

**Violence against women and girls**

*A pre-budget briefing from the UK Women’s Budget Group*

**March 2020**





# Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)

*Briefing from the* ***UK Women’s Budget Group***

**Key points**

* *Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) includes physical, sexual, psychological, emotional and financial abuse, stalking, and harassment and coercion, forced marriage, so-called honour-based violence and female genital mutilation, child sex abuse, modern slavery, trafficking, pornography and online abuse.*
* *20% of women and 4% of men have suffered sexual assault, including attempts, since age 16, equivalent to an estimated 3.4 million women and 631,000 men.* ***[[1]](#footnote-1)***
* *More than 1 in 4 women will experience domestic abuse during her lifetime[[2]](#footnote-2): that is 1.3 million women under 60 in the last year alone.* ***[[3]](#footnote-3)***
* *Much of this violence is invisible: 83% of victims of partner abuse did not report it to the police.[[4]](#footnote-4)*
* *The Government’s VAWG strategy is not backed with sufficient funding for services for survivors, or victims’ families, or for preventive interventions to end VAWG.*
* *In addition to Government commitment of £100m to supporting the VAWG strategy announced in 2017 Spring Spending Review, a further commitment of £24m over the next three years has been made to support services for all survivors of sexual violence, including men and boys. This compares to the total cost of domestic violence in England and Wales alone of £66bn annually, and sexual offending costs of £12.2 billion per year.*

Women-led specialist VAWG services are struggling, and in many areas failing, to keep up with demand after successive rounds of funding cuts.

There is no statutory right to specialist support services, and the Government has failed to ratify the Istanbul Convention which creates an obligation on the UK to provide and to fund them adequately to meet demand.

Scale of the problem

* 3.1% of women (510,000) and 0.8% of men (138,000) aged 16 to 59 were sexually assaulted in the last year
* 3% of women and 1% of men were sexually assaulted by rape or penetration (including attempts) as children: that is, 567,000 women now aged between 16 to 59 and 102,000 men.[[5]](#footnote-5)
* Sexual violence is one of the most underreported crimes. 83% do not report this to the police.[[6]](#footnote-6) 74% of survivors of childhood sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) did not tell anyone at the time.[[7]](#footnote-7)
* 1 in 4 women will experience domestic abuse during her lifetime[[8]](#footnote-8): that is 1.3 million women in the last year alone. **[[9]](#footnote-9)**
* Half of women who were murdered in the year ending March 2017 were killed by a partner or ex-, while only 3% of male murder victims were.[[10]](#footnote-10)
* The police in England and Wales made at least 201,656 child protection referrals as a result of domestic abuse incidents in the year ending March 2018 [[11]](#footnote-11)
* Domestic violence costs to society, in England and Wales, amount to £66bn each year, or £34,015 per person affected.[[12]](#footnote-12)
* Sexual offending costs £12.2 billion per year.[[13]](#footnote-13) Domestic homicide has an estimated cost of £2.2 million per death as a result of harms, health services and lost productivity. [[14]](#footnote-14)

***Ending Violence against Women and Girls VAWG Strategy 2016 – 2020***

The Government has signed, and declared it intends to ratify, the Council of Europe Istanbul Convention,[[15]](#footnote-15) which sets out Government’s duties to fund services.

Article 23 says: “Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to provide for the setting-up of appropriate, easily accessible shelters in sufficient numbers to provide safe accommodation for and to reach out pro-actively to victims, especially women and their children.”

Article 25 states: “Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to provide for the setting up of appropriate, easily accessible rape crisis or sexual violence referral centres for victims in sufficient numbers to provide for medical and forensic examination, trauma support and counselling for victims.”

Article 8 requires Government to allocate *appropriate financial and human resources for the work carried out by non-governmental organisations*, and Article 9 requires them to recognise, support and establish effective cooperation with them.

The EU Directive on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime sets minimum standards of service provision to support victims.

The Government published its updated action plan against its four-year VAWG strategy in March 2019. At the national level, spending committed in the Strategy does not match the investment required to deliver on this commitment. Central government has ring-fenced just £20m per year (£80m over the remainder of this spending review). Rising incidence figures, and funding cuts by central Government, have led local authorities to reassess VAWG funding. VAWG requires a sustained level of committed spending.

The Government has announced its intention to place a legal duty on local authorities to deliver support to survivors of domestic abuse[[16]](#footnote-16) in accommodation-based services in England, backed by funding to place services on a sustainable footing.

