

16 April 2024



Dear CANDIDATE,

What action will you take if elected Mayor for the most marginalised women in London?

I write regarding your candidacy for London Mayor and to ask what action you will take on behalf of some of the marginalised women in London, including those affected by prostitution and sexual exploitation.

Women at the Well is a unique pan-London support service, based in the King's Cross area, for women whose lives are affected by prostitution, trafficking and related forms of sexual exploitation. For nearly two decades we have run a women-only drop-in centre where there is food, hot showers, laundry, clean clothes and an advice service. We also take referrals and go out all over London to where women are rough sleeping or facing other risks. Our small team of advocacy and support workers do dedicated one-to-one support with women, for as long as it takes, to help them tackle problems with housing, addictions, legacies of abuse in childhood, access to healthcare and much more. Last year there were more than 1,300 visits to our drop-in centre in Kings Cross, and our team supported more than 600 women with advice and casework. We are a unique part of London's civil society.

What we see in London - Our vantage point running this specialist service gives us strong insight into how prostitution and sexual exploitation are in no way desisting in London but are morphing into multiple forms, aided by both new technologies and many women's economic exclusion. We work with women who are trafficked to London by organised criminal gangs who move them quickly around temporarily rented properties with alarming levels of threat and harm; women engaged in street prostitution in several London neighbourhoods, which can be high risk and usually involves extremely excluded women; women exploited through 'sex for rent' and 'survival sex' where sexual acts are 'exchanged' for basic material needs and safety; women experiencing the forced occupation (known as 'cuckooing') of their flats for exploitative purposes, and where sexual coercion often features; and women forced into begging, drug runs and shop-lifting for individuals and gangs who move them around.

Our call on the next London Mayor

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<https://www.watw.org.uk/>

We note the Mayor's wide-ranging powers over policing and crime, housing, some aspects of health inequalities, and the Mayor's unique role as London's face and champion. We hope you that if elected on 2 May you will:

***Renew the Mayor's Violence Against Women & Girls Strategy** and maintain its specific recognition of the harms inherent in prostitution and the need to support specialised exiting work. We would urge you to consult with organisations like ours to map the ever growing cluster of harmful sexual exploitation practices we have described above to inform this plan; it is critical that the Mayor and DMPC understand how these are disproportionately affecting some of the most marginalised women in London as part of the ever widening wealth gap in our city.

***Review and monitor closely the policing approach to prostitution, trafficking and all forms of adult sexual exploitation** taking place in London. This mayoralty period has been horrendous in regards to confidence in the Metropolitan Police's basic ability to protect women and Black and minority ethnic people from harm, and we note Dame Angiolini's findings on basic vetting failures and a culture of misogyny and racism at the Met. We are not currently confident that the Metropolitan Police can guarantee either an appropriate, protective response to individual women being harmed in prostitution, nor make a strategic level assessment of who is being harmed, what is driving the harm and what the policing response should be. We urge you to give this your direct attention when holding the Commissioner to account if you are elected.

***Use your strategic powers to make safe and secure housing for all Londoners** an incentivised and achievable goal. The vulnerable women we work with experience homelessness due to abuse, unsafe accommodation, and the take-over of their properties by others. This all makes them more vulnerable to further exploitation and abuse. We commend current pilot work by Islington and Camden to understand and support women who are rough-sleeping (women who are very vulnerable to harm, and who also report being constantly approached "for business" when they are visible on the streets), and urge you to monitor this work closely. We hope you will similarly influence your health inequalities partner agencies to take a gendered approach to understanding the most marginalised women's experience of mental health services and access to basic primary care in many instances (there is a very notable trend in our work where we are now supporting up to half the women we work with to access basic primary care services – something systemic has happened to make these services less accessible to many people).

*Finally, as London's key torchbearer, we urge you to **speak out on the harms of prostitution, trafficking and all forms of sexual**

exploitation. If London is to be a city where all women truly are safe and equal, we need to talk about the connections between endemic levels of domestic and sexual abuse, everyday sexual harassment, some men's strong sense of sexual entitlement to women and the realities of sexual coercion and abuse experienced by women in prostitution. While many Londoners are kind and offer support to women on the streets, the stories the women we work with can also tell about abuse and harassment by strangers are deeply upsetting. We need the Mayor to make visible commitment and persistent emphasis on respect for women, the equality and value of all women, and compassion for those facing disadvantages.

Thank you for your attention to our questions. This is an open letter to candidates and we are sharing it, along with any replies we receive, on our website and with our partners. We are available to meet and to talk more about our work if you ever want to do so.

Yours sincerely,

Sarah Green

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