the previous year [Gov.UK]. In the current situation any delay in processing claims is likely to impact disproportionately on women now and in the future.

- **Women's employment**

There has been little change in the gender pay gap since 2012 [Office of National Statistics] and despite it being grounds for unfair dismissal 54,000 women a year may lose their job due to pregnancy or maternity. As the lockdown is eased women's employment rights are likely to be at greater risk.

- **Return to work and safety**

When the lockdown is eased and people are permitted to return to their workplaces, employers should be mandated to set out their health and safety policies in respect of social distancing and appropriate PPE where needed, fully involving trade unions and/or the Health & Safety Executive. Employees should be free from intimidation in exercising their employment rights if they believe they are at risk. Years of funding cuts to local authorities and the HSE must be reinstated to enable and enforce this.

The Covid-19 crisis has exposed the parlous state of our health and social care services as well as the precarious situation for many workers and their families. It has highlighted the social and economic inequality in our society, particularly for millions of women. In charting the way forward, the Government has an opportunity to reject the corroding values associated with rampant consumerism and avaricious individualism, and build on the desire of people to act collectively in the interests of the wider community. It is imperative that the Government rejects austerity as a way out of the economic downturn and looks to rebuilding the economy through growth particularly those environmentally and socially useful industries, businesses and social enterprises.

Yours faithfully,

Anita Wright
President