



## **The Covid-19 Crisis and its Impact on Equality and Human Rights in Wales**

### **1. Introduction**

2. The Equality and Human Rights Coalition (EHRCo) is a third sector network of over 60 individual members working within the fields of equality and human rights. Its aim is to positively influence the design and implementation of policies, projects and work streams which impact on the experiences of people facing unequal and discriminatory treatment in Wales.
3. This paper is in response to the Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee's inquiry into the impact of Covid-19 on equality, tackling poverty and human rights in Wales.
4. Evidence indicates that Covid-19, lockdown and other measures taken to mitigate the effects of the virus have had a disproportionate impact on those with protected characteristics, including BAME groups, older people, disabled people and women who've been subject to heightened insecurity and violence. Furthermore, the mortality rate is greatest in Wales' most deprived regions. The five local authorities reporting the most deaths from the virus are some of those with the highest proportion of deprivation in Wales.

### **5. Evidence**

- The BAME population in Wales is disproportionately affected by Covid-19, – including among social care and NHS staff<sup>1</sup>.
- Police forces across England and Wales recorded an 8% increase in domestic abuse compared with the same period last year.<sup>2</sup>
- During the lockdown period, contact with Wales' national Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence helpline, Live Fear Free, rose by 49%, call time trebled, with those making contact often reporting more frequent abuse with shorter escalation periods. <sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2020-06/first-ministers-bame-covid-19-advisory-group-report-of-the-socioeconomic-subgroup.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> National Police Chiefs Council, Data from Operation Talla

<sup>3</sup> Live Fear Free and Welsh Government monitoring data.

- An additional 196,000 people are now caring for an older, disabled or seriously ill relative or friend, with the number of carers in Wales exceeding 683,000.<sup>4</sup>
- The Trussell Trust reported an 89% increase in the need for emergency food parcels during April 2020 compared to the same month last year, including a 107% rise in parcels given to children<sup>5</sup>.

## 6. The Covid-19 crisis and its impact on equality and human rights in Wales

The coronavirus pandemic has created risks, fear, and loss of life and livelihoods across communities in Wales and around the world. The impacts have served to highlight existing inequalities across society, with many of the impacts felt more keenly and immediately by people who were already experiencing income, social and societal disadvantage.

7. Wales gave its commitment to supporting the global effort to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all by adopting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015. Prior to the crisis, progress (although slow and insufficient) had been made but this has quickly been overridden and undermined by the Covid-19 pandemic. The annual SDGs stocktaking report has shown it's the poorest and most vulnerable – including children, older people, people with disabilities and migrants and refugees – experiencing the greatest effects. The Secretary-General stated “Although coronavirus affects every person and community, it does not do so equally. Instead, it has exposed and exacerbated existing inequalities and injustices”<sup>6</sup>.
8. The impact of the pandemic has varied considerably by gender. Women have been hardest hit, with research indicating that 17.8% of all female employees have been impacted by lockdown measures in comparison with 13.7% of male employees. In Wales, 68% of key workers are women, accounting for approximately 41% of total female employment, particularly within the field of health – potentially subjecting them to greater exposure to Covid-19<sup>7</sup>. Furthermore, the additional pressures placed on women as a direct result of the pandemic (home-working combined with school and nursery closures, unequal distribution of housework, greater risk of loss of employment) has impacted considerably on some women's mental health, with emerging data indicating a decline in mental wellbeing and increased loneliness<sup>8</sup>.
9. Survivors of violence against women subject to immigration control, with no recourse to public funds (NRPF), have been supported by services financed by designated Covid-19 funds. This emergency funding will automatically cease as the public health crisis subsides. Organisations, such as specialist

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<sup>4</sup> ii Carers UK – The rise in the number of unpaid carers during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.trusselltrust.org/category/press-releases/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/sustainable/sustainable-development-goals-report-2020.html>

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0017/2410343/Covid-19-and-the-Welsh-economy-shutdown-sectors-and-key-workers-briefing-paper.pdf](https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0017/2410343/Covid-19-and-the-Welsh-economy-shutdown-sectors-and-key-workers-briefing-paper.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/research/publications/working-papers/iser/2020-08>

violence against women services, will be faced with the wholly undesirable choice of terminating their support, risking those seeking refuge returning to their abuser or facing destitution, or continuing service delivery without funding for such provision.

