

Preliminary Report

Rosa's Covid-19 Response

The impact of coronavirus on
specialist women's organisations
funded by Rosa in 2020.



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Introduction

A feminist funder

This is the first of two reports Rosa is producing to detail how the global pandemic is impacting the specialist women's organisations we fund. Both reports are based on findings from conversations Rosa held with women's organisations focusing on those led by and for Black and minoritised women and girls.

People's experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic vary depending on the inequalities they were experiencing before it began. Those inequalities intersect race, gender, class, ability and migration status – and the pandemic has worsened them. As a result, there's been an increase in poverty and violence against women and girls in the home, at work and online.

Women's jobs are 1.8 times more vulnerable to the pandemic than men's. The National Domestic Abuse line has seen a 25% increase in demand. Lockdown measures have contributed to isolation and mental health distress. Black and minoritised women have been particularly exposed to the impacts of the pandemic, which continues to run along racial lines.

As a responsive grant funder, Rosa understood the pandemic would have a devastating impact on women in the UK. We also acknowledged the very real threat posed to specialist women's organisations who already do so much with very small pots of funding.

Our work over the last decade has championed and resourced women's organisations who are all too often locked out of mainstream grant funding programmes. This is particularly the case for organisations led 'by and for' black and minoritised women.

Rosa responded to the crisis by raising more than £1.2 million to support emergency grantmaking. This report picks up key themes and issues raised by funded organisations as part of a series of interviews and feedback. For Rosa, it is crucial to respond to evolving language. We understand that there is important and ongoing debate around terminology. For the purpose of this report when we refer to 'Black and minoritised women' we're using the term 'Black' in a policy sense. I.e. women and girls who are defined in policy terms as Black and Minority Ethnic (BME).

Designing a response

The aim of Rosa's funds

Rosa's response fund was twofold. We launched a small grants programme for those who might miss out on emergency funds elsewhere, but who were not necessarily working solely on tackling violence against women and girls (VAWG). This fund focused in particular on organisations led 'by and for' Black and minoritised women. Rosa also partnered with Imkaan on a separate stream to fund ending-VAWG organisations run 'by and for' Black and minoritised women.

The aim of these two programmes was to help organisations through the crisis. They were developed in response to findings from [our joint survey](#) with Women's Resource Centre and Women's Fund for Scotland, and [Imkaan's position paper](#) titled the Impact of the Two Pandemics: VAWG and Covid-19 on Black and Minoritised Women and Girls.

We funded 72 women's organisations across the UK through our small grants fund – 41 of which were organisations led 'by and for' Black and minoritised women. A further 27 specialist organisations led 'by and for' Black and minoritised women were supported as part of the ending-VAWG stream. To find out more about these individual funding programmes, see our insights reports: [Covid-19 Emergency Response for BME Women's Organisations](#) and [Covid-19 Response \(Small Grants\)](#).

Feedback from grant recipients

Rosa staff and trustees held over 50 conversations with women leaders, asking how they had met the fast-moving challenges of the pandemic. Listening in this way supports Rosa and wider civil society organisations to design, develop and enhance programmes, and to more effectively support women's organisations that are led by and for Black and minoritised women. Each organisation is unique. However, there were common themes, with clear strength, vision and resilience on display. Organisations adapted quickly and professionally with the welfare of the women and girls they support at the forefront of their minds.

Experiences of women and girls

Isolation

The break of social interaction through activities, classes and informal contact severely impacted women and girls living alone or in difficult situations, resulting in anxiety and increased mental ill-health. Many women had to shield (especially elders), which exacerbated distress. Services and local groups such as foodbanks and Mutual Aid were not necessarily able to communicate effectively, resulting in significant difficulty in accessing shopping, culturally appropriate food packages and medicine. With increased health and public messaging coming from government and local authorities, services that supported migrant communities and Black and minoritised women in appropriate ways was vital, and the severe lack of capacity in these organisations added to anxiety and uncertainty.

