

**People's Covid Inquiry      February-June 2021**

**Witness Statement  
Dr Mary-Ann Stephenson**

---

**Session 6, 5 April 2021, Inequalities and discrimination**

**STATEMENT**

I (name) Dr Mary-Ann Stephenson

Job title/ role/ occupation Director of the UK Women's Budget Group

---

will say as follows:

1. I make this statement for the purposes of the People's Covid Inquiry, which is to be held on 5 May
2. I am able to attend and give evidence. If unable to attend, I agree to my statement being considered by the Inquiry.
3. What is your job/ role/ occupation – how long doing this for/ brief summary of background/ experience - if possible, attach CV to statement

I am the Director of the UK Women's Budget Group. WBG is an independent network of leading academic researchers, policy experts and campaigners that analyses the gender impact of economic policy on different groups of women and men and promotes alternatives for a gender equal future.

I have been an active member of WBG since the late 1990s, and became its first Director in January 2017. I have worked for women's equality and human rights for over 25 years. I am a former Director of the Fawcett Society and Commissioner on the Women's National Commission. I hold a PhD in Law from the University of Warwick.

4. What is your connection/ interest/ background/ experience relevant to the pandemic in England?

WBG has over 30 years experience analysing women's economic situation and the impact of policy on women. Since March 2020 we have published [8 reports and 21 briefings on the impact of the pandemic on different groups of women and responded to 13 inquiries](#). We have published responses to every significant change in the Government's response to the pandemic. We have also requested gendered breakdowns of ONS data on furlough and job losses, and published summaries of these.

5. How are you able to assist the Inquiry – what is your expertise/ knowledge/ specialism?

Our work on Covid has focused on the social and economic impact of the pandemic on different groups of women in the UK.

6. What in your view were the original vision and principles underpinning the NHS?

That there should be a national health service, accessible to all and free at the point of delivery.

**We have listed a number of questions for Session 6: Inequalities and discrimination. Areas which you be may asked questions on are highlighted in red but you are of course free to comment more widely.**

If you have any references or articles for the Panel to consider please include them.

The bulk of answers to the questions below come from our January 2021 report 'Lessons Learned: where women stand at the start of 2021'

<https://wbg.org.uk/analysis/reports/lessons-learned-where-women-stand-at-the-start-of-2021/>

6.1 What have been the impacts on black, Asian and minority ethnic people? Should this have been predicted and/or acted on sooner?

Among women in England and Wales, those of Black Caribbean ethnic background have the highest mortality from Covid-19, 2.1 times higher than women from White ethnic groups. For men, those from a Black African ethnic background have the highest mortality at 2.5 times that of White ethnic men (this takes into account geography, socio-economic characteristics and health measures, including pre-existing conditions).<sup>1</sup> In fact, all ethnic minority groups except Chinese had a higher rate of mortality than White ethnic groups.<sup>2</sup>

Black, Asian and minority ethnic people have also been hit harder by the economic impacts of the pandemic. For example, in September 2020, unemployment rates for BAME workers was 26 times higher than for White workers.<sup>3</sup> The unemployment rate for BAME people has already reached 8.5% (compared with 4.9% overall and 4.5% for White workers).<sup>4</sup> Over one in five BAME workers who were furloughed during the first lockdown have since lost their jobs.<sup>5</sup> The proportion of people from ethnic minority groups that moved from employment to not working in the first four months of the crisis is nearly three times that of the UK population as a whole.<sup>6</sup>

The social and economic impacts of Covid 19 were widely predicted at the start of the pandemic. Our first briefing, published 19 March 2020, set out our concerns about the impact the pandemic

---

<sup>1</sup> ONS (October 2020) Updating ethnic contrasts in deaths involving the coronavirus (Covid-19), England and Wales: deaths occurring 2 March to 28 July 2020 (<https://bit.ly/38InCUD>)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> The Guardian (January 2021) Black, Asian and minority-ethnic UK workers hit worst by Covid job cuts (<https://bit.ly/3iCmV2s>)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Resolution Foundation (October 2020) One-in-five young people and over one-in-five BAME workers who were furloughed during lockdown have since lost their jobs (<https://bit.ly/3solR6L0>)

<sup>6</sup> IPPR (September 2020) Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups at greater risk of problem debt since Covid-19 (<https://bit.ly/3nHdwYk0>)

was likely to have on women and other equality groups <https://wbg.org.uk/blog/briefing-covid-19-and-gender-issues/> In that briefing we argued that:

‘Black Asian and Ethnic Minority (BAME) communities are also particularly vulnerable to both the health and economic impacts of the virus. People with underlying health conditions such as diabetes are more likely to experience severe symptoms if they contract Covid-19. People from a South Asian background are six times more likely to have type 2 diabetes and people from African and Caribbean backgrounds three times more likely. Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Chinese and Indian communities are over-represented among people over 65 with health-related problems.

