

Keir Starmer MP  
House of Commons  
London  
SW1A 0AA



23 March 2020

Dear Keir Starmer MP

**Re: Your commitments on violence against women and girls**

We are a UK-wide coalition of more than 80 women's organisations and experts working to end violence against women and girls (VAWG) in all its forms, writing to ask if you will make specific commitments to improving the law, policy and practice on tackling gender-based violence if you become the next leader of the Labour Party.

**The impact of COVID-19**

We are currently dealing with a coronavirus outbreak which will have a significant impact on women and children experiencing VAWG, and on the sustainability of life-saving service provision provided by the specialist women's sector. We know that intimate partner violence and violence against children increases during times of economic stress, and that emerging evidence of this global pandemic has already pointed to an increased risk of domestic violence, with reports of abuse tripling in China.

There is an urgent need for all our political leaders to ensure contingency arrangements and spending plans take into account the pressures of increased demand on helplines, refuge provision, counselling and other specialist services in the community for domestic and sexual violence survivors.

Responses to the pandemic must also acknowledge the impacts on women's well-being and financial independence. As women are most likely to be primary carers of children and to work in insecure low paid or unpaid caring roles, they will be disproportionately affected by any economic instability resulting from this outbreak.

**The prevalence of VAWG**

Progress has been made over the last decade to respond to the different forms of abuse facing women and girls, but it is still the case that one in four women will experience domestic abuse and one in five will be sexually assaulted during her lifetime. Men and boys are also subjected to these forms of abuse, but women and girls are very disproportionately victimised as police and Government statistics show.

Whilst reporting of domestic and sexual violence to the police, and help-seeking from local support services, are at their highest ever levels, prosecution rates for rape have fallen catastrophically, meaning only 1 in 65 cases reported to the Police now end in a charge. The number of women killed by a partner or ex-partner rose sharply last year from 63 to 80, and the overall number of women and girls murdered increased by 10 percent to 241, the highest level

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for 14 years. We need specific policy and legislation that will prevent and reduce VAWG and political leadership that is committed to ensuring all women and girls can access support and protection when they need it.

### **Recognising the needs of survivors**

If you are the next leader of the Labour Party, we hope you will work to enhance the programme of policy and legislation already underway, including the introduction of compulsory Relationships and Sex Education in all schools in England this year, a new White Paper on online harms, a proposed Victims Bill, a review into child sexual abuse, and the passing into law of a Domestic Abuse Bill for England and Wales. This Bill must be amended to ensure equal access to protection and support for migrant women, who must also be able to safely report abuse without fear of immigration enforcement action. This is a crucial part of wider work to ensure a more humane immigration system and address the hostile environment policies which increase the risk of VAWG to BME and migrant women and restrict their access to safety and justice.

Domestic and sexual violence support services in our communities, provide a lifeline to thousands of women and children every year, but are threatened by the pressures of local cuts and competitive tendering processes. Services built 'by and for' black and minoritised women have been particularly affected, and specific attention must be given to ring-fenced funding to ensure these vital services are sustained.

The unacceptable decline in rape prosecutions is currently subject to a government 'Rape Review'. This has huge potential to improve the treatment of rape cases in the justice system, but the recommendations must have a strong evidence base and meaningful consultation must take place with the specialist women's sector, who want to see measures such as a right to legal support and advocacy for victims introduced.

As Leader of the Labour Party we urge you to commit to the following:

- Ensure the Domestic Abuse Bill for England and Wales ratifies the Istanbul Convention and contains measures to protect and support migrant victims;
- Support a Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy from 2020 onwards - a critical framework that encourages all government departments play a role in ending abuse
- Ensure justice for rape victims and scrutinise the recommendations of the end to end 'Rape Review';
- Recognise the critical value of specialist women's services supporting victims of VAWG, and work to ensure they are sustainable before any more are lost.

We look forward to hearing from you on these critical issues and will share any response we receive.

Yours sincerely,



**Sarah Green**  
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