

## Save Our Services: support live-saving women's domestic abuse services

### Why must we save our women's domestic abuse services?

In your local area, specialist domestic abuse services - including refuges, community-based and therapeutic services – support huge numbers of women and children experiencing domestic abuse every year.

**Across England last year, it was estimated that over a quarter of a million women and children experiencing domestic abuse were supported by refuge and community-based services<sup>1</sup>.**

These specialist services provide safety and support, and give survivors the hope and empowerment they need to escape abuse and recover. The national network of women's domestic abuse services includes specialist services led 'by and for' Black and minoritised women, who are unique in their ability to meet the needs of Black and minoritised survivors and tackle the intersecting forms of oppression and racial inequalities which have been laid bare this past year.<sup>2</sup>

**During the pandemic we have all struggled with being stuck at home but for some of us home has never been a place of safety.** The COVID 19 pandemic has escalated domestic abuse, with perpetrators using lockdown as a tool to enact coercive and controlling behaviour. 61% of survivor's currently experiencing abuse told Women's Aid that their abuse had got worse during the first lockdown<sup>3</sup>. The pandemic closed down routes to safety for women to escape. Specialist services have worked tirelessly to provide support for survivors in the most challenging of circumstances and predict increased demand when lockdown measures finally lift<sup>4</sup>. These services have saved lives, but their funding remains as precarious as ever, and they need your support if they are to survive.

### What is the funding landscape for domestic abuse services?

The Government has made a number of welcome funding pledges this past year, including:

- £125million for the statutory duty on local authorities to fund accommodation based services, such as refuges and other forms of accommodation;
- £40million for Police and Crime Commissioners to fund domestic and sexual violence services in the community<sup>5</sup>.

However, funding remains short term - for just one year – and the amounts paling in comparison to the £66 billion the Home Office estimates as the social and economic cost of domestic abuse<sup>6</sup>. Women's Aid estimates that £393 million a year is needed to fund domestic abuse services in England – less than 1% of the total £66billion cost.<sup>7</sup> This means there is a

<sup>1</sup> Women's Aid. (2021) The Domestic Abuse Report 2021: The Annual Audit, Bristol: Women's Aid.

<sup>2</sup> Imkaan. (2020) 'The Impact of the Two Pandemics: VAWG and COVID-19 on Black and Minoritised Women and Girls'. London: Imkaan

<sup>3</sup> Women's Aid. (2020) *A Perfect Storm: The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Domestic Abuse Survivors and the Services Supporting Them*. Bristol: Women's Aid.

<sup>4</sup> Women's Aid. (2020) *A Perfect Storm: The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Domestic Abuse Survivors and the Services Supporting Them*. Bristol: Women's Aid.

<sup>5</sup> Association of Police and Crime Commissioners. (2021) Extra £40M for specialist support services for rape and domestic abuse victims. Available [online](#).

<sup>6</sup> The Home Office (2019) The economic and social costs of domestic abuse. Available [online](#).

<sup>7</sup> Women's Aid (2019) Funding Specialist Support for Domestic Abuse Survivors Bristol: Women's Aid.

shortfall of over £220 million in government funding for domestic abuse 2020-21, and not all of the funding will go to specialist women's services.

This shortfall will continue to mean survivors are turned away from the life-saving support they need. Last year 57% of refuge referrals were rejected and the main reason was due to lack of space or capacity.<sup>8</sup> There was a 25% shortfall of refuge spaces in November 2020. Without refuge spaces that local authorities do not commission, this shortfall increases to 42.5% - clearly demonstrates the importance and scale of non-commissioned women's services<sup>9</sup>.

### **What's the problem with current funding allocations?**

It is not only the quantity of funding, but how it is allocated which poses a real threat to the survival of our specialist services. Competitive tendering processes set specialist women's domestic abuse services up to fail. These procurement processes pit small women's services against large, non-specialist and business-like organisations who can compete on cost, but never on quality<sup>10</sup>. This process disadvantages the very services that survivors need the most. Services led 'by and for' Black and minoritised women are at the sharp end of this discrimination<sup>11</sup>, being continually unrecognised, misunderstood and devalued in procurement<sup>12</sup>. As a result services led 'by and for' Black and minoritised women are far more likely to receive no commissioned funding - 57% of spaces provided by 'by and for' services are non-commissioned in comparison to 18% of refuge spaces overall<sup>13</sup>. But it doesn't have to be this way. Government guidance makes clear that local commissioners can use grant-giving to fund domestic abuse services - they don't have to resort to competitive tendering processes at all. Grants are more flexible, simple and effective for commissioning specialist services for survivors<sup>14</sup>.

### **What is the issue with 'gender-blind' funding and commissioning?**

There is also a worrying increase in 'gender-neutral' funding and commissioning which is harming women and the services they need. Treating people equally does not mean treating them the same. The vast majority of victims who are seriously injured, or killed, by a partner or ex-partner, are women and research shows<sup>15</sup> clearly that women who have experienced violence and abuse need women-only services for their physical and emotional safety. These services are best delivered by women's organisations, by expert staff who have in-depth understanding of domestic abuse and the needs of survivors<sup>16</sup>. But we are seeing the rise of damaging 'gender neutral' and 'one size fits all' approaches to funding and commissioning of domestic abuse services. In practice, these are de-funding live-saving women's services - who bring enormous added value in tackling domestic abuse locally. Gender neutrality is undoing decades of critical work led by women to support survivors, raise awareness and challenge the inequality that drives domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women and girls.

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<sup>8</sup> Women's Aid. (2021) The Domestic Abuse Report 2021: The Annual Audit, Bristol: Women's Aid.

<sup>9</sup> Women's Aid. (2021) Fragile funding landscape: the extent of local authority commissioning in the domestic abuse refuge sector in England 2020, Bristol: Women's Aid

<sup>10</sup> Women's Aid. (2021) Fragile funding landscape: the extent of local authority commissioning in the domestic abuse refuge sector in England 2020, Bristol: Women's Aid

<sup>11</sup> Imkaan. (2018) From Survival to Sustainability. London: Imkaan

<sup>12</sup> Imkaan (2017) Uncivil partnerships? Reflections on partnership working in the violence against women and girls sector. London: Imkaan

<sup>13</sup> Women's Aid. (2021) Fragile funding landscape: the extent of local authority commissioning in the domestic abuse refuge sector in England 2020, Bristol: Women's Aid.

<sup>14</sup> Home Office. (2016) Violence Against Women and Girls Services: Supporting Local Commissioning. London

<sup>15</sup> Women's Resource Centre. (2007) Why Women-only? The value and benefits of by women, for women services. London. Women's Resource Centre

<sup>16</sup> Council of Europe (2011) Explanatory Report to the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence