

Spring Budget 2021 Pre-Budget Briefings

Violence against women and girls

Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) and Covid-19

Pre-budget 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.
- **More than 1 in 4 women will experience domestic abuse during her lifetime¹, 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**
- Even prior to the pandemic, services were severely stretched and under-funded. This crisis has been exacerbated by a **sharp increase in demand during the Covid-19 pandemic.**
- **Emergency Covid funding by government has been insufficient to cope with higher demand, and also 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.**
- In 2019/20, 57.2% of referrals to refuge were declined, with the main reason being lack of space or capacity.³ 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.
- The Domestic Abuse Bill, currently before the House of Lords, will place a new statutory duty on local authorities to support those experiencing abuse. While this is welcome, it will **need to be matched by long-term, sustainable funding to ensure adequate services can be delivered.** Research by Women's Aid estimates that delivering a 'safe and sustainable' **national network of women's domestic abuse services would cost £393 million, including £173 million for refuges.**

More than 1 in 4 women will experience domestic abuse during her lifetime.⁴ Yet, even 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 impact of Covid-19 on VAWG and VAWG services

The World Health Organisation warned early in the crisis that violence against women tends to increase during emergency situations, including epidemics.⁵ For women and girls living with such violence, home is not a place of safety, and being in lockdown with a perpetrator could present additional risk, isolation, and exposure to

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

² Sexual offences in England and Wales: year ending March 2017, ONS, 2018 <https://bit.ly/2COY83y>

³ Women's Aid (2021) Domestic Abuse Report 2021: Annual Audit (<https://bit.ly/37XpJ5X>)

⁴ ONS, 2018, Domestic abuse: findings from the Crime Survey for England and Wales: year ending March 2018 <https://bit.ly/34cTZp8>

⁵ WHO (2020) Covid-19 and violence against women (<https://bit.ly/2XTJISM>)

increased violence, and coercive and controlling behaviour.⁶

During the first lockdown in April 2020, the government stated explicitly that escaping harm is legally recognised as a legitimate reason to leave home. However, additional funding is needed for specialist support services, including those by and for Black, Asian and ethnic minority women, to cope with increased demand for support.

The impact on demand for VAWG services during the Covid-19 pandemic has been staggering.⁷

- Cases of femicide as a result of domestic abuse more than doubled at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, although rates receded after the initial lockdown.⁸
- Two-thirds of women in abusive relationships suffered increased levels of violence from partners since the beginning of the pandemic, and three-quarters of women have found it more difficult to escape their perpetrators.⁹
- 16% of adults in the UK (8.7 million people) say they have experienced economic abuse.¹⁰ For 1.6 million people (3% of UK adult population) economic abuse started during the Covid-19 pandemic.¹¹
- 45% of women currently experiencing economic abuse have had a worsening of their education or employment situation as a result of the perpetrator's actions since the start of the outbreak.¹²
- One in three survivors (34%) of economic abuse had made plans to change their employment or education situation prior to the outbreak which have been impacted by abuse during the pandemic

(for example, no longer being able to afford educational courses).¹³

- 1 in 6 (17.3%) disabled women in the UK experience domestic violence (compared to 1 in 15 - 7.0% - non-disabled women).¹⁴ The current Covid-19 crisis has forced disabled women to increase dependence on others, placing them at greater risk of domestic abuse.¹⁵ Women with learning difficulties who have experienced domestic and sexual violence have lost one-to-one support from advocates. Deaf women have also experienced difficulty communicating as support has moved mostly over the phone or online.
- 15% of disabled LGBT people also reported not feeling safe where they were staying during lockdown.¹⁶

The government has responded to the increase in demand by announcing emergency funding during the first lockdown (£28 million), in November 2020 (£18 million) and in February 2021 (£40 million). However, this funding has been criticised for failing to address the scale of increased demand (as well as the pre-existing funding gap) and for providing only short-term help when services urgently require long-term funding to ensure their sustainability.¹⁷

VAWG Services: Decades of neglect and under-funding

Even prior to the pandemic, VAWG services were severely stretched and policy had not kept pace with international best practice. The Domestic Abuse Bill, at time of writing, was in the House of Lords. Once this completes its passage through both Houses and receives Royal Assent, it will finally require local authorities in England, through a new statutory duty, to support

⁶ Women's Aid (2020) VAWG sector statement on Covid-19 (<https://bit.ly/3eG8zea>)

⁷ For statistics on the scale of VAWG pre-Covid, please see our March 2020 VAWG briefing: <https://bit.ly/3uESDld>

⁸ The Guardian (April 2020) Domestic abuse killings 'more than double' amid Covid-19 lockdown (<https://bit.ly/38Hd2wP>)

⁹ Guardian (August 2020) Domestic abuse surged in lockdown, Panorama investigation finds (<https://bit.ly/32JAKUY>)

¹⁰ Refuge (September 2020) Know economic abuse: 2020 Report (<https://bit.ly/38FK1BL>)

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Surviving Economic Abuse (December 2020) The cost of Covid-19: Economic abuse throughout the pandemic- on employment and education (<https://bit.ly/2LQHpbq>)

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ ONS (2019) Disability and crime, UK: 2019 (<https://bit.ly/3fd80de>)

¹⁵ Sisters of Frida (April 2020) The Impact of Covid-19 on disabled women from Sisters of Frida (<https://bit.ly/2YUWvAe>)

¹⁶ 58 LGBT Foundation (May 2020) Hidden Figures: The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on LGBT communities in the UK (<https://bit.ly/3hPhnQJ>)

¹⁷ BBC News (2021) Covid-19: Rape and domestic abuse services to get extra £40 million (<https://bbc.in/3q5fu5T>)

domestic abuse victims and their children in safe accommodation, and give priority to homeless victims.¹⁸

The Government has signed but still not ratified the Istanbul Convention¹⁹ which creates an obligation on the UK to provide and to fund them 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 them to recognise, support and establish effective cooperation with them.