***Local government***

A significant portion of funding for VAWG support services comes from local authorities’ budgets. Central government funding for local government decreased dramatically over the last decade, falling by over 50% between 2010/11 and 2015/16[[17]](#footnote-17) and by a further 30.6% in 2017/18.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Figures from 178 local councils show that 65% cut funding in real terms for refuges since 2010; in the 12 months to March 2018 alone, spending on refuges fell by nearly £1m in total, with 125 authorities cutting spending in real terms.[[19]](#footnote-19) A more detailed survey in 2017 of 84 local authorities across England found council funding for refuges across England had dropped from £31.2m in 2010/11 to just £23.9m in 2016/17.[[20]](#footnote-20)

As a result of these cuts to funding, 60% of vulnerable women and children turned away from women’s refuges in 2018-19.[[21]](#footnote-21)

A total of £3.5 billion additional funding was made available to local government in the 2019 spending round,[[22]](#footnote-22) but as none of this is ringfenced for VAWG services it is unclear whether these cuts will be reversed.

Rules governing the commissioning of services pose a further threat to smaller organisations that might be squeezed out of the bidding by bigger generic ones with larger capacity but without specialised and local knowledge.[[23]](#footnote-23) Single-sex services for women are especially threatened as commissioners seek to reduce transaction costs by commissioning ‘one size fits all services’ through a single contract rather than commission separate, specialist services for women and for minority women with specific needs.

Tampon Tax funding for VAWG services

The Women’s Budget Group, alongside other women’s organisations, has previously expressed concern about the continued charging of VAT on sanitary products and the way in which the dispersal of funds to women’s organisations creates a dangerous slippage whereby women become responsible for funding their own health and safety.[[24]](#footnote-24) The level of funding for VAWG services should be determined by the level of need rather than by the level of (unfair) tampon tax receipts.

Investing in prevention measures in schools

In 2016, the Women and Equalities Select Committee made a series of recommendations to tackle ‘widespread’ sexual violence in schools,[[25]](#footnote-25) including investment in school programmes to address attitudes towards women and girls in society.

The Committee asked for a statutory duty on schools to prevent and respond to sexual harassment and sexual violence, and for this to be included in schools’ inspections. They called for sex and relationships education to be designated a statutory subject, and for investment in teacher training, and in local third-sector specialist support. As a result, ‘Relationships and Sex Education’ is now on a statutory footing; however, the guidance is not in force until 2020. The Women’s Budget Group supports the recommendations of the Committee, particularly on the linked investment of resources.

***Legal aid***

Legal aid has been cut for family law cases, although there is an exception where there has been domestic violence. However, victims must report the violence to the police or to a health practitioner, something many women are not prepared to do. Additionally, victims often need legal advice on welfare benefits, debt or housing, which is no longer funded by legal aid.[[26]](#footnote-26)

***Health***

Health cuts have reduced the NHS’s capacity to meet the needs of women experiencing violence, including referrals and interpretation services.[[27]](#footnote-27) The NHS has made a commitment to giving victims of sexual abuse a lifetime of mental health care to help cope with the trauma, but the budget to achieve this is only £4m per year until 2020/21,[[28]](#footnote-28) which is clearly inadequate given the numbers of victims quoted in this briefing.

***Social Security***

The social security system is failing survivors of violence and abuse when they need it most.

Poverty resulting from the Benefit Cap or other social security cuts can leave survivors trapped with an abusive partner[[29]](#footnote-29). Being unable to afford to leave, and fearing the financial implications of leaving, can mean that survivors stay longer, increasing the risk of abuse[[30]](#footnote-30).

Payment of Universal Credit (UC) into a single bank account can make women more vulnerable to economic abuse.[[31]](#footnote-31).

The two-child limit can cause poverty for larger families; where there is ‘forced pregnancy’ the ‘non consensual conception exemption’ (rape clause) does not apply to women living with their abuser.

The ‘No Recourse to Public Funds’ rule, which prevents survivors accessing certain benefits or services, can be used by an abuser to frighten survivors to staying with them and make it impossible for survivors to find a refuge space that will take them.

Leaving can be difficult or impossible if the survivor has no access to benefits (worsened by benefit cuts including reductions in crisis support from local welfare assistance schemes (formerly the discretionary Social Fund) can mean fewer options to meet the immediate costs of leaving[[32]](#footnote-32)).

Survivors may be sanctioned for not applying for jobs that would put them at risk, such as near the perpetrator’s home or workplace[[33]](#footnote-33). They may also lose benefit if their ex-partner makes malicious allegations about their entitlements[[34]](#footnote-34).

Conclusions

Violence against women remains widespread and under-reported, with devastating impacts on victims, survivors and their families. The government’s welcome commitment to ensure that ‘no victim is turned away’ must be matched by funding to ensure services are available to all who need them.

**UK Women’s Budget Group, March 2020.**

WBG is an independent, voluntary organisation made up of individuals from Academia, NGOs and trade unions. See [www.wbg.org.uk](http://www.wbg.org.uk)

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of the 2 million adults who suffered domestic abuse in the last year, 695,000 of these were men. Figures for year ending March 2018. **A new report will be available in November 2019.** [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
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