



LONDONASSEMBLYLABOUR

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Re: PPE for people of all genders

Dear Secretary of State,

I write regarding your recent comments on gender-appropriate protective personal equipment (PPE). As you will know, these comments have been met with some concern from medical professionals. As a GP myself, I would appreciate your clarifying these comments so that staff can be reassured Government ministers understand their needs.

In response to a question from Nicola Richards MP, in your capacity as Minister for Women and Equalities, you told Select Committee members that “it’s the same protection that is required regardless of what gender you are”.¹ You also stated that protection of health workers was the responsibility of the Department for Health and Social Care.

However, colleagues from the British Medical Association have since pointed out “female doctors and other NHS staff are having issues with filtering face-piece masks and other PPE not being available in smaller sizes as they tend to be designed to the size and shape of male bodies.” The Royal College of Nursing commented that “One-size-fits-all protective equipment has been a problem for frontline healthcare workers who have to wear this specialist life-saving equipment for up to 12 hours at a time.”²

There is a wealth of research of the harm done to women by gender-blind design.³ Specifically on PPE, the Trades Union Congress revealed that nearly two fifths of women workers found ill-fitting gear hampered their work. I am aware of a particularly tragic case where a woman police officer was killed because the inadequate fitting of her stab vest had required its removal while breaking down a door.⁴

As you acknowledged at the Select Committee, three quarters of NHS staff are women. Yet it was not clear from your statements whether the NHS takes this into account when sourcing PPE. This is doubly important at the present time when PPE must be worn for longer and in a wider range of circumstances. The Equality Act 2010 is clear: individuals must be treated no less favourably on the basis of gender. I am

¹ Unequal impact: coronavirus, Women and Equalities Select Committee, 22 April 2020

<https://www.parliamentlive.tv/Event/Index/d4949356-8294-4157-ade4-88f8395ac8a4>

² Women’s minister insists PPE not gender-specific despite doctors warning gear designed for men putting female health workers at risk, The Independent, 24 April 2020

³ The deadly truth about a world built for men, The Guardian, 23 February 2019

<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/feb/23/truth-world-built-for-men-car-crashes>

⁴ Personal protective equipment and women, TUC, April 2017

<https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/PPEandwomenguidance.pdf>

sure you will be alive to the risk that systematic sourcing of inappropriate PPE for women risks violating this requirement.

I would like to do that in possession of a full response from yourself on your efforts, in tandem with ministerial colleagues, to keep our women key workers safe and your specific response to concerns about ill-fitting PPE.

Yours,

Onkar

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Onkar Singh Sahota', with a horizontal line underneath.

Dr Onkar Singh Sahota AM
London Assembly Member for Ealing & Hillingdon