

Funding for violence against women and girls services

Briefing for a new government



Funding for violence against women and girls services (VAWG)

A briefing from the UK Women's Budget Group - 2024

Summary

- 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, and one in four women have experienced rape or sexual assault as an adult

Funding

- Specialist services to support victims/survivors of VAWG are underfunded. Over 60% of referrals to refuges supporting women in England in 2022-23 were declined. There are 14,000 survivors on the Rape Crisis waiting list.
- The design of the Home Office's £8.4 million VAWG Support and Specialist Services (VSSS) fund launched in 2023 did not meet the needs of specialist women's organisations. The definitions and criteria enabled generic, non-specialist organisations to access this funding.
- Importantly, the investment announced for the VAWG sector did not include ringfenced funding for services led 'by and for' Black and minoritised women.

Investing in prevention measures in schools

- Despite wide-spread calls within the sector to invest in prevention measures in schools, there has been a failure to invest in tackling the root causes of violence against women and girls in society.

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.
- The Women's Budget Group found that 'domestic violence' is one of the main issues women seek legal help/advice for (48% of survey respondents). 85% of respondents said vulnerable women are unable to access civil legal aid.

Rape prosecutions

- The number of adult rape cases in the Crown Court outstanding caseload increased by 346% between 2019 and 2023.
- However, in the final quarter of 2023, the average mean time from receipt to completion for adult rape cases was 366 days compared with 240 for all offences.
- Despite an increase in cases, the percentage of victims who drop out of the legal process, (particularly at police investigation stage) has continued to rise and now sits at 61%.

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.

Social security

- The social security system is failing survivors of violence and abuse when they need it most.
- Poverty resulting from the benefit cap, two-child limit or other social security cuts can leave survivors trapped with an abusive partner.
- Payment of universal credit (UC) into a single bank account can make women more vulnerable to economic abuse. Survivors may also be sanctioned for not applying for jobs that would put them at risk, such as near the perpetrator's home or workplace

Recommendations

- A commitment to long-term grant funding for specialist women's services, including ringfenced funding for services led 'by and for' Black and minoritised women, Deaf and disabled women and LGBT+ survivors.
- Ensure all migrant survivors can access protection and support services.
- More specialist training for police dealing with VAWG cases.
- Restore women's access to justice through a commitment to clearing court backlogs and increasing legal aid funding and availability.
- Invest in prevention measures in schools to address the root causes of violence against women and girls.
- Reform social security (including uprating benefits and scrapping the benefits cap and two-child limit) to ensure women's economic independence and their ability to leave abusive relationships.

Introduction

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 1 in 4 women have experienced rape or sexual assault as an adult².

Despite some increases in government spending on VAWG, funding remains inadequate and difficult for support services to access. In 2022-23, over 60% of referrals to domestic abuse refuges in England were declined, and 14,000 survivors are on waiting lists for Rape Crisis centres³.

Ring-fenced funding is crucial to meet the specific needs of Black and minoritized survivors. However, services led by and for these women are six times less likely to receive funding compared to other domestic abuse services⁴. The Home Office's £8.4 million VAWG Support and Specialist Services (VSSS) fund in 2023 was poorly designed, allowing generic services and statutory agencies to access the funds.

There is an urgent need for clarity and commitment on government funding for VAWG post 2025.

VAWG services: decades of neglect and underfunding

Even prior to the Covid pandemic, VAWG services were severely stretched, and policy had not kept pace with international best practice.

Specifically, the government has signed but still not ratified the Istanbul Convention,⁵ which creates an obligation on the UK to provide and to fund services adequately to meet demand. Article 23 of the Convention states: "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.

The Domestic Abuse Act, which was signed into law in 2021, finally requires tier one 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 victims⁶.

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

² ONS (2023), Sexual offences prevalence and victim characteristics, England and Wales, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/sexualoffencesprevalenceandvictimcharacteristicsenglandandwales>

³ EVAW (2024) Spring Budget 2024 fails to meaningfully impact VAWG services (<https://bit.ly/3xrlGfD>)

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⁵ Istanbul Convention on Violence Against Women (2011) (<https://bit.ly/3202S44>)

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

But funding remains largely inadequate. A significant portion of funding for VAWG support services comes from local authorities' budgets. Almost half (49.0%) of organisations surveyed by Women's Aid reported they were forced to run an area of their domestic abuse service without dedicated funding, including services like therapeutic support, children's services and domestic abuse prevention⁷.