BAME households are disproportionately likely to be poor and rely on benefits for a larger proportion of their income. People of Bangladeshi and Pakistani origin are more likely to work in distribution, hotels and restaurants and people of African and Caribbean backgrounds are disproportionately employed in the health sector.

Immigration status also impact individuals’ access to support: people with no recourse to public funds will be left destitute if they or a family member loses their job. Undocumented people, visitors or visa overstayers will face large bills for medical treatment if they become ill. Covid-19 is exempt from charging as an infectious disease but undocumented migrants might not know about this exemption and remain fearful of going to the hospital and avoid treatment altogether, which will have collective disastrous consequences in a public health emergency as the one we are currently facing.’

Race equality organisations and researchers with expertise in pandemics raised repeated concerns but the Government was slow to act.

## 6.2 What specific impacts have there been on women both at home and in the workplace?

### **Paid work**

Women make up both the majority of key workers, and the majority of those furloughed. The furlough scheme has protected against the widespread job losses among women seen in other countries, but as the furlough scheme ends unemployment rates among women are likely to rise significantly.

- More women than men are key workers at 54% (compared with 42% of men). Key-working roles are also highest among working-class women with 60% of women in ‘Semi-routine’ and ‘Routine’ jobs classed as key workers.<sup>7</sup> An estimated 750,000 young women have had to go to work during the pandemic despite safety fears.<sup>8</sup>
- Across the UK, women make up 52.1% of those on furlough, despite being only 47.3% of the overall UK workforce. Data from HMRC show that 2,337,900 women were furloughed at the end of February 2021, compared to 2,144,700 men.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Warren, T. and Lyonette, C. (2020) ‘Carrying the work burden of the Covid-19 pandemic: working class women in the UK, Briefing Note 1: Employment and mental health’ (October). Working Paper No 2020/1, Nottingham University Business School.

<sup>8</sup> Young Women’s Trust (Nov 2020) Picking up the Pieces: Young Women’s Experiences of 2020 (<https://bit.ly/35Msmqs>)

<sup>9</sup> WBG (March 2021) Gender Differences in Access to Coronavirus Government Support (<https://bit.ly/3sRGoje>)

- This is explained by the type of sectors that women and men tend to work in. More women than men work in sectors that were shut-down like retail and hospitality or accommodation and food services.
- Young women aged 18-25 are the largest group furloughed by age and gender. 425,300 of young women workers who are eligible have been furloughed (24%). This compares to 345,100 young men or 20% of those eligible. 40% of eligible female workers under the age of 18 had been furloughed (30% of young men).
- During the Covid-19 pandemic, mothers have been more likely to be furloughed than fathers (35% compared to 30% for fathers),<sup>10</sup> with their overall employment dropping from 80% to 70%.<sup>11</sup>
- There are significant class differences in furlough rates. Over half (54%) of working-class women in 'Semi-Routine' (including care workers, retail assistants, hospital porters) and 'Routine' (including cleaners, waiting/bar staff, bus drivers, sewing machinists) jobs had been furloughed by June (compared with 41% of men).<sup>12</sup>
- Parents in better-off families<sup>13</sup> are more likely to continue to work through the lockdowns: 55% of formerly working mothers in better-off families continued work through the first lockdown (60% for fathers in this group), compared with 38% for mothers in the poorest tercile of families (40% for fathers in this group).<sup>14</sup>
- By the end of January 2021 only 28.8% of all SEISS claims had been made by women despite women making up 34.8% of self-employed workers. 632,000 self-employed women (28.8%) made SEISS claims totalling just over £1.4 billion by January 2021. This compares with 1,557,000 claims made by men, totalling nearly £4.8 billion. Only 60% of eligible women claimed SEISS, compared to 68% of eligible men.<sup>15</sup>
- For parents who were working prior to the pandemic, 17% of mothers are no longer doing paid work, having lost their work permanently (whether they were laid off, were fired or quit), compared with 11% of fathers.<sup>16</sup> 72% of mothers have worked fewer hours and cut their earnings due to lack of childcare<sup>17</sup>
- Lone parents (90% of whom are women) have been particularly impacted, earning on average just over half as much as mothers in 2-parent households. Nearly half (46%) of single parents worked in routine occupations more affected by the pandemic compared to 26% of coupled parents. Single parents are also **twice as likely to be on a zero-hours contract** than other family groups, putting them at greater risk of job insecurity during the crisis.<sup>18</sup>

## Unpaid work in the home

Women have carried out the bulk of unpaid work, particularly care work as a result of school and nursery closures, and the crisis in social care.

---

<sup>10</sup> IFS (May 2020) How are mothers and fathers balancing work and family under lockdown (<https://bit.ly/3nJoKLU>)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Warren, T. and Lyonette, C. (2020) 'Carrying the work burden of the Covid-19 pandemic: working class women in the UK, Briefing Note 1: Employment and mental health' (October). Working Paper No 2020/1, Nottingham University Business School.