"It's hard for women to talk closely on the phone as their husband might be home. Reaching those women and making sure they're safe is getting much harder for us."
- funded organisation.

"Settling back into the community is a big hurdle for women who come to us having experienced abuse. There's a lot of stigma around a woman leaving home and they're cut off from their communities. We work on the principle of confidence-building, so when women come to us they get support in all areas of their life." - funded organisation.

Domestic abuse

Women experiencing or fleeing domestic abuse, (DA) experienced a litany of issues, with the increased demand on domestic abuse support services echoing across the women's sector.

Reporting abuse was not an option for women living with extended families and abusive partners/husbands. Organisations found self-referrals were down across the country but state referrals significantly up.

Domestic abuse experienced particularly by Asian women became more hidden than usual. Visits by friends and families who could normally spot abuse were not possible. Organisations reported that women from Black and minoritised communities were more reluctant to leave a situation of DA as they would be caring for an older person in the family and felt a sense of guilt at the prospect of leaving them.

Experiences of women and girls

The digital divide

Transitioning to online services has been a mixed blessing, with many women learning to use online platforms and realising the potential for personal independence.

However, there was and continues to be a steep learning curve. Access to equipment and data has also been a major barrier, especially for women with no recourse to public funds (NRPF).

"We're now able to record Zoom sessions for our personal development and mental health programmes and put them online so they reach more women. Our new IT worker has started gathering stories from the women we've supported and sharing them on social media to inspire others to get in touch." - funded organisation.

"Many women we support don't have smartphones and 25% don't have a phone at all, often because of the situations they're in with extended families or because they're still living with perpetrators." - funded organisation.

Racism

Systemic and institutional racism and cultural incompetence already created barriers for Black and minoritised women in accessing the right housing, immigration advice, and appropriate benefits. Policies such as 'no recourse to public funds' and the hostile environment meant Black and minoritised women were vulnerable and lacked resilience in economic and social crises.

Migrant women and women with NRPF reported several incidents of racism during lockdown and struggled to access support, despite a temporary national reprieve to allow women with such status to access free healthcare if showing signs of Covid-19.

In one case, public agency staff made the comment: "well, can she not go back home?". Another example reported was that housing and refuge placements had been knocked back based on foreign-sounding names.

In addition, hate crime increased – for example, organisations reported that women from Chinese and Filipino communities fear going out as a result of targeted verbal abuse based on the racist narratives in the media.

Covid-19 and the women's sector

Key issues for women's organisations

Organisations re-evaluated and adapted processes and services very quickly to meet the new and emerging needs. However, the impact of this crisis will be felt well beyond 2021 as new issues have arisen or been exacerbated. Many commented that they mentally steeled themselves before going into crisis management mode and have operated at full capacity for months, with very little respite. Many staff, volunteers and trustees stepped up across the sector, working from home, offering additional or flexible hours, and use of personal data or technology.

One in three organisations reported that Rosa funding enabled them to increase staff capacity to cope with the demand. Interviewees reported they are coping, but for organisations led 'by and for' Black and minoritised women, staff are more likely to be off sick, which correlates to a higher proportion of BME people affected by coronavirus. They also reported that limited clinical supervision and self-care options were available, and that they are in real danger of burn-out. Staff are and will be suffering as much as the women they support. This accumulation of pressure, anxiety and stress over the last nine months will take a toll.

"I'm supposed to help 50 women over a year, and I've done 75 in 5 months." - funded organisation.

"We were like the emergency service for women... the police and social care can't function without us." - funded organisation.

The need for specialist providers was strongly felt by agencies such as the police and social services especially as the many statutory services "ground to a halt." Funding and income are a huge concern as there are questions about when normal funding rounds will open and the worry that funders may have reallocated to the Covid-19 response leaving nothing for 'normal' grants programmes. Some organisations were previously able to rent out space and have lost vital sources of income.