As part of the Tackling Domestic Abuse Plan, the Conservative government committed a total of over £230 million in funding from 2022-2025, including the Ministry of Justice quadrupling funding for victim and witness support services by 2024/25⁸.

Whilst this investment to support victims is welcome, it is not sufficient to address demand. A coalition of specialist VAWG organisations estimate that annual funding of £427m is needed for specialist domestic abuse services in England; including £238 million ring-fenced for community-based services and £189 million ring-fenced for refuge services⁹.

The current funding environment leaves many refuges struggling to cover the cost of their services - with only 22% saying that commissioned funding covers all of their support staff costs¹⁰ - and to meet demand in their communities. In 2022/23, 61% of referrals to refuge were declined, with the main reason being lack of space or capacity¹¹. There is currently a 22.2% shortfall in refuge capacity relative to Council of Europe minimum recommended levels¹².

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 knowledge¹³. 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.

There has been a consistent failure to provide ringfenced funding for services led 'by and for' Black and minoritised women. These specialist services are the best equipped to support Black and minoritised women, were underfunded prior to the pandemic and during it, found themselves unable to keep up with demand¹⁴. Imkaan has estimated that the total annual cost of delivering specialist support services in the Black and minoritised women and girls sector alone is over £97 million¹⁵.

2021 'Tackling violence against women and girls' strategy

In July 2021 the government published its 'Tackling violence against women and girls' strategy.¹⁶ 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.

⁷ Women's Aid (2024) Domestic abuse services struggling to fill critical gaps in a challenging landscape, exacerbated by the rising cost-of-living (<https://bit.ly/4c3iKYf>)

⁸ Gov.uk (2024) Funding boost for specialist victim support services (<https://bit.ly/4bV1CDW>)

⁹ Refuge (2024) Leading VAWG organisations issue letter to Government urging for specialist domestic abuse services funding in Spring Budget (<https://bit.ly/4emZJ4I>)

¹⁰ Women's Aid (2021) Domestic abuse report 2024: annual audit (<https://bit.ly/4el0oU2>)

¹¹ Women's Aid (2021) Domestic abuse report 2024: annual audit (<https://bit.ly/4el0oU2>)

¹² Women's Aid (2021) Domestic abuse report 2024: annual audit (<https://bit.ly/4el0oU2>)

¹³ WBG and Women's Resource Centre (2018) Life-changing & life-saving: funding for the women's sector (<http://bit.ly/2vf8l3j>)

¹⁴ Rape Crisis (2020) Position Paper Series May 2020 (<https://bit.ly/3B5dpMY>)

¹⁵ End Violence Against Women Coalition (Sep 2021) Joint submission (<https://bit.ly/3HxQehg>)

¹⁶ Home Office (2021) Tackling violence against women and girls strategy (<https://bit.ly/3G4YkhV>)

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 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 officer¹⁷.

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.

Despite the wide-spread calls within the sector to invest in prevention measures in schools¹⁹, there has been a failure to invest in tackling the root causes of violence against women and girls in society.

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 aid²⁰.

The Women's Budget Group found that 'domestic violence' is one of the main issues women seek legal help/advice for (48% of survey respondents). 85% of respondents said vulnerable women are unable to access civil legal aid and 77% said a major consequence of the legal aid changes is 'women reaching crisis point or problems escalating' before they receive any legal help or advice²¹.

Rape prosecutions

As a result of increased resource funding used to meet the ambitions set out in the government's End-to-End Rape Review, the number of adult rape cases in the Crown Court outstanding caseload increased by 346% between 2019 and 2023²². However, in the final quarter of 2023, the average mean time from receipt to completion for adult rape cases was 366 days compared with 240 for all offences²³. Protracted wait times have been found to lead to deteriorating mental wellbeing, suicide attempts, and survivors and their families feeling unable to plan for the future or move on from what had happened to them²⁴.

Despite an increase in cases, the percentage of victims who drop out of the legal process, (particularly at police investigation stage) has continued to rise and now sits at 61%²⁵. Longer wait times increases the risk of trials failing due to victims or witnesses being more likely to withdraw from cases, their recollection of evidence declining over time, and defendants being increasingly likely to plead not guilty²⁶.