<sup>13</sup> In this study, the IFS defines 'better-off families' to be families in the top of three equally distributed 'family income' earnings tertials

<sup>14</sup> IFS (September 2020) Family time use and home learning during the Covid-19 lockdown (<https://bit.ly/381Y4J0>)

<sup>15</sup> WBG (March 2021) Gender Differences in Access to Coronavirus Government Support (<https://bit.ly/3sRG0je>)

<sup>16</sup> IFS (September 2020) Family time use and home learning during the Covid-19 lockdown (<https://bit.ly/381Y4J0>)

<sup>17</sup> Pregnant Then Screwed (2020) The true scale of the crisis facing working mums (<https://bit.ly/2XLPa4R>)

<sup>18</sup> Gingerbread (November 2020) Caring without sharing: Single parents' journey through the Covid-19 crisis (<https://bit.ly/35EpMTh>)

- Mothers on the lowest incomes are nine times more at risk of losing their job due to school closures in the UK. Overall, 4% of parents report being at risk of losing their job if schools close and no additional support is in place for childcare.<sup>19</sup>
- Twice as many mothers report they would have to take time off with no pay due to school closures or a sick child than fathers (15% of mothers compared with 8% of fathers).<sup>20</sup>
- 57% of fathers compared to 49% of mothers report they would be able to work from home during school closures.<sup>21</sup>
- 70% of furlough requests from working mothers were tuned down by their employers.<sup>22</sup>
- Since March 2020 the number of unpaid carers has increased by an estimated 4.5 million, 58% of them women. Overall, nearly 3 million unpaid carers are also juggling paid work with care.<sup>23</sup>
- Mothers and fathers in 2-parent heterosexual households are both doing more childcare than before the pandemic. However, there are clear inequalities in time use. Fathers spend more time undertaking 'enjoyable' parts of childcare (defined by parents as developmental engagement, such as reading together). The amount of time mothers spent on 'enjoyable' childcare also increased. However, overall mothers spent two-thirds more time on childcare than men, much of this focused on non-developmental childcare and supervising children.<sup>24</sup>
- Increased unpaid work and 'multitasking' during the pandemic has impacted women's productive work time. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, mothers and fathers used to be interrupted for childcare responsibilities during the same proportion of paid working hours. Since the crisis began, mothers are being interrupted 50% more often.<sup>25</sup> While 70% of fathers' work hours are spent exclusively doing work, this is the case for only 53% of mothers' work hours.<sup>26</sup>
- In June 2020, 70% of employed women in couples were mostly doing the washing/ironing and 61% the cleaning. This was largely still the case in September 2020.<sup>27</sup> Overall, almost half (45%) of employed women spent 11 or more hours per week on housework at this point in the pandemic (24% of men).<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> WBG (January 2021) Mothers on the lowest incomes are nine times more at risk of losing their job due to school closures in the UK (<https://bit.ly/39q4w4s>)

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> TUC (January 2021) Working mums: paying the price (<https://bit.ly/38Hv6He>)

<sup>23</sup> Carers UK (October 2020) Caring behind closed doors: six months on (<https://bit.ly/39vTRW5>)

<sup>24</sup> WBG (July 2020) ONS new data on time use and parenting in lockdown (<https://bit.ly/2LwAtiP>)

<sup>25</sup> IFS (May 2020) How are mothers and fathers balancing work and family under lockdown (<https://bit.ly/3nJoKLU>)

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Warren, T. and Lyonette, C. (2020) 'Carrying the work burden of the Covid-19 pandemic: working class women in the UK, Briefing Note 2: Housework and childcare' (December). Working Paper No 2020/2 (14-12-20), Nottingham University Business School.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

- During the pandemic, almost two thirds (64%) of unpaid carers have not been able to take breaks from their caring role.<sup>29</sup> 70% of unpaid carers have reported caring had had a negative impact on their physical and mental health.<sup>30</sup>
- 81% of unpaid carers are providing more care, and 8 in 10 carers have seen the needs of the person they care for increase since the start of the pandemic.<sup>31</sup>
- 18% of over 65s from BAME groups are likely to be receiving informal care from their children compared to 10% from White ethnic groups.<sup>32</sup>

### 6.3 What additional impact has there been on people on low incomes? Was that predictable?

Before the Covid-19 crisis, household debt across the UK was already at an all-time high. Stagnant wages, rising rents and living costs, as well as cuts to social security (such as cuts to the local housing allowance, the benefit freeze and the benefit cap) have all contributed to household debt. Ongoing research into destitution from Joseph Rowntree Foundation estimates that more than a million households in the UK were destitute at some point in 2019, an increase of 35% on 2017.<sup>33</sup>

However, poverty and debt are gendered. Before the crisis, women were more likely to live in poverty than men (19% compared with 21%), and female headed households were poorer than comparable male-headed households.<sup>34</sup> 61% of those getting into debt to purchase everyday necessities were women<sup>35</sup> and women were more likely to become insolvent.<sup>36</sup>

