

Women's Aid definitions



Specialist Women's Domestic Abuse Services and 'By & For' Services

Background and context

Within the domestic abuse and wider violence against women and girls (VAWG) sector there is a shared understanding of '**specialism**'. This concept is based on established knowledge and practice and has developed through the years with the expansion of services for women experiencing male violence - from refuges, support in the community, to rape crisis services and many more.

There is currently **no legal definition of a 'specialist' or 'by and for' service** in the context of domestic abuse, although the government have adopted the following definition:

"Specialist services are those which are specifically designed and whose primary purpose is to support someone who is, or has been affected by domestic abuse, sexual violence and/or any other form of VAWG. By and for services are specialist services that are led, designed, and delivered by and for the users and communities they aim to serve in responding to VAWG (for example victims and survivors from ethnic minority backgrounds, Deaf and disabled victims and survivors, and LGBT+ victims and survivors).

Communities can be both by virtue of characteristic and/or shared experience. Therefore, by and for services can likewise offer support based on characteristic (e.g., LGBT+ victims) or based on shared experience of a particular VAWG crime type (e.g surviving FGM)." [1]

This paper sets out Women's Aid's definitions of:



A. a specialist women's domestic abuse service



B. a specialist 'by and for' service

We are concerned that these definitions lack clarity, specificity and crucially lack any mention of the gendered nature of specialist domestic abuse services. Women's Aid therefore sets out its own definitions in order to ensure that the value and work of specialist women's domestic abuse services and 'by and for' specialist services are understood.

These proposed definitions have been **informed by research and publications** from Women's Aid, Imkaan [2] , the Welsh Government's Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (VAWDASV) Commissioning Statutory Guidance [3] , and the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the Istanbul Convention) [4]. They are **supported by criteria, and indicators**, which evidence the definitions.

[2] Imkaan, The State of the Sector: Contextualising the current experiences of BME ending violence against women and girls organisations. [Available online.](#)

[3] Welsh Government, Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (VAWDASV), Statutory Guidance for the Commissioning of VAWDSV Services in Wales, May 2019. [Available online.](#)

[4] Council of Europe, Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, 2011. [Available online.](#)



A. a specialist women's domestic abuse service

1

Specialist women's domestic abuse services are run by women's, feminist organisations. They are run **by women, and for women and their children**.

2

Their core business and organisational purpose is to **support survivors** and/or children and young people impacted by domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG). The services they deliver are **specifically designed to support women and children** affected by domestic abuse, sexual violence and/or other forms of VAWG.

3

Specialist services differ from generic services because **they are independent from the state**. They were established as local, grassroots and independent organisations, which is critical for women survivors' ability to trust them.

4

The lived experience of women experiencing domestic abuse (survivors) is represented within their **governance and staffing structures**.

5

Their delivery of support and services is **needs-led and gender-responsive**. Support is delivered by specially trained staff, with an in-depth knowledge of domestic abuse and VAWG - and the way it impacts women and children.

6

Specialist services understand how **sex and other intersectional inequalities** - including ethnicity, class, gender identity, age, ability, sexuality, religion, and belief - drive wider patterns of VAWG. This equips them with the technical knowledge required to **understand the nuances of domestic abuse** and how it manifests.

7

Specialist services provide significant **added value to their local communities** and fundraise from a range of different sources to meet the needs of women and children. In most cases they have developed as a response to the particular needs of the area and contain within them **years of specialist knowledge** and expertise relevant to the communities they serve.

8

Specialist organisations operate within an established framework of sector **best practice and accredited quality standards** led by second tier organisations, which provide benchmarks for training, quality, and safeguarding.



B. a specialist 'by and for' service

1

Specialist 'by and for' services are **run by and for the communities they serve**, such as for Black and minoritised women, Deaf and disabled women and LGBT+ survivors. In doing so they offer a **uniquely empowering experience** to the communities they support, as the client group is reflected in staffing, management, and governance structures of these organisations.

2

Specialist 'by and for' services have emerged as distinct from wider specialist services, in that they are **led by, and seek to support further minoritised and marginalised groups**. They respond to parallel state-imposed barriers due to the marginalisation of the communities they support, who face **additional forms of structural inequality** (racism, homophobia, classism, Islamophobia etc), alongside misogyny, sexism and violence. While wider specialist services may also support these groups, 'by and for' organisations run **independent, specialist and dedicated services** specifically for the minoritised community they seek to serve.

3

Equality is an active practice within specialist 'by and for' services; it is central to the values and working practice of the service. The organisation takes an **intersectional approach** to practising equalities and observing the rights of people with protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010.

4

Specialist 'by and for' services are designed to tackle the **barriers facing the marginalised communities they support** and have specific expertise in meeting their needs. They provide **highly-tailored, wrap-around holistic recovery** and support that addresses a victims and survivor's full range of needs - which often means their work covers all forms of VAWG, as well as wider issues. Specialist by and for services are rooted in the marginalised communities they support, which means they can **engage with survivors who may be reluctant** to make contact with statutory agencies or generic organisations.

5

Despite the clear evidence that specialist 'by and for' services deliver **improved outcomes for minoritised survivors** [5], they often operate in a hostile environment - their expertise and holistic work to support survivors is **often devalued and exploited by commissioners** and generic or larger services.

[5] Domestic Abuse Commissioner, 'A Patchwork of Provision: How to meet the needs of victims and survivors across England and Wales', 2022. [Available online.](#)