

# Delivering the Government's ambition: how can we work together to halve violence against women and girls?

Solace is the leading provider of violence against women and girls (VAWG) services in London. In 2023/2024 we provided support to 18,862 women and children across our services which include refuges, advocacy and advice services, counselling and specialist services for children and young people, and women experiencing multiple disadvantages.

## An ambitious VAWG strategy

The Government has pledged to halve VAWG over the next decade, and the upcoming VAWG Strategy is an opportunity we cannot afford to get wrong. Solace has been delivering front-line advice and services to victims and survivors of domestic abuse and VAWG for the last fifty years, often working in partnership with other organisations across London. We call on the government strategy to:

### 1. Centre the most marginalised survivors

Government and societal efforts to reduce VAWG should centre the experiences and needs of minoritised and often-silenced survivors; those who face multiple forms of inequality and discrimination, and face additional barriers to accessing support from statutory agencies and support services because of their race and ethnicity, disability, sexual identity, gender identity, or age, or experience multiple disadvantages such as complex mental health, rough sleeping and substance use.

### 2. Protect migrant survivors

Migrant women with insecure migration status are some of the most vulnerable women affected by VAWG with their immigration status often deliberately exploited by perpetrators. Policies such as 'no recourse to public funds' (NRPF) and data-sharing between the police and the Home Office make it more difficult for women to leave abusive relationships. Alongside a wider review of the NRPF policy, the VAWG strategy should:

- Develop a firewall to halt data sharing between the police forces and the Home Office to allow survivors to safely report

- Reform the current concessions for migrant survivors to access temporary support and a route to a secure immigration status
- Removing the reservation to Article 59 of the Istanbul Convention which requires member states to grant residence to victims whose immigration status depends on an abusive partner.

### 3. Prioritise efforts on prevention

The societal change in the endemic levels of VAWG will only truly shift if we see significant prioritisation and investment in prevention. Women aged 26 to 35 make up the highest proportion of our service users by age, followed by women aged 19 to 24, but we are also supporting survivors of intimate partner violence as young as 12. The VAWG strategy should:

- Ensure schools have access to their local VAWG services and all children can access effective education provision which combats the prevailing gendered expectations and stereotypes that create the conducive context for VAWG, and teaches children and young people about healthy relationships, consent and safety planning.
- Invest in specialist support services for young people experiencing abuse in the home or in their own intimate relationships.
- Develop a perpetrator strategy that sits alongside the VAWG strategy which looks at interventions for young men and boys and ensures a national quality assurance system for perpetrator interventions.

### 4. Ensure the criminal justice system is fit for purpose

Survivors continue to experience inconsistent police responses, low prosecution rates and delays to court cases that let victims down, put them at risk and reduces the likelihood of future reporting. The Domestic Abuse Commissioner found that just 12% of victims and survivors who'd reported domestic abuse to the police (or had it reported), got the response they wanted, and a Victims' Commissioner report found that almost half (48%) of the victims who had been given a trial date, saw it adjourned at least once—often multiple times. The VAWG strategy should:

- Invest in piloting and expanding the 'Operation Soteria method' to explore transforming the police approach to domestic abuse.
- Deliver a wholesale review of the court system for domestic abuse and sexual offences

- Tackle police-perpetrated abuse ensuring independent methods of reporting and commissioning an independent advocacy support for survivors of police-perpetrated abuse in every police force.

## **5. Deliver sustainable funding for specialist support services**

Sustainable, long-term funding is essential to effectively prevent and respond to VAWG, ensuring consistent support and protection for survivors. The Women's Aid 2025 Census found that 60% of referrals were rejected, with nearly half of these being because of a lack of support (45.7%). Similarly, 35% of those surveyed were running a domestic abuse service without dedicated funding -often focusing on prevention and educational work – and often having to resort to their organisational reserves to cover the cost (71.4%).

The VAWG strategy should:

- Deliver multi-year funding for the specialist VAWG sector, delivered by all government departments responsible for VAWG. This will ensure all forms of service provision are resilient for the future and all survivors can access suitable services.
- Commit to a minimum funding settlement of £516m per annum in England for specialist domestic abuse services, including a ring-fenced fund for 'by and for' services, as recommended by Women's Aid.
- Move away from tender-based commissioning toward a finance model that provides grants to universal and 'by and for' specialist VAWG service providers.
- Local Authorities should adopt longer-term funding strategies and include inflationary increases

## **Safe and affordable housing for VAWG survivors**

Housing is a critical part of the VAWG strategy, ensuring survivors have safe, stable options to escape abuse, with access to refuge, temporary accommodation, and move-on housing being vital for recovery. It is also central to homelessness prevention. Strengthening the housing response can break cycles of abuse and homelessness, offering long-term safety and stability. The VAWG strategy should be considered alongside the homelessness and rough sleeping strategy.

### **1. Remove the barriers to survivors accessing housing**

We must commit to improving pathways and increasing accommodation for those in need. 66% of the survivors that Solace supports have a housing need. Survivors needing housing regularly face gatekeeping or are placed in inappropriate accommodation, with

only 18% of service users placed in suitable social housing. Insecure or inappropriate housing can encourage survivors to return to an abuser, as it might be viewed as easier for them and their children. At the same time, for many survivors, the fear of homelessness can also prevent them leaving an abusive situation. The Government should:

- Tackle the lack of affordability of housing for survivors by building more social housing, removing the benefit cap and unfreezing the local housing allowance to ensure that it keeps up with local rents.
- Ensure all survivors can access appropriate housing by removing the exemption for survivors aged 35 and under from the shared accommodation rate for housing benefits and the housing element of Universal Credit (48% of women Solace supports are under 35) and expand priority access to housing to include all forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG).
- Provide councils with funding to deliver bespoke housing pathways for survivors of violence against women and girls and appropriate move-on from refuges, and to ensure housing officers are trained in domestic abuse awareness to prevent traumatisation when seeking housing support.

## 2. Address women's homelessness

Violence and abuse are near universal experiences for women experiencing homelessness, and homelessness accommodation is often inaccessible and unsafe. Recent census data shows women's rough sleeping is 9 times higher than government estimates, yet there are currently no government-directed gender-informed measures for addressing rough sleeping and homelessness. The Government's VAWG strategy and homelessness strategy should link up to ensure safe support for women experiencing VAWG and homelessness. They should:

- Strategise for and fund women's homelessness specifically, ensuring that policies, funding, practices and services respond to how women experience homelessness and their specific needs, including all forms of VAWG, child removal, and recent pregnancy.
- Provide local authorities with tools to ensure they gather accurate and inclusive data on women's homelessness – including resourcing the Women's Rough Sleeping Census.
- Provide ring-fenced funding to enable local authorities to ensure their commissioned homelessness services and systems are equitable, accessible, and safe for women.