10. Members of BAME communities have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19; available statistics indicate BAME groups in Britain are more likely to contract the disease and are up to two times more likely than their white counterparts to die from COVID-19<sup>9</sup>.
11. Far right groups have used the pandemic to incite anti-Muslim sentiment by falsely claiming British Muslims breached lockdown restrictions and contributed to the spread of the virus by continuing to attend mosques to pray<sup>10</sup>.
12. The pandemic has been extremely challenging for many individuals within our disparate communities, such as Gypsy and Roma Travellers. These challenges are intensified for those living in caravans on unauthorised sites where there is inadequate access to suitable sanitation and waste disposal. A report by the Traveller Movement<sup>11</sup> suggests the majority of Gypsy and Roma Travellers suffer with poor health (often linked to poor air quality and proximity to industrial sites and insufficient access to health care). Covid-19 is primarily a respiratory disease, therefore placing Gypsy and Roma Travellers at greater risk from the virus. In addition to the physical risks, Gypsy and Roma Travellers face greater exposure to the mental health consequences of the pandemic. These communities often live in large, extended family groups, in close proximity, with the need to roam and travel deeply embedded in their cultural identity. Lockdown and the enforced social distancing measures will considerably impact on this culture with implications for long-term mental health and wellbeing.
13. Progress in relation to the European Union Settled Status Scheme (EUSS) has been impacted by the pandemic. A Home Office statistical report<sup>12</sup>, published in May, indicated only 17% of the total applications expected from Wales have been completed. Many migrants, particularly those with language barriers and limited digital skills, require face to face support to complete the application, which hasn't been possible with lockdown, travel restrictions and social distancing measures in place.
14. Welsh and UK government information in relation to the virus, including advised actions, has been criticised for its complex messaging and inaccessibility - further exacerbated by the difference in rules between England and Wales. People's health and well-being has been compromised because they're unable to obtain information in accessible formats, such as

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<sup>9</sup>[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/908434/Disparities\\_in\\_the\\_risk\\_and\\_outcomes\\_of\\_COVID\\_August\\_2020\\_update.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/908434/Disparities_in_the_risk_and_outcomes_of_COVID_August_2020_update.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> <https://tellmamauk.org/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://theconversation.com/the-hidden-impact-of-coronavirus-on-gypsy-roma-travellers-141015>

<sup>12</sup>[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/884897/eu-settlement-scheme-statistics-quarterly-march-2020-hosb1220.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/884897/eu-settlement-scheme-statistics-quarterly-march-2020-hosb1220.pdf)

British Sign Language (BSL), audio and video formats and in an appropriate range of community languages.

15. The Coronavirus Act (2020) and the suspension of duties of Local Authorities under the Social Services and Well-being Act (2014), could potentially result in a breach of disabled people's human rights. Local authorities deliver key services to disabled people, services which are often essential for independent living. Furthermore, the requirement for testimony to institutionalise a person was also reduced through these changes. Institutionalisation is proven to be harmful to the physical health and mental wellbeing of many disabled people<sup>13</sup>.
16. There has been a notable regression to a more medicalised model of disability as opposed to the social model. For example, some individuals and groups have been referred to as 'vulnerable' but under the social model, this would be 'at risk'. This further perpetuates the stereotype of disabled people as weaker than their non-disabled counterparts<sup>14</sup>.
17. The measures implemented to control the spread of the virus have impacted considerably on blind and partially sighted people, affecting their independence and, in some cases, leading to feelings of isolation and depression. Many partially sighted people struggle to follow the new streetscape designs, many of which are not compliant with accessible design standards.  
  
