

Human Rights (Joint Committee)
The Government's response to COVID-19: human rights implications
Written Evidence by Protection Approaches

Executive Summary

1. This submission sets out how the Covid-19 crisis is exacerbating risks related to hate crime, violent extremism and other forms of identity-based violence in the UK. Indicators of risk were already high before the pandemic hit the UK but the crisis has had a comprehensively negative impact not only on localised or specific indicators but also many structural risk factors. Left unchecked, the UK will likely see an increase in all forms of identity-based violence. The UK's minority and marginalised communities will pay the greatest price.
2. The prevention of identity-based violence and other threats to human rights is not needed in some places some of the time, but everywhere all the time. The Covid-19 pandemic should underline, not undermine, this truism. An established lesson of identity-based violence prevention is that moments of acute stress exacerbate existing structural risk factors of 'othering', exclusion, hate crime, violent extremism, and the violation of all manner of human rights.¹ The Coronavirus crisis has not been an exception, as evidenced by the subsequent 'tsunami of hate' has engulfed the entire world, including the UK.² Our work in and with communities, and with the police, has found that Covid-related hate and hate crime has increased against all protected groups, as well as documented attacks on NHS and care workers.
3. As lockdown measures begin to ease, the economic, social and political consequences of the virus will likely take more lives than the virus itself, further compromising the quality of life experienced by marginalised groups globally. The identity-based violence prevention community, and its associated architecture, must now be leveraged to ensure that the UK's Covid-19 response has at its heart what decades of practice have taught us: Intersectional, inclusive communities are where resilience of all kinds comes from –whether in the face of a pandemic, economic crisis or identity-based division.
4. The challenge posed by the virus is a global one, as is the notion that the pandemic is a 'human rights crisis in the most immediate sense'.³ Covid-19 is perhaps the most global crisis in history; the health challenges and the pandemic's consequences require a global response and will rely upon the strength of support for multilateral organisations. Now, more than ever, the UK cannot effectively defend human rights at home without doing the same abroad.

About Protection Approaches

5. Protection Approaches works to confront and prevent identity-based violence by developing and implementing innovative programmes that address all forms of hate. From Newham in East London to Bangui in the Central African Republic, we work with local communities, civil society organisations, policymakers, governments, academics and multilateral institutions to develop strategies that predict, prevent and protect all

¹ Protection Approaches, [Atrocity Prevention and Covid-19: Opportunities and Responsibilities](#), April 2020

² Helen Davidson, [Global report: virus has unleashed a 'tsunami of hate' across world, says UN chief](#), May 2020

³ [Amnesty International UK](#), 2020

forms of identity-based violence. Protection Approaches convenes the [UK Atrocity Prevention Working Group](#).

6. Protection Approaches is a registered charity in England and Wales, charity number 1171433. For more information please see www.protectionapproaches.org.
7. This submission has been prepared by Nasyah Bandoh, Programmes Assistant and Dr. Kate Ferguson, Co-Executive Director. Nasyah Bandoh is a communities and policy analyst with a BA in Modern History and Politics from Royal Holloway, University of London. Dr. Ferguson is a leading peace and security expert, specialising in violence prevention and civilian protection. She is Chair of Policy at the European Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, University of Leeds, a member of the Centre for Science & Policy's Network for Evidence and Expertise at the University of Cambridge and Honorary Research Fellow at the University of East Anglia. She holds a PhD from UEA on the dynamics of modern mass atrocities, and an M.Phil in Russian and East European Studies from the University of Oxford.
8. For further details or questions relating to this submission please contact Nasyah Bandoh: Nasyah.Bandoh@protectionapproaches.org

Covid-19 and identity-based violence

9. No community, society or country is immune to identity-based violence; rather, constant and consistent effort is required from local grassroots to political leaderships to ensure that the fundamental rights and freedoms of all are protected and respected.
10. The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing challenges faced by the UK's marginalised and minority groups, increasing the burden on communities that were already shouldering the burdens of structural inequalities. As experts in IBV, we know that in times of social, political or economic crisis, the risks of marginalisation and division increase. Protection Approaches has been concerned about the UK risk factors for social dislocation and marginalisation in the UK for a long time. Our 2019 'A Gathering Storm' series analysed social trends in Britain relating to identity, perceptions of security and of belonging. We concluded that prejudice in the UK had become mainstream and judged that the UK's social resilience was low and ill-equipped to meet further stress or overcome moments of rupture.⁴ These divisions do not simply dissolve; they require conscious effort to repair.
11. As we have already seen, the virus and its responses have disproportionately affected marginalised groups and other minorities that might have previously considered themselves to be 'safe'.⁵ The sharp increase in hate-based attacks, online and offline, on Chinese and Asian communities, amid a rise of hate crime across the board, is comparable to the rapid normalisation of communities and individuals from the EU – especially Poland and Romania – after the 2016 referendum. UK criticisms of China, whether related to the pandemic, human rights concerns or seemingly unrelated issues, must not be communicated in a way that could further encourage the exclusion and discrimination of our Chinese and Asian communities.

