

## **Solace submission to the Home Affairs Select Committee's call for evidence on violence against women and girls.**

### **About Solace**

1. Solace Women's Aid (Solace) is the leading provider of violence against women and girls (VAWG) services in London and one of the largest single providers in the UK. In 2020, our services touched the lives of over 27,000 women and children. We supported 14,601 women, 94 male survivors and 1,392 children in our frontline services and worked with 11,327 people through our prevention services.
2. Our services include refuge and move on accommodation; community-based services; therapeutic services; North London Rape Crisis; specialist provision for children and young people who have experienced domestic abuse or sexual violence; accommodation and support for survivors who have experienced multiple forms of disadvantage; advice lines; and bespoke training for statutory agencies, third sector organisations and corporations.
3. We welcome the opportunity to provide evidence to support the Home Affairs Select Committee's inquiry into how violence against women and girls is being addressed to inform its future programme of work on this issue.

### **How VAWG affects women and girls**

4. The fear and reality of male violence against women and girls (VAWG) impacts the life of every single woman and girl, highlighted by the outpouring of women's responses to the murder of Sarah Everard, sharing examples of the ways in which they alter their behaviour out of that fear.
5. The vast majority of abuse and violence experienced by women is perpetrated by men and normalised by society, media and popular culture. We work with male victims and are supportive of specialist provision for them, but while we recognise the under-reporting of domestic abuse and sexual violence by men, of the 14,695 adults we supported in our services in 2019-20, 96.3% were female and fewer than 1% were male.
6. Through its Domestic Abuse Act and planned domestic abuse strategy as distinct from its VAWG strategy, the Government has delinked domestic abuse from other forms of VAWG and degendered it in legislation. These changes are already having devastating impacts, with commissioners withdrawing funding from specialist VAWG services run by and for women in favour of gender-neutral services. Women-only specialist services run by VAWG organisations are vital for survivors' safety and recovery, particularly refuges and other accommodation-based services and counselling and therapeutic services. This is both for women's physical safety from male perpetrators, and for the understanding that a feminist, trauma-informed framework gives survivors in their recovery from abuse.
7. While not enough to meet need, the Government has committed funding for local authorities to fulfil their duties under the Domestic Abuse Act which we fear will have the effect of deprioritising funding for services specialising in supporting survivors of forms of VAWG disproportionately experienced by Black and minoritised women and girls, such

as FGM, so-called 'honour'-based violence and forced marriage. These services have already faced funding deep cuts since 2010<sup>1</sup>.

8. Statistics about women and girls' experiences of VAWG tend to be gathered and quoted by type of VAWG, but survivors we work with have often been subjected to several forms of male violence. A snapshot audit of our data during December 2020 found that across our four core service areas of refuge, community-based services, rape crisis and counselling services survivors, reported a range of forms of VAWG including domestic abuse, sexual violence, stalking and harassment, forced marriage and so called 'honour'-based violence. 14% of the type of VAWG disclosed by refuge service users was rape or other sexual offences for example, and 39% of the type of VAWG disclosed by rape crisis services users was domestic abuse. It is therefore vital that domestic abuse is not separated from other forms of VAWG when commissioners are funding services, and the Government should relink domestic abuse with other forms of VAWG in its cross-Government VAWG strategy.
9. Across all our services, demand has almost always been higher than we can meet. This last year during multiple lockdowns and with the closure of many other services, however, we have seen a shadow pandemic of VAWG and despite huge efforts of our staff and emergency funding from the Government, we are simply unable to respond to the level of women's needs.
10. Solace runs an advice line for survivors of domestic abuse, sexual violence and any other form of VAWG, taking calls directly from survivors and as part of the pan-London Ascent Advice and Counselling and Ascent Plus partnership (Ascent). We saw a 117% increase in calls to our advice line in March this year compared to last year. The calls we have been receiving throughout the pandemic, echoed by other organisations in the Ascent Advice and Counselling partnership, are often from women in greater distress and with higher needs, including an increase in suicidal ideation and complex mental health needs. Someone who may have called their caseworker on a weekly basis is now calling daily for support and getting support from any other services is really challenging. The number of calls that lasted over an hour increased by 97% in 2020-21 compared to 2019-20. We are seeing this increase in women's emotional and mental health needs across our services.
11. Women who have experienced multiple forms of disadvantage including VAWG often fall through the gaps in standard services, including VAWG services. We run several specialist services and programmes with women who have experienced multiple forms of disadvantage including street homelessness, problematic substance use, childhood abuse and the removal of children from their care. We run one specialist refuge with 24-hour specialist trauma-informed staffing, and it is always oversubscribed. In 2019-20 we had to turn nearly 90% of referrals away for the 14 rooms that became available throughout the year. The waiting list for our programme for young women with experiences of multiple disadvantages is six months.
12. We are also seeing the impact of the failures in the criminal justice system on survivors' mental health and emotional wellbeing. Even before the pandemic, our waiting list for the North London Rape Crisis Centre and for our London borough counselling and therapeutic services are more often closed than open for referrals. As soon as they

