

COVID 19: ONE YEAR ON

A year ago, our organisations came together to issue an urgent call to action to protect women and children experiencing domestic abuse, sexual violence, forced marriage, so called 'honor based' violence, child sexual abuse, FGM, online abuse and other forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG). We knew the pandemic would have devastating impacts on the lives of the women and children we support, and the frontline specialist services across the UK that we represent.

COVID 19 has affected us all, but it has not affected us all equally. It was clear from the outset that lockdown measures would exacerbate women and girls' experiences of violence and abuse, and shut down routes to safety and support. Over the past year this has been borne out in the huge increases in demand our sector has witnessed, the increasing complexity of need from those we support, the strains that frontline workers have faced in responding to survivors in trauma, the new ways that perpetrators are using COVID 19 as tools for abuse and control, and of course the tragic murders of women and children that we remember today.

The pandemic – and its health, social and economic effects – have had disproportionate impact on communities facing oppression. Before COVID 19 women and girls experiencing structural inequality – including black and minoritised women, women with insecure immigration status, disabled women and LGBT+ survivors – faced the most severe barriers to getting the help they need. Urgent and coordinated action was required to fix glaring gaps in protection and support – particularly for migrant women experiencing VAWG – but the UK government has failed to act.

We celebrate the huge strength of our sector in supporting survivors during an unprecedented challenge; frontline staff have radically redesigned their services, under immense pressure, so they could continue to save lives, provide specialist support and hope to women and children, and ensure that their rights are protected and voices heard. But we remain seriously concerned about the lack of meaningful partnership working between the UK government, devolved administrations in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and our specialist sector. This has limited the ability of all nations and regions to meet the needs of women and girls and the life-saving specialist services that support them.

A year ago, we called for action on funding, equal protection and support, prevention and practical measures to protect women and girls experiencing violence and abuse during COVID 19. Today, these measures are more urgently needed than ever. As we reflect on the impact of this global crisis upon our life-saving sector, we set out why a new approach, which delivers protection for all survivors, is required.

Funding

Before COVID 19, specialist VAWG services were existing on a shoestring, unable to meet demand for help. Whilst the UK government has delivered emergency funding for the VAWG sector over the past year, it has been piecemeal, fragmented and unequal. In some areas, it took months and numerous different complex funding streams to deliver, and was severely challenging for life-saving frontline services to access at a time of crisis. There was no ring-fence on funding for services led by and for Black and minoritised women, Deaf and disabled women, and LGBT+ survivors, who face the most severe funding challenges and often required major adaptations in order to work remotely.

The Treasury deadline of spending emergency funding by the end of March 2021 has been wholly ineffective. Delays in delivering the funding meant that additional staff have only recently been recruited, but in some cases are now facing notice of redundancy. It also fails to acknowledge that we are still in the midst of the pandemic, and services will not stop facing demand on April 1st 2021.

There was also inadequate join-up between the UK government and devolved administrations to ensure that services in all parts of the UK were sustainable. The lack of coordination has also wasted resources and capacity - multiple application and reporting mechanisms on funding streams has increased demand on services at a time when they needed to prioritise frontline delivery. Time and money was lost on 'making the case' for resources rather than accepting the expertise of specialist services that need was high, and funding was urgently required. Specialist services in Northern Ireland did not receive comparable levels of funding to other nations. Delayed Treasury funding allocations to Northern Ireland resulted in millions of pounds of underspend – a waste of the resources that specialist women's organisations so desperately needed.

The funding landscape for next year is as precarious as ever. In various parts of the UK, even in the midst of the pandemic, we have seen the defunding of expert domestic abuse services due to competitive tendering processes that are not fit for purpose when it comes to VAWG services. Tendering processes were pushed forward at a time when services were extremely stretched, drawing resources away from the frontline and placing huge burdens on smaller specialist services. We must see the removal of these vital, lifesaving services from procurement rules altogether in order to protect and uphold the rights that women and children have to access specialist support. We continue to call urgently for secure, long-term grant funding for specialist VAWG service provision, including ring-fenced funding for by and for services.

Equal support

At the outset of the pandemic we called for immediate action to ensure all women experiencing VAWG were protected equally – including an end to hostile environment policies, 'no recourse to public funds' conditions, and immigration detention. Yet the hierarchy of protection and support for women experiencing violence and abuse continues – migrant women with no recourse are still denied safe housing, protection and financial support. If the UK Government's does not accept amendments to the Domestic Abuse Bill to deliver equal protection to migrant women, and work in partnerships with devolved administrations to ensure no survivor is turned away in the future, this legislation will have failed.