⁴ Protection Approaches, [A Gathering Storm?: Assessing the risks of identity-based violence in Britain](#), March 2019

⁵ [Atrocity Prevention and Covid-19: Opportunities and Responsibilities](#)

12. The rise in Covid-related hate-based incidents in the UK; the scapegoating of certain groups by the right-wing media; and the devastating disproportionate impact of the pandemic on Britain's BAME communities are just a few examples of the UK's current state of hate.⁶ Our work indicates that all protected groups are experiencing increased in discrimination based on race, religion, gender, sexuality, and disability. As lockdown restrictions ease and debates around the clarity of government guidance continue, we – and our contacts at the Metropolitan Police – anticipate increases in Covid-related hate and IBV, further damaging the UK's social cohesion and its respect for vulnerable groups. Left unchecked, these trends will continue and accelerate.

Recommendations

13. Failure to address social fracture in the wake of the EU referendum and the divisive Brexit debate exposed and deepened existing grievances (whether real or imagined); accelerated and emboldened a more extreme and exclusionary culture; contributed to legitimising in the eyes of perpetrators their hate-based activities; and increased levels of hate crime and violent extremism. It is essential that the UK learns from this experience and prioritises prevention measures at the heart of its Covid response. Global and national best practices shows that community building is the most effective way to sustainably reduce division and build long-lasting resilience.
14. Broad-brush public communications or community campaigns and Government initiatives are unlikely to succeed in tackling the unequal impact the pandemic has had on certain sections of our society and their right to life.
15. The views and experiences of the marginalised communities worst hit by the pandemic must be consciously and visibly integrated into local and national responses to the health crisis, its consequences, and in efforts to build long-term resilience against all kinds of crises.
16. UK responses to the pandemic and measures to limit the spread of the virus must fully embed the principles of community-building, capacity building local community groups who are the experts in and of their communities. It also requires investing in local services. This work is essential to being to reverse the tides of hate the UK and its marginalised and minority communities have experienced in recent years. While this is a shared endeavour it would be a mistake to rely upon volunteers and goodwill; not only does this privilege those more able to give their time and exclude those who cannot, but a volunteer-led approach divests local organisations of the modest funds they need – and deserve – to carry out their important activities.
17. We recommend Her Majesty's Government:
 - a. **Integrate identity-based violence prevention into local, national and global responses to the worldwide health crisis:** if this is not done, the pandemic risks accelerating trends that undermine social and political resilience to division, propaganda and fear.

⁶ Ipsos MORI, "[COVID-19 – One in seven people would avoid people of Chinese origin or appearance](#)", 14 February 2020; Aina Khan, "[Anger as right-wing UK voices suggest Ramadan virus spread](#)", Aljazeera, 13 April 2020; Caelainn Barr, Niko Kommenda, Niamh McIntyre and Antonio Voce, "[Ethnic minorities dying of Covid-19 at higher rate, analysis shows](#)", Guardian, 22 April 2020

- b. **Actively reach out to and consult with local grassroots community groups:** the smallest local grassroots organisation are unlikely to respond to calls for evidence such as this and are also unlikely to be called on by national or local government for the insights – therefore, the views of larger more established organisation tend to dominate these responses. However, these smaller organisations, that work with and are led by marginalised groups and communities are those best placed to understand the implications of Government responses to Covid-19 on their human rights. National and local government should work with civil society networks to consult those organisations on how the unequal impact can be mitigated, and how their rights to life are protected.

- c. **Establish a Cohesion Commission:** to ensure that as the UK emerges from a period of collective grief, social dislocation, and heightened inequality the Government is prepared to meet what will likely be a sustained economic crisis unlike anything we have seen before. The Government must learn the lessons from human rights impact of Brexit and from 2008 when during austerity community building and social cohesion were wholly deprioritised, resulting in a dislocated, divided country with low trust in institutions, increasing levels of marginalisation, hate crime, and social exclusion. The government should use this moment to refocus attention and resources on those most vulnerable in our society, recognising that stronger, inclusive, intersectional, equal, and empathetic societies are not just nice to have but benefit us all.