Women and those from a Black, Asian or minority ethnic background are also over-represented in low-income households, due to their lower earnings compared to White men.<sup>37</sup>

Disabled women are more likely to be in low-paid work; the employment pay gap for disabled women is 36% (average median gross earnings compared to a non-disabled man),<sup>38</sup> totalling an equivalent earnings difference of £7,020 per year.<sup>39</sup> Disabled people were also already facing on average an extra £583 in costs per month due to their impairment or condition, despite benefits designed to meet such costs.<sup>40</sup>

Lone parents (90% of which are women) were increasingly likely to be destitute,<sup>41</sup> less financially secure, and on lower incomes than other family types; mothers in coupled households earned nearly twice as much per week than lone mothers.<sup>42</sup> Lone mothers were also set to lose the most from cumulative tax-benefit changes since 2010; £4,640 per year by April 2021 (17% of net income) for a

<sup>29</sup> Carers UK (October 2020) Caring behind closed doors: six months on (<https://bit.ly/39vTRW5>)

<sup>30</sup> University of Birmingham (August 2020) Covid-19 leaves unpaid carers without physical and mental health treatment (<https://bit.ly/2XC90Qh>)

<sup>31</sup> Carers UK (October 2020) Caring behind closed doors: six months on (<https://bit.ly/39vTRW5>)

<sup>32</sup> ONS (2019) Living longer: caring in later working life (<https://bit.ly/3nLa3rs>)

<sup>33</sup> JRF (December 2020) Destitution in the UK 2020 (<https://bit.ly/2LUifVO>)

<sup>34</sup> WBG (2018) The Female Face of Poverty (<https://bit.ly/3bBVdRS>)

<sup>35</sup> StepChange (2018) Women and debt (<https://bit.ly/35EYmN5>)

<sup>36</sup> WBG (2019) Household debt and gender (<https://bit.ly/2AzRzHE>)

<sup>37</sup> WBG (November 2020) Household debt, Gender and Covid-19 (<https://bit.ly/38IBUo4>)

<sup>38</sup> TUC (November 2020) Disability pay and employment gaps (<https://bit.ly/3lQp3UV>)

<sup>39</sup> Original calculation with data from TUC (November 2020) Disability pay and employment gaps (<https://bit.ly/3lQp3UV>)

<sup>40</sup> Scope (May 2020) The Disability report: Disabled people and the coronavirus crisis (<https://bit.ly/34VGdLo>)

<sup>41</sup> JRF (December 2020) Destitution in the UK 2020 (<https://bit.ly/2LUifVO>)

<sup>42</sup> Gingerbread (November 2020) Caring without sharing: Single parents' journey through the Covid-19 crisis (<https://bit.ly/35EpMTh>)

non-disabled lone-mother, rising to £7,224 per year (26% of net income) for a lone disabled mother, and £10,506 per year (32% net income) for a lone disabled mother with a disabled child.<sup>43</sup>

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused an economic recession which has seen these pre-existing gendered and intersectional inequalities compound. Polling undertaken early in the crisis found 42.9% BAME women believed they would be in more debt, compared to 37.1% of white women, and 34.2% of white men.<sup>44</sup> 34.2% of disabled women (compared with 24.4% of non-disabled women) reported their household had already run out of money, with 37.7% of disabled mothers having struggled to feed their children since the start of the crisis.<sup>45</sup>

Inequality between the most affluent and poorest households has also widened. Loss of employment and an inadequate social security safety net have meant that low income households with less/no savings to buffer against such volatility are being pushed further into debt.<sup>46</sup> We knew at the start of summer 2020 that 3.8 million people had borrowed to make ends meet since the start of the pandemic, most often using a credit card (1.7 million), an overdraft (1.6 million) or a high-cost credit product (980,000).<sup>47</sup> 44% of those with an income of less than £30,000 have fallen behind or borrowed to make ends meet.<sup>48</sup>

Meanwhile, households on higher incomes, whose work is typically more easily transferred to working from home, have seen a substantial rise in household savings.<sup>49</sup>

- The poorest fifth of income groups have seen an average £170 per month (£1,220 total and equivalent to 14% of pre-crisis income) decline in their bank balances from March to September 2020, relative to what would be expected pre-Covid-19, as income falls are not fully cancelled out by lower spending.<sup>50</sup>
- By the end of July 2020, a third (34% or 9.7 million) of households across the UK reported a fall in income as a direct consequence of the pandemic.<sup>51</sup>
- By November 2020, almost 18 million people (34%) have had to use some form of debt to get by since March 2020, with 6.4 million (12%) people using multiple forms of debt.<sup>52</sup>
- By November 2020, 42% of high-income households have saved more during the pandemic. According to the Bank of England, these households are less likely to spend their savings in support of the recovery, with only 10% planning to do so (70% planned to continue saving this additional money).<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> WBG (2018) Disabled Women and Austerity (<https://bit.ly/3sqJtI0>)