Interviewees expressed serious concern that many sources of Covid 19 response funding were short-term and worries about the looming funding cliff edge in 2021 became very apparent. Governance and reporting need staff time and capacity.

"We underestimated the resilience of our team." - funded organisation

The many small funding programmes that sprang up has been appreciated but there is concern about the added burden of the multiple reports for relatively small grants is worrying in relation to capacity. Re-positioning and re-evaluating strategy are extremely challenging with current delivery plans and capacity which are inhibiting allocation of time or resources to core goals and more strategic thinking time.

How women's organisations responded

Digital transformation

Staff transitioned to remote working very quickly - transferring services online was challenging, both in terms of lack of appropriate equipment but also the lack of confidence to operate via zoom, Teams or WhatsApp. Coupled with the challenges faced by service users, i.e. the lack of access to equipment and ICT illiteracy delivery was difficult.

Once established, online interaction was vital for engagement, especially for those isolated, experiencing anxiety and seeking information and advice. However, for those supporting women at risk of or experiencing abuse, it is harder for staff to pick up on body language and signs. Appropriate, affordable and safe database systems that allow for remote working are needed.

The gap in data to build a strong evidence base needs to be filled, as does the digital divide in terms of skills, knowledge and confidence. Ensuring that appropriate safeguarding practices were in place was identified as a priority but highlighted challenges in terms of appropriate and accessible systems. These organisations are small and rely on basic reporting and tracking. Creating secure remote systems is both costly and generally not well funded.

Covid-19 and the women's sector

Experience and impact on the BME women's sector

Small organisations, particularly organisations led 'by and for' Black and minoritised women have little or no sustainability plans beyond emergency or Covid-19 specific funding and risk closure. Interviewees reported some of the BME specific funding felt like low-level 'temporary or tokenistic' gestures.

There are continued trust issues between funders and small women's organisations and much still needs to be done by funders and statutory bodies to address this.

"Many of the women we support have insecure immigration status, which often stops them leaving home from fear of what will happen. We were able to tell refuge providers that it was their duty to support these women even with NRPF." – funded organisation.

Presence and voice in public spaces

The reallocation of staff time and limited capacity has meant the presence of women leaders, particularly Black and minoritised women's voice is missing from policy spaces. Small women's organisation need support in creating a strong presence to all stakeholders – especially reflecting on the resilience during the pandemic. Many reported that unheard voices remained a huge frustration. Many years of repeating the same messages and offering solutions but still not being heard was passionately articulated by a few organisations.

Racism and prejudice within institutions and wider society impacts both the organisations and service users. Organisations have reported an increase obvious microaggressions. Interviewees referenced that larger refuge organisations need to be more culturally competent as well as the need for investment in more BME specific refuges.

"Without sustainable funding post-pandemic, BME women's organisations will keep falling by the wayside. They won't be able to sustain the staff they recruited during the pandemic." – funded organisation.

Creating secure remote systems is both costly and generally not well-funded. Several Black and minoritised women-led organisations reported that the pandemic has been a double-edged sword. It opened up new funding opportunities (albeit small ones) not seen for decades.

Mainstream providers do fantastic jobs, but victims from BME communities need specialist support and safeguarding. There's no space for complacency when it comes to the knowledge that's needed to provide this." - funded organisation.

Several organisations said it was their first significant successful grant. Organisations demonstrated their unique resilience and adaptability – challenging previous doubts by mainstream providers.

The media has noticed issues affecting Black and minoritised women and mainstream providers are recognising organisations for their specialist knowledge and expertise. There has been a feeling of 'they need us' from mainstream providers, who have recognised their deficit in culturally-relevant services. For example, grantees have been approached to help with culturally appropriate meals for BME residents sheltering and self-isolating.

Inequalities highlighted by the crisis coupled with Black Lives Matter gave young women and girls the chance to be vocal about their identities, rights and frustrations.

