

Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP

Chancellor of the Exchequer

HM Treasury

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Via email: CEU.Enquiries@hmtreasury.gov.uk

Cc: Rachel Reeves MP, Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer

Monday 4th March 2024

Dear Chancellor,

We are writing to urge you to prioritise funding for specialist violence against women and girls (VAWG) organisations in your upcoming budget, and to guarantee that these lifesaving services do not fall from the cliff edge they are currently facing in April 2025 by confirming a roll-over year of funding in 25-26.

Violence against women and girls in the UK

VAWG in all its forms is a violation of women and girls' human rights, and is far too common in the UK today. It remains the case that one in four women experience domestic abuse in their lifetimes, whilst reports of sexual offences are at the highest level ever recorded. It is a grave injustice that a woman in England and Wales is killed by a man every week.

In light of this, we have welcomed the government's commitment to VAWG as a priority, and its recognition that specialist VAWG services are crucial to save and change lives. But their future is under severe threat from multiple funding crises, including: ongoing budget cuts and urgent local authority financial pressures; the impact of the pandemic; poor procurement and competitive tendering processes; short term, insecure funding which doesn't reflect the true cost of service delivery and inflation; and demand consistently exceeding capacity.

Funding for VAWG services

Our organisations represent hundreds of specialist VAWG organisations across England and Wales. These services are run by *organisations whose primary purpose* is to support survivors – both women and/or children and young people - affected by VAWG, or to work with perpetrators. They are run by women's organisations and hold decades of experience and expertise in meeting survivors' specific support needs. Yet research by the Rosa Foundation has found that, of £4.1 billion grants going to charitable organisations in 2021, the women and girls sector received just 1.8%. This is despite the fact that they deliver significant cost savings for the taxpayer, with recent research by Women's Aid and Respublica demonstrating that for every £1 invested in domestic abuse services there is a benefit of at least £9 to the public purse.

Black and minoritised survivors of VAWG experience overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination and disadvantage multiplied by race, gender, sexuality, and disability, necessitating the specialist support of 'by and for' organisations. Yet services led 'by and for' Black and minoritised women are six times less likely to obtain funding compared to other domestic abuse services. Ring fenced funding for 'by and for' services is essential to ensure the specific and intersectional needs of Black and minoritised survivors are met.

Whilst we have welcomed a number of specific government funding streams focused on tackling VAWG in recent years, overall funding has been piecemeal, insufficient and inaccessible to the support services that women need. For example, after years of advocacy in calling for ring-fenced funding for specialist VAWG services, and 'by and for' services, we welcomed the announcement of the Home Office's £8.4 million VAWG Support and Specialist Services (VSSS) fund in 2023. Sadly, the design of this funding competition did not meet the needs of the women's organisations we represent. The definitions and criteria were inadequate, opening the door for generic, non-specialist services and statutory agencies to access this funding. The government's definition of 'by and for' within this process allowed services who weren't led 'by and for' the communities they serve - with the client group reflected in staffing, management and governance - to obtain resources which had been earmarked for 'by and for' services. The minimum bid values were set at a level that excluded many small, women's organisations from applying together.

Significant unmet need

Given these severe inequities in funding, it was particularly concerning to see that the VSSS fund failed to adequately prioritise services for women. All victims of violence and abuse should be able to access support which is tailored to their needs and experiences, and this should be proportionate and according to need. Yet there are severe concerns with proportionality in funding at both a national and local level. Official statistics show that 1 in 4 women and 1 in 18 men have experienced rape or sexual assault as an adult¹, and 93% of victims of coercive control are female.² We would expect funding to reflect these realities. Despite the evidence that these crimes disproportionately victimise women and are perpetrated by men, less than two thirds the £1.48 million funding stream for "specialist VAWG services" within this process went to support female victims.

There remains significant unmet demand for women's support services; over 60% of referrals to refuges supporting women in England in 2022-23 were declined³ and 14,000 survivors are on the Rape Crisis waiting list.⁴ The Domestic Abuse Commissioner's mapping research found that the vast majority (70%) of domestic abuse services commissioned are currently not sex or gender specific⁵, despite international law requiring 'gender sensitive' policies which take a gendered perspective in policies to tackle VAWG. We consider it critical that the Treasury end the significant gap between current funding for women experiencing violence and abuse and the unmet need for support.