<sup>44</sup> WBG (June 2020) BAME women and Covid-19 (<https://bit.ly/35IFEE7>)

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> WBG (November 2020) Household debt, Gender and Covid-19 (<https://bit.ly/38IBUo4>)

<sup>47</sup> StepChange (2020) Coronavirus and personal debt: a financial recovery strategy for households (<https://bit.ly/2lvGfA8>)

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Bank of England (November 2020) How has Covid affected household savings? (<https://bit.ly/3oLdD6t>)

<sup>50</sup> IFS (October 2020) Spending and saving during the Covid-19 crisis: evidence from bank account data (<https://bit.ly/3bEJ3Yp>)

<sup>51</sup> Standard Life Foundation (September 2020) Emerging From Lockdown (<https://bit.ly/3qo24Tg>)

<sup>52</sup> Turn2Us (November 2020) Weathering the Storm: How Covid-19 is Eroding Financial Resilience (<https://bit.ly/2LRaVxs>)

<sup>53</sup> Bank of England (November 2020) How has Covid affected household savings? (<https://bit.ly/3oLdD6t>) s

- At the end of July 2020, 10% of households were in serious financial difficulty and a further 16% were struggling to make ends meet<sup>54</sup>
- More than 11 million people (one in five) are now running out of money ‘always’ or ‘most of the time’ before the end of the week or month. This means an additional 4.2 million are now frequently running out of money, compared to the start of the Covid-19 crisis.<sup>55</sup>
- 30% of women report being negatively affected financially by the Covid-19 pandemic compared with 26% of men.<sup>56</sup>
- In October 2020, an estimated 1.5 million young women had lost income since the coronavirus pandemic began.<sup>57</sup> The pandemic has particularly impacted young women’s employment, as over a third (36%) of all young women were employed in shutdown sectors like hospitality, leisure and tourism<sup>58</sup>. Young female employees aged 17 were the most likely to be furloughed, with 65% put on furlough (compared with 62% of 17-year-old male employees)<sup>59</sup>
- 6 million people have fallen behind on at least one household bill. Over half (52%) of people in this group are disabled.<sup>60</sup>
- Nearly half of parents (47.5%) have been unable to pay for an unexpected expense during the crisis (data collected for July 2020).<sup>61</sup>
- In September 2020, 1 in 4 people with caring responsibilities (the majority of whom are women) had fallen behind on their bills. This is particularly pronounced for people caring for someone older, with 1 in 3 (33%) having had to borrow money from a commercial lender.<sup>62</sup>
- 1 in 3 (31%) Black people are behind on their bills, compared to 1 in 8 (12%) for White ethnic groups.<sup>63</sup>
- 1 in 5 key workers have fallen behind on their bills, compared to fewer than 1 in 10 of non-key workers.<sup>64</sup> Women are twice as likely to be key workers than men with BAME and migrant women overrepresented.<sup>65</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> Standard Life Foundation (September 2020) Emerging From Lockdown (<https://bit.ly/3qo24Tg>)

<sup>55</sup> Turn2Us (November 2020) Weathering the Storm: How Covid-19 is Eroding Financial Resilience (<https://bit.ly/2LRaVxs>)

<sup>56</sup> StepChange (June 2020) Coronavirus and personal debt: a financial recovery strategy for households (<https://bit.ly/3oOYLUA>)

<sup>57</sup> Young Women’s Trust (Nov 2020) Picking up the Pieces: Young Women’s Experiences of 2020 (<https://bit.ly/35Msmqs>)

<sup>58</sup> IFS (Apr 2020) Sector shutdowns during the coronavirus crisis: which workers are most exposed? (<https://bit.ly/2yCSruD>)

<sup>59</sup> HMRC (Aug 2020) Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme statistics: August 2020 (<https://bit.ly/34GA6Ku>)

<sup>60</sup> Citizens Advice (2020) Excess debt – who has fallen behind on their household bills due to coronavirus? (<https://bit.ly/2lpLZMm>)

<sup>61</sup> ONS (September 2020) Personal and economic well-being in Great Britain: September 2020 (<https://bit.ly/3snZhLr>)

<sup>62</sup> Citizens Advice (2020) Excess debt – who has fallen behind on their household bills due to coronavirus? (<https://bit.ly/2lpLZMm>)

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Resolution Foundation (2020) Risky business (<https://bit.ly/3n5UYRA>)