Black and minoritised women service users and staff are evidently more vulnerable – adding to the anxiety, worry and stresses on staff, volunteers and the communities they support. The Rosa interviews echo findings elsewhere: that health and socio-economic disparities facing Black and minoritised communities are significant and impact life chances.

Organisations still have to work extremely hard to secure funding and gain trust with mainstream funders. Larger providers continue to receive significant contracts to support Black and minoritised women.

These mainstream providers cannot reliably provide specialist knowledge on issues such as FGM, forced marriage, domestic abuse, mental health, language, faith, culture, race, as well as other intersecting issues such as disability and sexuality.

Covid-19 and the women's sector

The value of Rosa's support

Women's organisations in receipt of funding commented on the Rosa funding process. They reported that the fund was well-timed, the process was straightforward and the grants gave them flexibility to look beyond specific projects and cover overheads, expand, purchase equipment or increase staff hours.

The turnaround time for approval of grants was appreciated. It was vital for organisations to react quickly to immediate demands, digitally transition and increase staff capacity at short notice. Increasing staff capacity was highlighted by more than 33% of funded organisations.

Many extended existing staff hours, recruited new staff, and increased the pool of specialist advisors – including language experts, activity facilitators and trainers. Some of the grants also enabled access to immediate supplies, including food packages.

Organisations appreciated Rosa's empathy and specialist understanding of women's issues, including BME context. Some expressed their frustration towards other funders who are generalists and don't understand the importance of specialist provision or intersectionality. Despite being relatively short-term, Rosa funding has offered some reprieve and sustainability to small organisations, particularly BME-led services.

The digital transition to remote working opened up many challenges in relation to existing outdated equipment (PCs without cameras or sound), lack of laptops, tablets, phones, sufficient broadband speed and data, website development and training.

Rosa grants supported this difficult but essential phase for several organisations. For the majority of recipients, Rosa grants were the only way they were able to fund online activities, classes and counselling to help women and girls overcome isolation and loneliness, and prevent further anxiety, stress and mental ill-health.

Covid-19 and the women's sector

Women's voices

“Supporting our staff with their mental and physical health is a top priority for us.

During the first lockdown we organised training for the staff to make sure they feel comfortable working online. Our Rosa grant then gave us the capacity to apply for other grants, which led to us taking on a dedicated team member to help the women we support to gain employment. People with refugee status often have no recourse to public funds and it's detrimental to their mental health and wellbeing – especially mothers and children.

Lots of the women who come to us have lost their jobs in hospitality, care work or cleaning because of the pandemic. We're there to help them apply for benefits or funding from the DWP until they're able to find a job, which can be difficult in the current climate. We have to stay positive to support the women, though.

Most recently, one of our advisors successfully supported a woman and her 12-year-old son with no recourse to public funds through the process of getting their documents. The woman sent her son to collect the documents and he later phoned our advisor to thank her and tell her that she doesn't know what a change it will make to their lives. Our advisor spoke to his mum a few days later and she had no idea that he'd called. You see, this might sound like a little change we're making, but it's massive to someone that is destitute.”

- Rosa-funded organisation.

Covid-19 and the women's sector

Women's voices

“It’s been hard for us with six frontline staff supporting 350 refugee, asylum-seeking and migrant women.

Volunteers are helping us to run a befriending service where they check in with women every week. They’re there for a chat, to explain what’s going on, and to check their children have everything they need for school. This gives our staff time to deal with referrals, order food for women and their families and help with immigration advice – the bigger things that take more time.

Many of the women we support have insecure immigration status, so our staff are always there to reassure them through the uncertainty. It’s difficult because our staff are working to keep these women safe while dealing with their own experiences and traumas. It became clear to us early in the pandemic that women’s mental health was going to suffer. The government wasn’t giving guidance in community languages, so the women we support were struggling because they didn’t know what was going on, just that people were dying.

