

Autumn Budget 2021 Pre-Budget Briefings

Violence against women and girls

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Violence against women and girls (VAWG)

A pre-budget briefing from the UK Women's Budget Group - October 2021

Key points:

- Violence against women and girls (VAWG) includes physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, and financial abuse; stalking; harassment and coercion; forced marriage; so-called honour-based violence and female genital mutilation; child sex abuse; modern slavery; trafficking; pornography; and online abuse.
- More than **one in four women will experience domestic abuse** during their lifetime,¹ and **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.²
- Prior to the pandemic, services were severely stretched and underfunded. This crisis has been exacerbated by a sharp increase in demand during the pandemic.
- **Emergency Covid funding by government has been insufficient to cope with higher demand**, and only available on a short-term basis, meaning that some of the **additional refuges space** made available in response to the first national lockdown in April 2020 will **likely cease to exist in 2021**.
- A long-term funding settlement is required to deal with the crisis of gender-based violence as well as investment in prevention such as school programmes to address attitudes towards women and girls.
- Women's Aid estimates that at least **£409 million is needed next year for specialist domestic abuse services** across England.³ This estimate includes the funding needed to meet women's mental health needs and holistically support their recovery.

Introduction

Prior to the pandemic, women-led specialist VAWG services were already struggling, and in many areas failing, to keep up with demand after successive rounds of funding cuts. Covid-19 has exacerbated this, with the pandemic leading to a sharp increase in domestic abuse, financial abuse and other gender-based violence. The government's 'Tackling violence against women and girls' strategy, published this year, is limited in its scope of ways to tackle VAWG and does not commit to adequate levels of funding needed in the sector.

The impact of Covid-19 on VAWG and services

When the pandemic began it was clear that lockdown measures would exacerbate women and girls' experiences of violence and abuse and make fleeing safely even harder. These concerns were borne out in the huge increases in demand seen by the sector.

Before Covid-19, Black and minoritised women, women with insecure immigration status, disabled women and LGBT+ survivors already faced severe barriers to accessing support.

Organisations led by and for Black and minoritised women, which were severely under-

¹ ONS (2018) Domestic abuse: findings from the Crime Survey for England and Wales: year ending March 2018 (<https://bit.ly/34cTZp8>)

² ONS (2018) Sexual offences in England and Wales: year ending March 2017 (<https://bit.ly/2C0Y83y>)

³ Women's Aid (2021) Women's Aid launches national campaign Deserve To Be Heard to highlight impact of domestic abuse on mental health of women and their children (<https://bit.ly/3AVXQa5>)

resourced before the pandemic, have been unable to meet demand. Research by Imkaan shows that 75% of Black and minoritised women in need of bedspaces in ‘by and for’ services were turned away during the pandemic.⁴

Deaf and disabled women, who face increased risk of gender-based violence, have also been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. Disabled and deaf women faced increased reliance on abusers for care and access to basic essentials, and difficulties in accessing statutory and specialist services.⁵

Over the last year, the government’s emergency funding for the VAWG has been unevenly distributed and insufficient to cope with increased demand. Additionally, there was no ringfenced funding for specialist ‘by and for’ services, which support women who were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.

VAWG services: decades of neglect and underfunding

Even prior to the pandemic, VAWG services were severely stretched, and policy had not kept pace with international best practice. The Domestic Abuse Bill will finally require local authorities in England, through a new statutory duty, to support domestic abuse victims and their children in safe accommodation and give priority to homeless victims.⁶

The government has signed but still not ratified the Istanbul Convention,⁷ which creates an obligation on the UK to provide and to fund services adequately to meet demand. 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 it to recognise, support and establish effective cooperation with them.