- 32% of young women surveyed by Young Women’s Trust are finding it hard to afford essentials like food. Around 1 in 10 said they have taken on debt to afford essentials, such as borrowing from family and friends, taking on overdrafts or paying on credits card.<sup>66</sup>
- A quarter of young women surveyed during the pandemic said they expected to lose more than £100 a week during the pandemic, 84% were concerned about their future finances.<sup>67</sup>
- The current rate for Statutory Sick Pay is £95.85 per week. Over 4 in 10 workers told the TUC that they would be pushed into debt or not be able to pay bills if their income dropped down to £96 per week for just two weeks.<sup>68</sup>
- [Figures from The Trussell Trust in December 2020 show that](#) nearly half (47%) of the households using their food banks in the summer of 2020 were in debt to the DWP – meaning that the most common form of debt among people using food banks is debt to the government, ahead of private lenders, families and friends.<sup>69</sup>
- From the start of April to the end of September 2020, The Trussell Trust food banks provided 47% more emergency parcels to people in crisis around the UK than over the same period in 2019 (1,239,399 compared with 843,655). However, the extent of need exceeds this, as it does not include the nearly 1,000 independent foodbanks across the UK.<sup>70</sup>
- In December 2020, BPAS found that 62% of women who have had an abortion during the pandemic have said that their decision to end their pregnancy was either due to mainly financial factors or a combination of financial and other factors. Among women who were aware of the two-child limit,<sup>71</sup> 21% said that mainly financial factors influenced their decision, compared with 7% of those who were not aware.<sup>72</sup>

All of this was entirely predictable. Our report in March 2020 argued that:

‘The economic impacts of the Covid-19 will affect the poorest families in the UK hardest. The sectors that have taken the immediate hardest hit, retail (excluding food), hotels and restaurants, airlines, travel operators, cleaning, arts and entertainment, and personal services like hairdressing have lower average rates of pay. Low-paid workers are less likely to be entitled to Statutory Sick Pay (SSP), are less likely to work from home and have lower levels of savings. Women, disabled and BAME people are all over represented among the poorest groups in society. Women hold [70% of jobs](#) that are not entitled to Statutory Sick Pay.’

---

<sup>66</sup> Young Women’s Trust (2020) Ignored, undervalued and underpaid (<https://bit.ly/3piwOFh>)

<sup>67</sup> Young Women’s Trust (May 2020) Ignored, Undervalued and Underpaid (<https://bit.ly/33UyCue>)

<sup>68</sup> TUC (September 2020) Sick pay and debt (<https://bit.ly/3ssGVJp>)

<sup>69</sup> The Trussell Trust (December 2020) Lift the Burden: Tackling the Government Debts Facing People at Food Banks (<https://bit.ly/3ibKm2e>)

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> The government’s ‘two-child limit’ policy, introduced in 2017 restricts the amount of financial support available for families with three or more children.

<sup>72</sup> BPAS (December 2020) Forced into a corner: The two-child limit and pregnancy decision making during the pandemic (<https://bit.ly/39uTqvf>)

#### 6.4 What measures could have been taken by government to better address the impact on black, Asian and minority ethnic people, women and those on low incomes?

In our 9 April 2020 report 'Crisis Collide' (<https://wbg.org.uk/analysis/reports/crises-collide-women-and-covid-19/>) we set out a series of recommendations for the Government to address the social and economic impact of Covid 19 on women and other equalities groups:

- The Government should collect and publish sex-disaggregated data as well as data disaggregated by other relevant protected characteristics to best understand and act on this pattern
- All NHS and social care workers, including cleaners and other support staff, must have adequate PPE, and testing for Covid-19 should be rolled out as quickly as possible
- Decisions about treatment for Covid-19 and end of life care should respect the human rights of disabled people, people with serious health conditions and older people. It should not be denied to people who would benefit based on assumptions about their quality of life and no one should be pressured to refuse treatment
- Reinstate, and support with central Government funding, the legal duty on councils to provide social care to all who are eligible
- Give local authorities the power to take over care providers and expand local provision, provided they employ workers directly on contracts similar to those used in the NHS
- There should be a right to request furlough and part time furlough. The full range of people who are eligible for furlough should be widely publicised
- The Government should introduce a paid parental leave scheme for parents of children who are not covered by the furlough scheme
- Statutory Sick Pay should be increased and the earnings threshold abolished. The Government needs to take urgent action to extend sick pay to the self-employed
- The calculation of support for the self-employed should exclude periods of time off work to care, including maternity leave
- Child Benefit should be increased to £50 per child per week to cover loss of free school meals and cover some costs of children being at home full-time
- Carer's allowance should be increased
- Universal Credit should be paid from day one of a claim or advance payments should be widely promoted and converted from a loan into a grant while the IT systems are amended
- The two-child limit and overall benefit cap should be abolished
- The housing element of UC should be increased in line with actual rents
- No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) must be suspended immediately
- Keep women-only buildings/areas when allocating rooms to rough-sleepers to ensure women's safety
- The VAWG sector needs immediate emergency funding, and longer term support to meet the expected surge in cases when lockdown is lifted
- The Tampon Tax fund should be re-purposed to provide emergency core funding for specialist women's organisations facing increasing pressures as a result of Covid-19

#### 6.5 Have risk assessments been done in the workplace for these groups; were they timely and what was the outcome?

Although employers were obliged to carry out risk assessments this does not appear to have been rigorously enforced. We know for example that death rates for care workers were particularly high. Data from the first few months of the crisis show that care workers were more likely to die from Covid-19 than their NHS counterparts (19.1 deaths per 100,000 women for care workers compared

with 15.3 deaths per 100,000 women for NHS staff)<sup>73</sup> and twice as likely to die from Covid-19 than non-key workers.<sup>74</sup>

#### 6.6 What impact has the Government's 'hostile environment' policies had on undocumented and migrant people during the pandemic in accessing NHS care?

