

The Solace pledge to end violence against women and girls in London



solacewomensaid.org

Solace Women's Aid is a charity registered in England & Wales.
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Introduction

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) continues to be endemic across London and the UK. Despite recent improvements in legislation, funding and strategies we are still a long way from the goal of eradicating violence against women and girls in London.

1 in 8 25,000

1 in 8 recorded offences in London are for domestic abuse

Nearly 25,000 police recorded sexual offences in London.

The next Mayor of London needs to prioritise ending violence against women and girls across the City. We are asking Mayoral and Greater London Assembly (GLA) candidates to sign our four pledges to demonstrate their commitment to achieving this goal so that all women and girls can live free from the fear and reality of male violence and flourish in London.



1

Ensure VAWG is a priority for London through a new and ambitious strategy to end violence against women and girls

London has been seeking to lead the way in responding to VAWG through a public health approach with a focus on prevention and early intervention and we would encourage the next Mayor to build on this approach. Alongside prevention, VAWG needs to be seen as a societal responsibility to tackle and a partnerships and multi-agency approach is crucial to ensure that all survivors can get access to the support they need.

The rise in online misogyny and worrying views on gender equality highlights the importance of investing in education of our young people on healthy relationships. Recent research found that 69% of boys had encountered posts promoting misogyny, with 70% of teachers saying they had seen a rise in sexist language in the classroom over the last year. However the public's faith in the ability of schools to tackle sexual abuse within school settings is low – 46% of the public do not trust schools in to do this effectively.

Any future VAWG strategy must ensure it protects some of the most vulnerable women including migrant women with insecure immigration status and women with no recourse to public funds. Perpetrators deliberately exploit survivors insecure immigration status – the case of former Metropolitan Police officer David Carrick highlighted that a survivor's immigration status can be weaponised with Carrick threatening to have her deported.

Many survivors with insecure immigration status are reluctant to report their abuse to authorities for fear of immigration enforcement. Recent research by the Domestic Abuse Commissioner highlighted that every police force in the UK has shared information about survivors of domestic abuse with immigration enforcement at some point in the last three years. It is crucial that London is a city that ensures that all survivors of domestic abuse are able to safely report and access support.

70%

70% of teachers saying they had seen a rise in sexist language in the classroom over the last year



We are calling on mayoral candidates to commit to:

Develop and implement a strategy to end violence against women and girls for 2024-28 with specific commitments to:

- Prioritises and significantly invest in work to prevent VAWG across London including funding for specialist VAWG training and resources for children and young people in schools and other key settings. This should include provision for advocacy support for those young people already affected by peer-to-peer violence across London.
- Make London a safe city for migrant survivors including commissioning specialist support for survivors with no recourse to public funds, immediately halting data sharing between the Metropolitan Police Service and the Home Office and working with the VAWG sector in lobbying for a national firewall; and
- Increase the number of safe and effective perpetrator interventions across London which prioritise behaviour change, and sit alongside support for survivors.

2

Improvement in the Metropolitan Police's response to VAWG

Since the last Mayoral election, multiple reviews into the Metropolitan Police have highlighted that trust between women and the police is at a low. Victims have reported they feel unable to continue their cases or have them dropped by the police or Crown Prosecution service.

The Casey Review into standards and culture of the Metropolitan Police set out the huge challenges that the force faces in tackling institutional misogyny, racism, and homophobia, and ensuring it supports all Londoners.

The report also highlighted the deprioritising and, in some cases, effectively decriminalising of crimes against women and children in the face of budget cuts. Day to day, we see that women have continued to report only to be disbelieved or poorly served and when they have come forward about misconduct within the force and made complaints, the Met Police has dismissed them or not prioritised them.

The Casey Review and the Angiolini Inquiry have also highlighted the urgent priority to tackle police perpetrated abuse, including improved recruitment and vetting processes and implementing a more robust approach to misconduct and the need to address wider discriminatory cultures. Last year it was revealed that more than 650 Metropolitan Police Officers were under investigation for sexual or domestic abuse, or both.

Whilst Operation Soteria has shown promising signs on improving prosecution rates for sexual violence cases, we are still seeing significant levels of victims dropping out of the criminal justice system and the number of convictions for domestic abuse declining compared to 5 years ago.

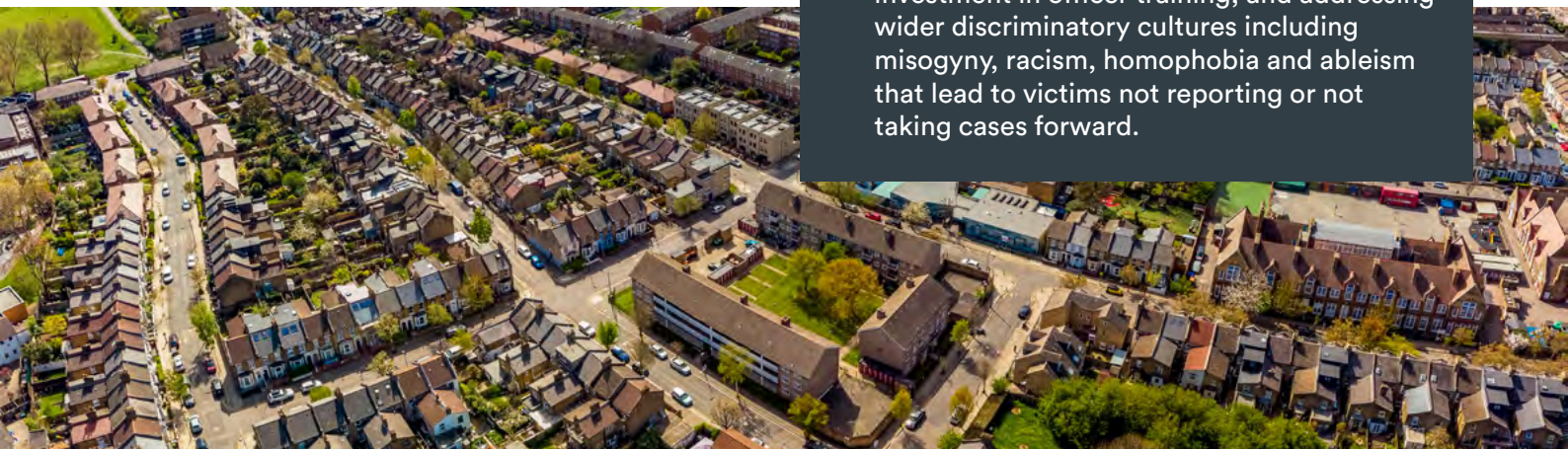
Day to day we have seen the impact that the deprioritising of support for victims of violence against women and girls and the removal of specialist officers has had. The next Mayor has an important role in ensuring that police's day-to-day support for women and children matches the public messaging that violence and abuse is a top priority.