A significant portion of funding for VAWG support services comes from local authorities’ budgets. Figures from 178 local councils show that 65% cut funding in real terms for refuges between 2010 and 2018; 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.⁸ Research by Women’s Aid found that 59% of local authorities had cut their funding in real terms in 2019/20.⁹

The current funding environment leaves many refuges struggling to cover the cost of their services - with only 19.8% saying that commissioned funding covers all of their support staff costs -¹⁰ and to meet demand in their communities. In 2019/20, 57.2% of referrals to refuge were declined, with the main reason being lack of space or capacity.¹¹ There is currently a 24.5% shortfall in refuge capacity relative to Council of Europe minimum recommended levels, and this shortfall rises to 42.5% if non-commissioned spaces that are supported through donations and other funding sources are not included.¹²

⁴ Rape Crisis (2020) Position Paper Series May 2020 (<https://bit.ly/3B5dpMY>)

⁵ Women’s Aid Northern Ireland (2021) Covid-19: one year on (<https://bit.ly/3AZO148>)

⁶ UK Parliament (2021) Lords examines Domestic Abuse Bill (<https://bit.ly/3dRL4Sc>)

⁷ Istanbul Convention on Violence Against Women (2011) (<https://bit.ly/3202S44>)

⁸ Grierson, J (2018) Council funding for women’s refuges cut by nearly £7m since 2010, Guardian, 23 March (<https://bit.ly/2pDVzib>)

⁹ Women’s Aid (2021) Fragile funding landscape: The extent of local authority commissioning in the domestic abuse refuge sector in England 2020 (<https://bit.ly/37W5KEC>)

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Women’s Aid (2021) Domestic abuse report 2021: annual audit (<https://bit.ly/37XpJ5X>)

¹² Women’s Aid (2021) Fragile funding landscape: the extent of local authority commissioning in the domestic abuse refuge sector in England 2020 (<https://bit.ly/37W5KEC>)

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.¹³ 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.

2021 'Tackling violence against women and girls' strategy

In July 2021 the government published its 'Tackling violence against women and girls' strategy.¹⁴ It makes frequent reference to a 'cross system approach'. However this approach is not reflected in the strategy, which places considerable focus on the role of the criminal justice system (CJS) in responding to VAWG. This is despite the fact that many women, particularly those from marginalised backgrounds, do not trust the police or court systems.

The strategy does not acknowledge the systemic problems, such as institutionalised misogyny, within the police that act as barriers to women reporting their abuse. This omission seems all the more concerning given the death earlier this year of Sarah Everard at the hands of a serving policeman as well as the 15 other women killed since 2009 by a former or serving police officer.¹⁵

The spending committed in the strategy of £43 million for 2021-22 does not come close to matching the funding required for the sector. This is despite the government's own estimates putting the cost of domestic violence to society, in England and Wales, at £66bn each year, or £34,015 per person affected.¹⁶

Women's Aid estimates that at least £409 million is needed next year for specialist domestic abuse services across England.¹⁷ This estimation includes the funding needed to meet women's mental health needs and support their recovery.

Investing in prevention measures in schools

In the summer of 2021, 16 organisations including Imkaan, Women's Aid Federation England, Refuge, and Rape Crisis England & Wales called for the creation of a taskforce to drive the 'Whole schools approach'.¹⁸ This approach should be based in human rights principles and focused on VAWG to ensure it addresses inequality and power, and should be implemented with a view to shifting attitudes and cultures of tolerance, normalisation and acceptance of VAWG as part of women and girls' everyday lives.

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.¹⁹

'No recourse to public funds'

The 'no recourse to public funds' rule, which prevents survivors accessing certain benefits or services, can be used by an abuser to frighten survivors into staying with them, and make it impossible for survivors to find a refuge space.

Leaving can be difficult or impossible if the survivor has no access to benefits. This has been worsened by benefit cuts, including reductions in crisis support from local welfare assistance schemes (formerly the discretionary social fund).