*"It is very hard to know how to keep 2 metres away from people when you can't judge distance... I can't see the markings on the floor, so have been shouted at... I ended up in tears. It's not my fault that I can't see the floor markings."*  
  
*"I live alone and feel isolated and alone for the first time in my life. I am also very acutely aware of my sight impairment in ways I am not usually."*
18. The health crisis and consequential restrictions have contributed to many disabled people becoming lonely and isolated. Lack of access to public toilets, long queues to accommodate social distancing in shops and difficulties accessing support from carers and personal assistants have all exacerbated this. Disabled people have also been subject to increased discriminatory behaviour – some is well intended but still discriminatory e.g. people assuming those with physical disabilities, such as wheelchair users, should be shielding at home. Some people with certain health conditions are prevented from wearing face coverings which has led to abuse and hate incidents from others unaware of such barriers and exemptions.
19. The pandemic has pushed the health and social care system to its limits, causing significant repercussions for unpaid carers. Local services, that carers rely on for respite and support, have been closed or stripped back,

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.edf-feph.org/independent-living-and-de-institutionalisation>

<sup>14</sup> <https://rcni.com/hosted-content/rcn/first-steps/social-model-of-disability>

forcing carers to take on additional responsibilities that have implications for their own health, well-being and employment. Many report feeling physically and mentally exhausted, isolated and close to breaking point<sup>15</sup>.

20. In comparison to other members of the general public, carers are 50% more likely to rely on foodbanks during the pandemic.<sup>16</sup> This demonstrates how difficult life is for those providing additional care for disabled relatives and friends.

*JN – a carer “Due to the fact that my brother needs 24hr care and cannot be left alone it means that I have to be available for every hour that we don’t have carers working. I have carers for 48 hours a week and daycentre for 24hours a week which leaves the other 96 hours a weeks for me to have to be available to physically provide care for my brother.*

*I have no future plans because living on benefits means you live day to day, you are so busy concentrating on surviving and making sure you don’t get into financial strife you really don’t have the energy to look to the future, the future brings nothing but fear so I just live to survive another day providing the best I can for my brother while I’m able”.*

21. Whilst the outbreak of Covid-19 has impacted considerably on all households, there has been a disproportionate impact on those already living in poverty. People whose incomes have been disrupted by the outbreak should be able to access the benefits system for temporary support but many are unaware of their entitlements or those who have accessed the system have been confronted by delays.
22. At the height of the pandemic, the message echoed across all governments was “stay home”. The notion of ‘home’ has arguably meant more over the past six months than ever before and yet too many people have no access to suitable accommodation, if any at all. The need for good quality homes should be at the core of Welsh Government’s recovery plans, with the right to adequate housing a legal and practical reality in Wales.
23. The decision to award A-Level and GCSE grades in Wales in 2020, on the basis of teacher assessments, is welcomed. However, it’s worrying that the original decision to use an algorithm which entrenched the attainment gap between richer and poorer postcodes and school catchments, appears to have been undertaken with no Children’s Rights Impact Assessment and has caused considerable distress to many young people. It’s hoped the inquiry announced by the Education Minister on August 17 will report rapidly, as the cohort sitting public exams in 2021 will also have been disadvantaged by the closure of schools from March-July 2020 and must not be subject to a similar

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<sup>15</sup> <https://business.senedd.wales/documents/s103912/ELGC%20COV%2045%20-%20Disability%20Wales.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> [https://www.carersuk.org/images/publications/Caring\\_and\\_COVID-19\\_Hunger\\_and\\_mental\\_wellbeing.pdf](https://www.carersuk.org/images/publications/Caring_and_COVID-19_Hunger_and_mental_wellbeing.pdf)

experience. A Children's Rights Impact Assessment, for the 2021 grading proposals, should be published as soon as possible.