650+

Last year it was revealed that more than 650 Metropolitan Police Officers were under investigation for sexual or domestic abuse, or both.

We are calling on mayoral candidates to commit to:

- Work with the Metropolitan Police to tackle the systematic levels of police perpetrated abuse including properly resourcing their professional standards team, ensuring independent methods of reporting and commissioning an independent advocacy support for survivors of police perpetrated abuse.
- Ensure that there are specific targets and accountability measures within the Metropolitan Police's VAWG Action Plan and build mechanisms for the VAWG sector to meaningfully scrutinize their progress and ensure it is being treated as a priority.
- Work with the Metropolitan Police to rebuild survivors' trust, focusing on significant investment in officer training, and addressing wider discriminatory cultures including misogyny, racism, homophobia and ableism that lead to victims not reporting or not taking cases forward.





3

Access to safe and affordable housing for VAWG survivors

Domestic abuse is a leading cause of homelessness in the UK. Women living with abuse are regularly faced with either having to stay in an abusive and often escalating situation or lose their home. Over 70% of Solace's survivors have a housing need and it was recorded that in 2022-23 nearly 6,000 people were made homeless by domestic abuse in London.

The Domestic Abuse Act amended housing legislation to give automatic priority to survivors of domestic abuse making homelessness applications and increased funding to London to provide safe accommodation for survivors.

Whilst there has been an increase in safe accommodation support for women across London, women are still too often facing 'gatekeeping' from housing officers which is preventing them accessing support and accommodation, leaving vulnerable women retraumatised when they sought help to leave an abuser. When women are fleeing abuse or looking to move on from refuges, limited social housing and rising rents also create additional barriers for women to find safe and affordable housing, with many women being moved into unsuitable and unsafe temporary accommodation.

Over 70%

Over 70% of Solace's survivors have a housing need.

6,000

In 2022-23 nearly 6,000 people were made homeless by domestic abuse.

Experience of domestic abuse and violence is near universal among women who are sleeping rough or have experienced homelessness – either as the cause of homelessness or while they are on the streets or both – yet they are often underrepresented in rough sleeping data and overlooked in strategies to end homelessness.

Over the last two years the London Women's Rough Sleeping Census has found that women's experiences of rough sleeping tend to be hidden, transient and intermittent, and women's experiences frequently fall outside of the government definition of rough sleeping. This means that services and support for rough sleepers is not designed for women and is unsuitable for them as they have experienced and are often still at risk of male violence.

We are calling for mayoral candidates to commit to:

- Provide more affordable move on housing options for women seeking to flee abuse and violence with a particular focus on increasing support for Black and minoritised women, LGBT+ survivors, disabled women, older women and migrant women.
- Work with councils to ring-fence a minimum of 5% of housing under new or existing affordable housing programmes to survivors of VAWG; and
- Support the continuation of the Women's Rough Sleeping Census in London and commit to improve pathways and increase accommodation for women experiencing multiple disadvantage, including homelessness, in London.

4

Ensuring all victims can access services and the support services are fairly funded

London's continued housing crisis and spiralling cost of living are impacting survivors experiencing violence and abuse and the specialist services supporting them. Perpetrators are using these challenging financial situations as a form of control and many women are scared that they will be left destitute or homeless if they leave.

87%

87% of survivors have been impacted by the cost-of-living crisis with 25% stating it has significantly affected them

56%

Over half of survivors (56%) have had essential resources restricted by their abuser

Continued reductions in public funds, particularly to local authorities, are directly impacting the ability of specialist support services to provide support and recruit and retain skilled and passionate staff to support survivors. Providers are expected to meet more demand for their services with real term year on year reductions in funding, and increased running costs.

Contracts for delivering VAWG services are routinely awarded through competitive tendering models and usually for between one and three years. Competitive tendering favours large non-specialist organisations with the capacity to write and submit numerous bids which are undercutting the bids of specialist services. It disadvantages 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.

There continues to be a short-term funding approach which leaves survivors and staff with uncertainty from one year to the next, which is particularly problematic when working with people who have experienced trauma and need stability to build trust and recover.

We are calling for mayoral candidates to commit to:

- Move from competitive tendering to a grant funding model for VAWG services, commission services for three to five years where possible and lobby Government for more sustainable funding settlement for London;
- Provide cost of living funds for survivors across London to help them meet their basic needs such as food, utilities and furniture as they flee abuse and seek safety.
- Tackle the gendered nature of VAWG by commissioning services that specialize in supporting women; and
- Meet the needs of Black and minoritised women, Deaf and disabled women, LGBT+ survivors by providing ring-fenced funding for services run by and for these communities.



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