We hadn’t offered counselling before, but as a result of the pandemic we commissioned two bilingual counsellors to lead one-to-one sessions with 10 women. It was a new concept for us as an organisation and the women we support. It’s proving to be worthwhile but challenging. We will need lots of support to make sure we can continue running sessions. There is help available in Bristol, but for organisations led ‘by and for’ Black and minoritised women, there’s a real lack of funding.”

- Rosa-funded organisation.

Covid-19 and the women's sector

Women's voices

“Connecting women and girls to help build their confidence, develop a community and advocate for themselves is one of our main focuses right now.

We're hosting online sessions and we're in the process of setting up a media platform to engage young women. This is all about developing and amplifying their voices – whether that's on social media, at work, or in day-to-day life. We recently hosted a session on self-leadership, for example, which focused on the idea that strong leadership starts with self-belief and self-confidence.

The Zoom sessions we host each week are mostly themed, but women always end up talking about their experiences of lockdown. This is how we end up identifying their needs as they develop. A big challenge that women were telling us about over Zoom is managing their children with home-schooling. This is especially hard for families of six or more with only one laptop to share.

Now we're trying to connect with other local organisations to see if they can provide these families with new or used laptops. That's a typical practical need that we see. Other themes are emerging around mental health, which has really intensified. We're trying to normalise conversations around mental health because it can be a taboo subject in BME communities.

One woman told us: 'It's a great relief for me to see my 19-year-old come out of her bedroom and actively participate in the Zoom meetings. We watch her face brighten as she shares with us in the evening how the Zoom conversation was and who said what and why. It has also been speaking to two of her friends to join as well.'"

- Rosa-funded organisation.

Covid-19 and the women's sector

Women's voices

“Increasingly younger women are coming to us for support after experiencing domestic abuse, honour-based violence and forced marriage.

Often these young women are disowned by their families. Our usual demographic is 18 to 25-year-olds, but sadly we're now seeing secondary school-age girls. The cases are high risk and high harm. This is happening because the pressures of lockdown magnify a family member's existing perceptions of a young woman or girl acting 'dishonourably'. Lockdown restrictions then reduce access to support. We have criminal investigations into serious assaults and even conspiracy to murder. That's the magnitude of what these young women and girls are experiencing.

What we often find is that young women will start to disclose these experiences, but only once they've sorted out other priorities like accommodation, finances or their mental health. For many, university and college provides a safe space and they're desperate without it. We've always operated remotely, so the pandemic hasn't affected our services but it has impacted our capacity. The volume and severity of the cases we're receiving is affecting our decision-making time.

Another concern is sustainability. Funding is very short term and we're concerned that post-pandemic, the BME grassroots sector will be taken backwards by at least 25 years. Right now, the government is committed to providing some funding and the Black Lives Matter movement has drawn attention to our services. But what will we do if that level of funding and interest isn't sustained after the pandemic? Grassroots organisations led 'by and for' Black and minoritised women will fall to the wayside. The women and girls who come to us prefer the specialist support we can offer, so it's essential this doesn't happen.”

- Rosa-funded organisation.

Covid-19 and the women's sector

What's next?

The effects of the pandemic are clearly going to be felt for years to come. It's now crucial that we support already under-funded specialist women's organisations to continue meeting the evolving needs of the women and girls in their communities.

These organisations are often supporting women with a range of issues impacting their lives, including work and employment, poverty and destitution, insecure housing, migration status, mental and physical health, severe isolation and poor access to services.

Rosa is now focusing on building a second phase Covid-19 response fund that gives longer-term grants specifically to specialist organisations led 'by and for' Black and minoritised women and girls across the UK. These organisations have unprecedented levels of trust and reach into communities where need is greatest but resource is lacking. We aim to raise a minimum of £1 million for this fund.

[See more stories from the women's organisations we fund on our Covid-19 impact page.](#) Get in touch at info@rosauk.org to discuss partnering with Rosa.