¹⁷ Moloney, C. (2021) At least 15 serving or former police have killed women in UK since 2009, Guardian, 28 September (<https://bit.ly/3jjHD8Q>)

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 Ibid

²⁰ Coventry Women's Voices, CEMAP, Folleshill Women Training and the University of Warwick (2013) Layers of inequality (<http://bit.ly/2iHyoip>)

²¹ The Women's Budget Group (2023) Gender Gaps in Access to Civil Legal Justice (<https://bit.ly/4c0V0sE>)

²² National Audit Office (2024) Reducing the backlog in the Crown Court (<https://bit.ly/4c0YA0A>)

²³ National Audit Office (2024) Reducing the backlog in the Crown Court (<https://bit.ly/4c0YA0A>)

²⁴ National Audit Office (2024) Reducing the backlog in the Crown Court (<https://bit.ly/4c0YA0A>)

²⁵ HM Government (2024) Rape review progress update (<https://bit.ly/3VIPh4K>)

²⁶ National Audit Office (2024) Reducing the backlog in the Crown Court (<https://bit.ly/4c0YA0A>)

‘No recourse to public funds’

The ‘no recourse to public funds’ rule, which prevents migrant women 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). This can mean fewer options to meet the immediate costs of leaving.²⁷

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 partner²⁸. Being unable to afford to leave, and fearing the financial implications of leaving, can mean that survivors stay longer, increasing the risk of abuse²⁹.

Payment of universal credit (UC) into a single bank account can make women more vulnerable to economic abuse³⁰. Economic dependence makes women more vulnerable to domestic and sexual abuse and violence since it makes it harder to leave abusive relationships³¹.

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.³² They may also lose benefit if their ex-partner makes malicious allegations about their entitlements.³³

Recommendations

An increase in funding alongside consultation from specialists in the sector is paramount to the success of any strategy to tackle violence against women and girls. The first priority must therefore be a commitment to long-term grant funding for specialist women's services.

In addition, ringfenced funding must be provided for services led ‘by and for’ Black and minoritised women, Deaf and disabled women and LGBT+ survivors. The incoming government must also ensure all migrant survivors can access protection and support services.

There must also be more specialist training for police dealing with VAWG cases. We welcome The Labour Party's commitment to introduce specialist rape and sexual offences teams in every police force³⁴.

Women's access to justice must also be restored through a commitment to clearing court backlogs and increasing legal aid funding and availability. The increase of rape prosecutions under the Conservative government is a good start³⁵, but

²⁷ 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>)

²⁸ 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/3bOlfOr>)

²⁹ 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>)

³⁰ WBG, EVAW and SEA (2018) Universal credit and financial abuse: exploring the links (<http://bit.ly/2PciCjx>)

³¹ Women's Aid for the TUC; M. Howard and F. Bennett (2021) Distribution of money within the household and current social security issues for couples in the UK (<https://bit.ly/3xjXiPB>)

³² Mary-Ann Stephenson (2014) The impact of benefit sanctions on people in Coventry (<http://bit.ly/2qnMvyd>)

³³ Surviving Economic Abuse (2018) Transforming the response to domestic abuse: response to the government consultation (<https://bit.ly/2PvL7Xl>)

³⁴ The Labour Party (2024) Labour's Manifesto (<https://bit.ly/4b0hMuE>)

³⁵ HM Government (2024) Rape review progress update (<https://bit.ly/3VlPh4K>)

more must be done to address wait times and victim attrition. Further, 71% of the population of England and Wales do not have a community care legal aid provider in their local area³⁶, so it is crucial that steps are taken to remove these legal aid deserts across the country.

We also need the Government to meaningfully address the root causes of violence against women and girls via investment in prevention measures in schools. Finally, in order to ensure women's economic independence and their ability to leave abusive relationships, social security must be reformed. This includes restoring benefits to at least pre-pandemic levels in real terms, scrapping the benefits cap and the two-child limit and removing the rule that universal credit must be paid into the main earner's bank account.

UK Women's Budget Group, June 2024

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³⁶ Law Society (2024) Our three key asks of the next government (<https://bit.ly/45kjg1D>)

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