Furthermore, the continued two-tier system of support and hostile environment continues to discriminate against, and exclude, migrant women from specialist VAWG support altogether. The government recognises that perpetrators exploit migrant women's insecure status and perpetrate immigration-related abuse and coercive control, yet the no recourse to public funds condition continues to exclude many migrant women experiencing violence and abuse from accessing support and safety. Migrant women face higher risks of returning to violent perpetrators, destitution, or deportation, and further risk of violence and exploitation as a result. We urge the government to ensure all migrant survivors can access protection and

¹ ONS (2023), Sexual offences prevalence and victim characteristics, England and Wales. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/sexualoffencesprevalenceandvictimcharacteristicsenglandandwales>

² ONS (2020a) Domestic abuse in England and Wales overview: November 2020. Office for National Statistics. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/releases/domesticabuseinenglandandwalesnovember2020>

³ Women's Aid (2024) The Domestic Abuse Report 2024: The Annual Audit. Bristol: Women's Aid. Available online: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/annual-audit-2024/>

⁴ Ministry of Justice, Rape and Sexual Abuse Support Fund Returns.

⁵ Domestic Abuse Commissioner. (2022) A Patchwork of Provision: How to meet the needs of victims and survivors across England and Wales. Available online: https://domesticabusecommissioner.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/DAC_Mapping-Abuse-Suivivors_Long-Policy-Report_Nov2022_FA.pdf

support, which the Domestic Abuse Commissioner estimates could save the Treasury £2.3 billion over a ten-year period.⁶

Funding cliff-edge

There is an urgent need for clarity and commitment on government funding for VAWG post-2025. Whilst we appreciate that the current Spending Review period concludes in 2025 and the next government will be responsible for setting budgets after this point, we are urgently concerned about the funding cliff edge facing our services next year. As you will appreciate, dedicated funding streams from the Ministry of Justice for IDVA and ISVA services and the Rape Sexual Abuse Support Fund, DLUHC's funding for domestic abuse safe accommodation and Home Office funding for perpetrator interventions have provided essential funding to our sector in recent years. We fear that the expiry of these funding streams, coupled with the severe impacts of current local authority finances, will result in significant reductions in VAWG service provision in the coming year. We are already seeing local authorities scale back on commitments to tackling VAWG in 2024-25 and we fear that services will be threadbare by the next financial year unless there is a clear government commitment to roll over funding for VAWG post 2025.

We therefore urge you to guarantee a roll-over year of funding in 2025-26 to provide critical security for essential VAWG services in an uncertain funding landscape. We are copying our letter to the Shadow Chancellor in this regard.

We urge the Treasury to work with relevant departments to ensure specialist services for women and children experiencing violence and abuse are protected and sustained in the coming year, and to ensure that funding for VAWG services reaches the women and children who need them.

Yours sincerely

Farah Nazeer, CEO, Women's Aid Federation of England
Mary Clarke and Ghada Alnasseri, Interim Executive Co-Directors, Imkaan
Ciara Bergman, CEO, Rape Crisis England and Wales
Jo Todd, CEO, Respect
Andrea Simon, Director, End Violence Against Women Coalition
Vivienne Hayes, CEO, Women's Resource Centre
Sara Kirkpatrick, CEO, Welsh Women's Aid

⁶ Domestic Abuse Commissioner, 'Safety Before Status', 2021. Available online: <https://domesticabusecommissioner.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2021/10/Safety-Before-Status-Report-2021.pdf>. The Commissioner's report concluded that extending access to the Destitute Domestic Violence Concession and Domestic Violence Indefinite Leave to Remain for all migrant women would have benefit-cost ratio at 4.0. Over ten years, if the government were to pay the expected costs of c.£536,826,000, this would generate overall social gains worth c.£ 2,293,420,000 (both in present value terms).