

# Confinement: Women, HIV And Pregnancy During The COVID-19 Pandemic In The UK

## Authors

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## Objectives

COVID-19 has significantly impacted the health and wellbeing of pregnant women. We describe key challenges faced by pregnant women living with HIV in the UK during the pandemic.

## Methods

4M is a national Mentor Mother programme supporting women with HIV in pregnancy and beyond. Using a participatory approach, we synthesise qualitative data from key stakeholders and Mentor Mothers, obtained via webinar/email between May & October 2020.

## Results

COVID-19 has negatively impacted women's wellbeing. Key themes emerged:

1. Psychological impact (including concerns about acquiring COVID-19, fears about attending appointments or giving birth alone, and threatened/actual domestic violence);
2. Constrained choices (including not having a birth companion, not being supported to breastfeed (reduced clinical services, limited viral monitoring availability);
3. Digital exclusion because of poor digital literacy, poverty and confidentiality concerns;
4. Exacerbation of existing considerable socio-economic deprivation.

Mentor Mothers highlighted women's resilience, identifying key sources of support:

1. Fully integrated multidisciplinary team, including specialist midwives, clinicians, and **Mentor Mothers**; and
2. **Peer support**, which successfully adopted an online model, providing safe spaces for advice and support, combined with fostering social connections.

## Conclusion

Policymakers and health and social care providers must be aware of multiple intersecting challenges women with HIV experience during pregnancy as a result of COVID-19. Many of these, while not unique, are amplified by HIV. It is imperative that policy reflects women's lived realities in order to uphold their sexual and reproductive rights, and that peer support is recognised and funded as a key care component.

## Our Key Recommendations to policy makers

**INEQUALITIES:** Urgently address persistent inequalities and intersectional issues which existed before the pandemic, have now been exacerbated by it and particularly affect people from BAME communities

**BALANCE:** The emotional, physical and mental wellbeing of women throughout pregnancy must be in focus, with a good balance between COVID-19 prevention versus upholding their SRHR;

**RELEVANCE:** Ensure that policies and programmes are those that are relevant and in line with women's lived realities and priorities, to provide trauma-informed supportive responses;  
**MEANINGFUL INVOLVEMENT OF WOMEN:** from the start is essential for respectful partnerships in effective decision-making

**SUSTAINABLE FUNDING:** Enable grassroots community groups like 4M to continue to keep women meaningfully engaged, and keep the 'out of reach' in touch with essential services;

**URGENCY:** Chronic pre-COVID-19 socio-economic determinants of poverty and ill-health should be addressed as a matter of urgency, in order to reduce the multiplier effects of COVID-19, potential other future pandemics and to ensure that our priorities are in focus

*"When it comes to pregnancy and that is part of what 4M advocates for - is that the woman is an individual in her own right...because if the woman is okay the child will be okay...if the woman never gets the support that she needs, unfortunately that then translates to the child. So it is important we understand and promote that a woman's rights are upheld as a human being first before anything else that is added, which includes the children, and that is not to say the children are not important, but the woman needs to be okay first."  
(4M webinar 12, Mentor Mother)*

*"We acknowledge the anchoring and determination with which women in general have navigated life with HIV, regardless of the challenges and brought their families in all their myriad forms along with them."  
(4M Mentor Mother)*

*"The midwife in my experience is the person in the antenatal care team who will refer a pregnant woman who is experiencing anxiety, depression etc for perinatal mental health service. Other members of the team may identify concerns, but the midwife has the responsibility to initiate referrals to the appropriate services."  
(4M MM)*

**4M Network**  
My health, My choice, My child, My life

We wish to acknowledge the ongoing support of 4MNet's incredible members and the amazing Steering Group members: Jane Anderson; Susan Bewley; Laura Byrne; Rageshri Dhairyawan (Chair); Fiona Hale; Vicky Johnson; Longret Kwardem, Rebecca Mbebe, Angelina Namiba, Shema Tariq (Interim Chair); Pat Tookey; Alice Welbourn; and Alison Wright. Massive thanks to our funders.