We are seeing how immigration and social security policies aimed at creating a 'hostile environment' have exacerbated the impact of Covid-19 on all migrants, with particular impacts on migrant women:

- Most migrant women have no recourse to public funds, meaning that if they lose their jobs, hours or home they cannot claim benefits like Universal Credit, Housing Benefit or get homelessness support from their local authorities.
- Migrant victims/survivors of abuse who have no recourse to public funds cannot access women's refuges, as refuges are dependent on Housing Benefit for their bricks and mortar funding.
- Despite being overrepresented in frontline work like care, migrant women are paying for the NHS twice through the Immigration Health Surcharge and their taxes.
- Undocumented migrants may fear seeking treatment from the NHS due to links with immigration enforcement and fear of charging.
- Migrant women in detention centres are at high risk of contracting the virus without adequate staff, space for social distancing or healthcare.

The Government introduced some welcome measures to mitigate some of these impacts, including:

- Allowing asylum seekers and refugees with a change in their status to remain in their current state accommodation. This will spare up to 50,000 people from becoming homeless during this health crisis.
- Local authorities to house all rough sleepers and people in night shelters, including people with no recourse to public funds.
- Visas for NHS frontline staff expiring before October 2020 were automatically extended for one year.

However, many migrant women, including those with insecure status or undocumented are still left with no protection.

#### 6.7 Covid-19 is a notifiable public health disease and NHS treatment is free: what barriers nevertheless exist for undocumented and migrant people in accessing treatment?

Undocumented migrants are understandably wary of engaging with public services, including health services, because they do not trust that they will not be reported to immigration services. In addition, charging for routine NHS services is likely to act as a barrier to accessing services which may be free because people assume that there will be a charge, based on previous experience.

---

<sup>73</sup> ONS (June 2020) Coronavirus (Covid-19) related deaths by occupation, England and Wales: deaths registered between 9 March and 25 May 2020 (<https://bit.ly/39AXCti>)

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

## 6.8 What factors explain why impacts have fallen so unequally on black, Asian and minority ethnic people, women and those on low incomes?

The disproportionate impact on black, Asian and minority ethnic people, women and those on low incomes is a result of pre-existing inequalities, in the labour market, housing, poverty and personal safety.

Prior to the pandemic women were the majority of those providing care, paid and unpaid and the majority of health workers. This means that they were more likely to be exposed to Covid-19, and more likely to be affected by the decision to close schools and nurseries and the need to move non-urgent patients out of hospitals.

Women were also more likely to be employed in service sectors that were hit hardest by social distancing measures, more likely to be on insecure and zero-hours contracts, more likely to be dependent on social security and more likely to be in an insecure housing situation. Single women and lone parents in particular (90% of whom are women) are already less able to afford housing. Social isolation policies increased women's vulnerability to domestic violence and abuse. These gendered impacts intersected with impacts as a result of age, disability, class and race.

Black Asian and Ethnic Minority (BAME) communities were also particularly vulnerable to both the health and economic impacts of the virus.

BAME households are disproportionately likely to be poor and rely on benefits for a larger proportion of their income. People of Bangladeshi and Pakistani origin are more likely to work in distribution, hotels and restaurants and people of African and Caribbean backgrounds are disproportionately employed in the health sector.

The sectors that have taken the immediate hardest hit, retail (excluding food), hotels and restaurants, airlines, travel operators, cleaning, arts and entertainment, and personal services like hairdressing have lower average rates of pay. Low-paid workers are less likely to be entitled to Statutory Sick Pay (SSP), are less likely to work from home and have lower levels of savings. Women, disabled and BAME people are all over-represented among the poorest groups in society. Women hold 70% of jobs that are not entitled to Statutory Sick Pay.

## 6.9 What measures could and should have been taken, especially when the differential impacts became apparent? How would such measures have been effective?

In addition to the recommendations made at 6.4 above the Women's Budget Group has made the following recommendations:

### Employment

- All key workers must have access to adequate PPE and liveable Statutory Sick Pay. This will require immediate funding injections for the social care and childcare sectors to meet the additional costs and avoid bankruptcy.
- The majority of public sector workers are women. The public sector pay freeze announced in the November 2020 one-year Spending Review should be lifted to support public sector workers through the Covid-19 recovery and to appropriately value their contribution during the pandemic.