¹³ WBG and Women's Resource Centre (2018) Life-changing & life-saving: funding for the women's sector (<http://bit.ly/2vf813j>)

¹⁴ Home Office (2021) Tackling violence against women and girls strategy (<https://bit.ly/3G4Ykhv>)

¹⁵ Moloney, C. (2021) At least 15 serving or former police have killed women in UK since 2009, Guardian, 28 September (<https://bit.ly/3jjHD8Q>)

¹⁶ Home Office (2019) The economic and social costs of domestic abuse (<https://bit.ly/334d6BL>). Note this figure is for the year-end 31 March

2017, using the methodology in Heeks et al. (2018) The economic and social costs of crime; the information is gathered from CSEW.

¹⁷ Women's Aid (2021) #DeserveToBeHeard (<https://bit.ly/2XuMgVL>)

¹⁸ EAW Coalition (2021) Women's groups call on Secretary of State for Education to create 'whole schools approach' taskforce (<https://bit.ly/3aUA08Z>)

¹⁹ Coventry Women's Voices, CEMAP, Foleshill Women Training and the University of Warwick (2013) Layers of Inequality (<http://bit.ly/2iHyoip>)

This can mean fewer options to meet the immediate costs of leaving.²⁰

At the outset of the pandemic, many organisations in the VAWG sector called for immediate action to ensure all women experiencing VAWG were protected equally – including an end to hostile environment policies, ‘no recourse to public funds’ conditions, and immigration detention. However, migrant women with no recourse are still denied safe housing, protection and financial support. The government must accept amendments to the Domestic Abuse Bill to deliver equal protection to migrant women, and work with devolved administrations to ensure all survivors get the support they need.

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.²¹ Being unable to afford to leave, and fearing the financial implications of leaving, can mean that survivors stay longer, increasing the risk of abuse.²²

Payment of universal credit (UC) into a single bank account can make women more vulnerable to economic abuse.²³ The recent cut to UC, the largest overnight cut to benefits since the inception of the welfare state, will affect the incomes of around six million families.²⁴ As of July 2021, 53% of the people receiving UC were women.²⁵ The cut in UC will push already vulnerable women and children further into poverty and may mean that more women are forced to choose between staying with an abusive partner or being unable to provide for themselves and their children.

²⁰ Liz Kelly, Nicola Sharp and Renate Klein (2014) Finding the costs of freedom: how women and children rebuild their lives after domestic violence (<https://bit.ly/2PKsfV9>)

²¹ WBG, EVAW and SEA (2019) Benefits or barriers? Making social security work for survivors of violence and abuse across the UK’s four nations (<http://bit.ly/3bOlfQr>)

²² Marilyn Howard and Amy Skipp (2015) Unequal, trapped & controlled: women’s experience of financial abuse and potential implications for universal credit (<https://bit.ly/2JDJa7F>); Women’s Aid (2019) The domestic abuse report 2019: the annual audit (<https://bit.ly/36io7Bz>)

²³ WBG, EVAW and SEA (2018) Universal credit and financial abuse: exploring the links (<http://bit.ly/2PciCix>)

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

Survivors may be sanctioned for not applying for jobs that would put them at risk, such as near the perpetrator’s home or workplace.²⁶ They may also lose benefit if their ex-partner makes malicious allegations about their entitlements.²⁷

Conclusions

Violence against women remains widespread and under-reported, with devastating impacts on victims, survivors and their families. Covid has put a strain on already underfunded VAWG services. If the government is serious about bringing about “real and lasting change” then it must commit to secure, long-term grant funding for specialist VAWG service provision, including ringfenced funding for ‘by and for’ services.

UK Women’s Budget Group, October 2021

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²⁴ JRF (July 2021) UK heading for the biggest overnight cut to the basic rate of social security since World War II (<https://bit.ly/3jmhtIE>)

²⁵ [Universal Credit statistics, 29 April 2013 to 8 July 2021 - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk) (www.gov.uk)

²⁶ Mary-Ann Stephenson (2014) The impact of benefit sanctions on people in Coventry (<http://bit.ly/2qnMvvd>)

²⁷ Surviving Economic Abuse (2018) Transforming the response to domestic abuse: response to the government consultation (<https://bit.ly/2PvL7Xi>)