As Imkaan have documented, COVID 19 has compounded racial inequalities, resulting in Black and minoritised communities experiencing the highest levels of death rates from the virus, economic hardship and continued exclusion. The health inequalities faced by Black and minoritised communities sharply affected our sector, impacting the women we support, our colleagues, friends and family. Organisations led by and for Black and minoritised women, who were severely under-resourced before the pandemic, have been unable to meet demand; Imkaan's research shows that 75% of Black and minoritised women in need of bedspaces in by and for services were turned away during the pandemic. These services have reported increasing poverty, food scarcity, homelessness, and further barriers to Black and minoritised women accessing their rights.

Deaf and disabled women, who face increased risk of gender-based violence, have been disproportionately impacted. Changes to the Care Act 2014 in England took away established rights and safeguards, and organisations led by and for disabled and Deaf women have reported that survivors have faced severe isolation, increase reliance on the abuser for care and access to basic essentials, and difficulties in accessing statutory and specialist services.

The impacts of inequality have been starkly clear in the past year. We urge for a different response as we emerge from the pandemic, based on human rights and the protection of all survivors.

Frontline workers

We honour the women in specialist VAWG services who have given everything to support survivors over the past year. But we know the heavy toll that this work has had. Frontline staff in refuge services were not provided with the protection they needed to stay safe – including PPE and consistent access to testing. Specialist staff continue to support survivors experiencing unimaginable trauma from their bedrooms, juggling home schooling and childcare at the same time. During the first lockdown we clapped for key workers, but life-saving staff in the VAWG sector are

far too often on insecure contracts and pay which does not reflect the expert work they do. This must change. Staff in specialist VAWG services will need additional therapeutic and personal wellbeing support from their organisations, which requires further resources.

Prevention and awareness

The consequences of failing to prevent VAWG are significant in both human and economic terms. We called for leadership at the highest levels to prevent violence and abuse, and tackle perpetrators, during the pandemic. During the past year we have welcomed a significant boost in public support and awareness – and multiple initiatives from community networks, mutual aid groups, employers and businesses who have sought to help survivors. Campaigns by national governments and other public services have raised awareness and signposted to survivors to support, but they have not always spoken to the experiences and needs of all women and girls. . The UK government's communications and advice, and resources for survivors produced by national governments, have often been inaccessible to disabled and Deaf women and others facing communication barriers.

The UK wide Ask for ANI scheme, a codeword which survivors could use to access support in pharmacies, was born from the urgent need to improve gateways to help for women trapped at home with their abuser. But it was launched almost a year after the pandemic started, and there have been continued concerns with how this is working across all four nations in the UK, the level of training for pharmacy staff responding to disclosures, as well as how effectively such schemes link up to local specialist support services.

Joined-up responses

Our life-saving sector has worked together like never before to protect and support survivors. The expansion of partnership working between and within specialist VAWG services, and with academics, organisations and agencies, has been a positive feature of the past year. This has included initiatives such as Rail to Refuge, which saw the Rail Delivery Group work with train operating companies to secure free train travel for all survivors accessing refuge services in England, Wales and Scotland.

But coordinated partnership working has been far from effective everywhere. Smaller specialist services – particularly those who are not commissioned by their local authority, and services led by and for Black and minoritised women and Deaf and disabled survivors – have continued to report that communication and partnership working from statutory agencies has been poor. Information and advice about VAWG from the UK government often ignored different national contexts and lockdown rules, creating confusion and additional work in signposting survivors to the right helplines and support. The lack of join up between UK government and devolved government communications has resulted in confusion for citizens, and a lack of confidence in the messages to survivors.

A year on, we fear that the UK government is still not working in partnership with national governments in a coordinated way to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 on the rights of all women and girls to live free from violence. The proposed fragmentation of the government's VAWG strategy, and the fact that Northern Ireland still has no VAWG strategy at all, are causes for serious concern in the future.

Our experience, and academic research, predicts that harm to women and children will escalate once lockdown measures finally lift and separations increase. Yet violence against women is still not factored in at the highest levels of the pandemic response, not seen as a fundamental priority in the public health response we need. As the first year of COVID 19 comes to end, we cannot return to 'business as usual'. We need a new approach, which equally protects all women and girls, and ends the societal inequalities that drive violence and abuse against them.