- The government should immediately reinstate gender pay gap reporting to get a better picture of what is happening to women's economic equality to aid Covid-19 recovery planning.
- The government must ensure that employment support programmes such as the Kickstart Scheme avoid segregating women into lower-paid professions and are sensitive to diverse caring responsibilities.
- Use the upcoming employment bill to reduce insecurity for low-paid workers by extending employment rights and investing in strong and effective enforcement.<sup>75</sup>
- Larger companies should be mandated to report the number of people they make redundant by protected characteristics including sex and race, to ensure accountability against bias or discrimination while gender pay gap reporting is suspended.

### Childcare

- Emergency support is required for Early Years providers immediately to prevent widespread closures.
- The Early Years workforce should be provided with raised salaries and high-quality training, enabling better support for the most disadvantaged children.
- The Early Years Funding Formula should be updated to reflect the real costs of delivering childcare. In 2019 there was a total gap of £662 million for Early Years funding (free entitlement hours for under two's was underfunded by 37%, and for three and four-year-olds this was 20%). The formula was updated by 8p/hr in the November 2020 Spending Review, which is not enough, particularly with the increases in the National Living Wage.

### On Social Security

- Efforts to control Covid-19 have increased costs for households with children. Child Benefit should be increased to £50 per child and the benefit cap and the two-child limit should be abolished to prevent child poverty being further exacerbated.
- The personal allowance in Universal Credit and Working Tax Credits should be further increased, or at least, the uplift made permanent and proportional to household size. It must also be applied to other 'legacy benefits', including Job Seeker's Allowance and Employment Support Allowance to guarantee disabled people do not struggle to access basic resources.
- Employment and Support Allowance, Job Seeker's Allowance and other benefit payments should be increased in line with the rise in Universal Credit and Working Tax Credits.
- The 5-week wait for Universal Credit has been hugely damaging to many, with those who opt for an advance accruing this as debt. The 5-week wait should be scrapped and replaced by a non-repayable grant.
- Statutory Sick Pay must be increased to the Real Living Wage and be extended to all workers with no income floor to ensure that those who have symptoms of Covid-19 or are awaiting test results are not forced to go to work.
- Excluding many migrant's from support risks exposing them to the virus, which threatens the public health response, and fails to recognise the vital role many migrant workers are playing in combating the pandemic. The 'No Recourse to Public Funds' condition should be lifted.
- The government should consider debt relief for people accumulating Covid-19 related debt and rent arrears to avoid further widespread poverty and destitution.

---

<sup>75</sup> JRF (December 2020) Destitution in the UK 2020 (<https://bit.ly/2LUifVO>)

## Poverty and Debt

- The Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) should extend payment holidays for the duration of the pandemic to help people manage household bills.
- The government should increase the budgets of local authorities to make Local Hardship Funds more widely available.
- Investment in local welfare assistance for local authorities to provide direct support including cash to prevent households being pushed into destitution.<sup>76</sup>
- We recommend the introduction of a national hardship fund<sup>77</sup> to provide grants to households negatively affected by coronavirus to repay arrears and debt incurred to pay for essentials. WBG recommends these are delivered on the individual level to maximise economic independence.

## Housing

- The eviction and bailiff visit ban should be extended indefinitely to limit the risk of eviction and homelessness.
- The government should immediately reinstate the 'Everybody In' scheme to protect homeless people from the severe winter weather and increased risk of Covid-19
- Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates should be raised to the 50th percentile of local rents, and the under-occupancy penalty (or 'bedroom tax') should be abolished.

## Local Government

- Local government funding needs to be urgently restored to a level which enables councils to meet their statutory obligations and also provide the preventive, non-statutory services which are vital to the wellbeing of women, children and those in need of care.
- Equality Impact Assessments of local government funding levels and spending should be carried out across the UK, taking into account the impacts the pandemic has had on different groups.

## Violence against women and girls

- The VAWG sector has struggled with the significantly increased demand for their services since the start of the pandemic. The government must provide adequate, ring-fenced funding for the sector to enable it to respond to the growing need.

- 

---

<sup>76</sup> JRF (December 2020) Destitution in the UK 2020 (<https://bit.ly/2LUIfVO>)

<sup>77</sup> StepChange (June 2020) Coronavirus and personal debt: a financial recovery strategy for households (<https://bit.ly/3oOYLUA>)

I confirm that the opinions I have expressed represent my true and complete professional opinions on the matters to which they refer.

-----

SIGNED

-----

DATE

Please return to [inquiry@keepournhpublic.com](mailto:inquiry@keepournhpublic.com)

Thank you  
Olivia O'Sullivan  
Secretary to the panel  
The People's Covid Inquiry

[inquiry@keepournhpublic.com](mailto:inquiry@keepournhpublic.com)

07956590773