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<sup>1</sup>Imkaan (2016). 'Capital Losses'. London: Imkaan

open, the waiting lists fill up again immediately. Survivors of sexual violence are only able to access pre-trial counselling, which means they cannot talk about the alleged incident because of the apparent risk that counsellors could 'coach' them for any trial. This means they must live with the trauma of what has happened to them without professional support, leaving them in limbo often unable to feel they can move on until the outcome of the prosecution. The average length between the offence and a charge was three years in 2018-19, with up to another year for the case to go to trial. There is now reported to be a backlog of 58,000 Crown Court cases, having a huge impact on survivors' mental health. The Government must urgently invest in increasing court capacity, more staff and adequate sitting days, as recommended by the Bar Council and Law Society.

13. We are deeply concerned about the cumulative impact of multiple lockdowns on survivors' mental health; problematic substance use; risk of street homelessness and other survival strategies which might include prostitution, and/ or self-harm and suicide. There is a gap in services to support survivors of VAWG who also have complex or more serious mental health conditions and we are finding that services we refer women to because they have higher needs than most services can accommodate are being referred back to us, including from statutory mental health services. The Department of Health and Social Care should review the extent to which mental services are meeting the needs of survivors and the sustainability of funding for VAWG services to provide counselling and therapeutic services.
14. There continues to be a gap in support for migrant women with insecure migration status and with no recourse to public funds. With funding from the Mayor of London and the Julia and Hans Rausing Trust, Solace worked in partnership with Southall Black Sisters (SBS) to set up an emergency refuge providing crisis accommodation with specialist support to women and children fleeing domestic abuse and other forms of VAWG, across London during the Covid-19 pandemic. The refuge was able to support a set number of women with no recourse to public funds over the course of the first funding round and there was particularly high demand for those places. Between May and November 2020, the project turned 60 referrals away due to unsuitability. Half – the biggest reason - were due to lack of space for women without recourse to public funds. This project is due to come to an end in June this year but we know that there will still be significant need for accommodation for women with no recourse to public funds.

## **How VAWG should be prevented and addressed**

### Prevention

15. Prevention programmes are vital to combat prevailing gendered expectations and stereotypes that create the conducive context for VAWG, and to teach children and young people about healthy relationships, consent and safety planning. Not only do educational programmes challenge damaging messages as a preventative measure, they can also help identify and intervene where children and young people are in abusive or exploitative situations. Women aged 26 to 35 make up the highest proportion of our service users by age, followed by women age 19 to 24. Given that the average time the women we work with live with abuse is 6 years and 4 months if we could access younger women earlier, we could reduce that time and the impact of the abuse.

16. For programmes to effect change long-term, they should be part of a 'whole school approach', supporting and training teachers and parents as well as the children and young people. The testimonies shared through the 'Everyone's Invited' project highlight how important it is for schools and other educational institutions to have a shared understanding of VAWG and clear policies for responding to disclosure made by girls and young women and unacceptable behaviours acted out by boys and young men. The Department for Education should provide ring-fenced funding for schools to commission specialists to teach relationships and sex education and embed it across the school.
17. A key gap in prevention work with children and young people is intervention to work specifically with boys and young men who present with signs of, or who demonstrate, actual abusive behaviour. When girls and young women disclose abuse there are (limited) services that work specifically with younger aged women providing advice, support and counselling. Perpetrator programmes designed for men would not be suitable for young men and boys, particularly those not actively acting out abuse but showing signs that could develop into abuse. We would recommend that the Government pilot and develop such programmes as part of its forthcoming perpetrator strategy.