## 24. Recommendations

Welsh Government should commit to learning from the lessons of the pandemic and take active steps that help to address the inequalities experienced by sectors of our society and in ways that protect fundamental human rights.

25. Document any regression in women's rights and achieve gender equality for all women to ensure the post-pandemic society does not return to the status quo we know is discriminatory against women.
26. Commit to ensuring all survivors of all forms of violence against women, domestic violence and sexual violence, including those subject to immigration control with no recourse to public funds, have equal access to protection, safety and support (including refuge provision).
27. Welsh Government and local authorities should encourage funders to allocate grants to voluntary organisations and advice agencies to provide services which may be accessed by those with No Recourse to Public Funds.
28. Work co-productively with communities of interest in taking forward the recommendations highlighted in the recent report on systemic and structural racial inequality in Wales<sup>17</sup>.
29. Monitor communication strategies to ensure they are effective and reduce barriers – such as low literacy, cultural, language, accessibility.
30. Develop Wales specific public information campaigns and channels in collaborative partnership representative of Wales' diverse communities; communications should be Plain English, Cymraeg Clir, easy read with no complex medical terminology, and language and culturally appropriate.
31. Incorporate the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Disabled People (UNCPRD) into Welsh Law. This would give Ministers the duty to ensure the rights of disabled people are considered in all suggested policy and legislation
32. Commit to developing policies and plans that make a commitment to the social model of disability more clearly evident which detail its current and future response to the pandemic.
33. Develop a clear strategy detailing how transition to the 'new normal' will enable carers to have access to appropriate emotional and practical support.

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<sup>17</sup> <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2020-06/first-ministers-bame-covid-19-advisory-group-report-of-the-socioeconomic-subgroup.pdf>

34. Proactively encourage people to check what benefits or support they are entitled to; consider a universal intervention such as writing to all households in Wales (or, as a minimum, those most at risk of financial difficulty) informing them of the available benefits and support schemes administered in Wales, such as the Council Tax Reduction Scheme and the Discretionary Assistance Fund.
35. Show a demonstrable commitment to tackling poverty through Fair Work – including providing leadership in the take-up of the Real Living Wage and developing an effective and sustainable Foundational Economy that better reflects the character of Wales.
36. Make the right to adequate housing a legal and practical reality in Wales by:
- finding a way to fully incorporate the principles of the United Nations-enshrined Right to Adequate Housing into Welsh housing policy.
  - taking action across tenures to ensure that everyone has access to a good home
  - ensuring that homes designated as affordable are genuinely affordable, with occupants spending no more than 30% of their income on rent/mortgage.
  - rationalising/consolidating existing Welsh housing legislation to address shortcomings and improve outcomes for people.
  - being open to different models of addressing housing need, e.g. community-led/owned housing and intergenerational models.
  - ensuring citizens have a voice in housing policy making. One mechanism could be the establishment of a national tenants' voice or union.
37. Report rapidly on the inquiry announced by the Education Minister into the public examination grading in 2020, and a Children's Rights Impact Assessment for the grading proposals for 2021 should be published as soon as possible.
38. To work co-productively with the Coalition and other groups that are well placed to help shape and take forward equality and human rights ambitions in public sector Area Plans and Equality Action Plans to ensure they drive change and secure continued systemic improvements in equality and human rights in Wales.

## **Appendix A**

We are pleased to submit this paper on behalf of the Equality and Human Rights Coalition. The following organisations contributed directly to this paper:

Bevan Foundation  
Cardiff Third Sector Council (C3SC)  
Carers Wales  
Cytun  
Citizens Advice Cymru  
Disability Wales  
Diverse Cymru  
Guide Dogs Cymru  
National Energy Action (NEA)  
North Wales Regional Equality Network (NWREN)  
Tai Pawb  
TGP Cymru  
WCVA  
Welsh Women's Aid  
Womens Equality Network Wales

A full Coalition membership list can be made available on request.