A long-term funding crisis

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), despite its

own estimates putting the cost of domestic violence to society, in England and Wales, at £66bn each year, or £34,015 per person affected.²⁰

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.²¹ Research by Women’s Aid found that 59% of local authorities had cut their funding in real terms in 2019/20.²²

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,²³ 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.²⁴ 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.²⁵

Research by Women’s Aid estimates that delivering a ‘safe and sustainable’ national network of women’s domestic abuse services would cost £393 million, including £173 million for refuges.²⁶

¹⁸ UK Parliament (2021) Lords examines Domestic Abuse Bill (<https://bit.ly/3dRL4Sc>)

¹⁹ Istanbul Convention on Violence Against Women <https://bit.ly/3202S44>

²⁰ 2019 Home Office, The economic and social costs of domestic abuse, January. Note this figure is for the year-end 31 March 2017, using the methodology in *The Economic and Social costs of Crime* (Heeks et al., 2018), and the information gathered from CSEW. <https://bit.ly/334d6BL>

²¹ Grierson, J (2018) Council funding for women’s refuges cut by nearly £7m since 2010, Guardian 23 March 2018 (<https://bit.ly/2pDVzib>)

²² 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>)

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Women’s Aid (2021) Domestic Abuse Report 2021: Annual Audit (<https://bit.ly/37XpJ5X>)

²⁵ 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>)

²⁶ Women’s Aid (2019) Funding Specialist Support for Domestic Abuse Survivors (<https://bit.ly/3uFDuA6>)

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.²⁷ 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.

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,²⁸ 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, while it was due to become mandatory in 2020, this has now been postponed to the summer of 2021 due to Covid-19.²⁹ The Women’s Budget Group supports the recommendations of the Committee, particularly on the linked investment of resources.

²⁷ WBG and Women’s Resource Centre (2018) Life-Changing & Life-Saving: Funding for the women’s sector (<http://bit.ly/2vf813j>)

²⁸ Women and Equalities Select Committee (September 2016) Sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools report (<http://bit.ly/2cl5jvO>)

²⁹ House of Commons Library (2020) Relationships and sex education in schools (England) (<https://bit.ly/3r4EKum>)

³⁰ Coventry Women’s Voices, CEMAP, Foleshill Women Training and the University of Warwick (2013) Layers of Inequality (<http://bit.ly/2iHyoip>)

³¹ WBG (2018) Health and Gender (<https://bit.ly/2OxG8q6>)

³² NHS, 2018, Lifetime NHS mental health care for sexual assault victims <https://bit.ly/2N216v0>

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.³⁰

Health

Health cuts have reduced the NHS’s capacity to meet the needs of women experiencing violence, including referrals and interpretation services.³¹ 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 2020/21,³² 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.³³ Being unable to afford to leave, and fearing the financial implications of leaving, can mean that survivors stay longer, increasing the risk of abuse.³⁴

Payment of Universal Credit (UC) into a single bank account can make women more vulnerable to economic abuse.³⁵

The two-child limit can cause poverty for larger families; where there is ‘forced pregnancy’ the ‘non consensual conception exemption’ (rape

³³ 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>)

³⁴ Marilyn Howard and Amy Skipp, 2015, Unequal, trapped & controlled: Women’s experience of financial abuse and potential implications for Universal Credit, Women’s Aid and TUC <https://bit.ly/2JDJa7E>, Women’s Aid, 2019, The Domestic Abuse Report 2019: The Annual Audit, <https://bit.ly/36io7Bz>

³⁵ WBG, EVAW and SEA (2018) Universal Credit and financial abuse: exploring the links (<http://bit.ly/2PciCix>)

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).³⁶

Survivors may be sanctioned for not applying for jobs that would put them at risk, such as near the perpetrator's home or workplace.³⁷ They may also lose benefit if their ex-partner makes malicious allegations about their entitlements.³⁸

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, 1 March 2021

WBG is an independent, voluntary organisation made up of individuals from Academia, NGOs and trade unions. See www.wbg.org.uk

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³⁶ Liz Kelly, Nicola Sharp and Renate Klein, 2014, Finding the Costs of Freedom How women and children rebuild their lives after domestic violence, Solace Women's Aid, <https://bit.ly/2PKsfV9>

³⁷ Mary-Ann Stephenson, 2014, The impact of benefit sanctions on people in Coventry, Warwick Law School Centre for Human Rights in Practice <http://bit.ly/2qnMvyd>

³⁸ Surviving Economic Abuse, 2018, Transforming the response to domestic abuse: response to the Government consultation, <https://bit.ly/2PvL7XI>