#### Implementation of the Domestic Abuse Act

18. The Domestic Abuse Act has now passed bringing in important changes. For the first time domestic abuse is defined in law, recognising emotional and economic abuse and coercive control as forms of domestic abuse, and extending the offence of coercive control to cover post-separation abuse. Children are now recognised as victims if they see, hear or otherwise experience the effects of abuse. The Domestic Abuse Commissioner will for the first time gather information and data on the national picture of need and provision for survivors of domestic abuse, and tier one authorities now have a duty to assess need and provide safe accommodation for survivors and their children.
19. We welcome these measures however there are some disappointing gaps and risks to the Act's successful implementation. The Government is on course to being able to ratify the Istanbul Convention with the passing of relevant legislation in Northern Ireland. The key gap in the legislation however is protection for migrant women with insecure migration status and/ or no recourse to public funds (NRPF), which the Government did not close through the Domestic Abuse Act. The Government should at a minimum provide safe reporting mechanisms for migrant survivors and witnesses, as recommended by the College of Policing, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) and the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) in response to the super complaint made by Southall Black Sisters and Liberty, and ensure local authorities commission wholly funded places based on the emergency refuge model we ran with Southall Black Sisters, which gives women with NRPF breathing space and a chance to regularise their status.
20. By omitting community services from the new duty in part 4 of the Act, the legislation risks a two-tier system where safe accommodation is funded at the expense of community-based services. Our advice, advocacy and support teams worked with over 10,000 survivors in 2020. We support survivors with creating safety plans while living

with abusers; with advice and guidance on immigration, housing and welfare support; with implementing a sanctuary scheme to make it safe to stay home where wanted and possible, with accessing legal aid and guidance through child custody arrangements; and with accessing therapeutic support so they can begin to recover from trauma and rebuild their lives. The Government has committed to reviewing community-based services before it brings in a new victim's bill, and we would like to see these services be made statutory with sufficient and sustainable funding.

## Housing

21. Domestic abuse is the third biggest cause of homelessness in England and Wales, and the safe accommodation duty in the Act is welcome. However, it was never intended to address the impact of the pandemic on VAWG and the unparalleled number of survivors reaching crisis point and becoming unsafe in their homes in the last year. We surveyed our frontline staff in March 2021, asking how many times they estimated the women they support had experienced gatekeeping from housing departments over the last three months and the average by staff member was eight times. In addition, 37% said proof of physical violence was requested in most or all applications, 50% said survivors were told there needed to be a police report or the police were called to corroborate in at least half of all applications, and one fifth of respondents said the perpetrator had been called to corroborate.
22. This gatekeeping behaviour is in the context of the wider housing crisis. In London there were an estimated 232,409 households on council housing waiting lists in 2018, and around 55,000 households in temporary accommodation. The Government needs to ensure its strategies for domestic abuse and VAWG are joined up with its housing and homelessness strategies, otherwise the Domestic Abuse Act risks creating a logjam of survivors stuck in short-term accommodation waiting for secure, affordable and suitable housing – particularly in London.

## Welfare

23. Analysis by the Women's Budget Group found that Government cuts to social security made between 2010 and 2020 have disproportionately affected the poorest women, Black and minoritised women, and disabled women, making them more vulnerable and less able to escape abuse or rebuild their lives afterward. There are several exemptions to punitive welfare policies for survivors of VAWG, but they are often applied inconsistently and/ or the evidence threshold makes successful application difficult.
24. In addition, Local Housing Allowance (LHA) housing benefit or the housing element of Universal Credit is funded, should be funded at 30% of median rent for an area. But Government cuts and freezes to the LHA since 2012 have delinked it from actual local rents, which have continued to climb exponentially in London. LHA rates no longer cover the bottom 30% of rents in any London borough, and in most areas (69%) do not cover the bottom 10% (Shelter). We recommend that the Government exempt survivors of VAWG from the benefit cap, 2-child limit and shared accommodation rate for survivors under 35, make the uplift to Universal Credit permanent and bring the LHA up to at least 50% of median rents.

## Specialist services

25. Specialist VAWG services run by and for women, Black and minoritised women, Deaf and disabled women and LGBT+ survivors are lifesaving services. Counselling and therapy run by VAWG services empower and support survivors to rebuild their lives after violence and abuse.
26. Competitive tendering models used as standard by commissioner's disadvantage specialist services and in particular many of the smaller organisations we work in partnership with to provide specialist expertise, because they do not have the capacity to submit multiple funding bids and because they provide services by community need rather than covering a geographical area. The competitive tendering model also incentivises a race to the bottom on quality of service, losing the specialist VAWG expertise survivors need to large non-specialists including housing associations and non-VAWG charities. We would like to see an end to competitive tendering and a move towards values-based commissioning from national, regional and local commissioners based on survivors' needs.
27. Women's Aid Federation of England estimates that £393 million annually is needed for specialist women's domestic abuse services, including 173.8 million for accommodation-based services and £219.5 million for wider community-based services. The Government has only allocated £125 million for 2021-22 and should increase funding to ensure that survivors needs are met.