



End Violence Against Women Coalition (UK)

**Rapidly Compiled – Initial Briefing on the COVID-19
Pandemic and the Duty to Prevent Violence Against
Women & Girls**

Including: Predictions on abuse prevalence; Key areas of life where women and girls are at increased risk; What policy makers should do to protect and prevent

“We must not get to the end of this public health emergency and look back on it as a period when a ‘secondary’ predictable disaster was allowed to happen.”

April 2020

Executive Summary

READ: [EVAW Briefing on COVID-19 and the Duty to Prevent VAWG](#)

This Briefing has been compiled quickly by the EVAW Coalition in an attempt to set out the consequences that COVID-19, and the necessary public health measures being implemented to control it, may have for women and girls who are experiencing or who are at risk of violence.

Increased abuse is predicted and there is a duty to act to prevent

It is clear and foreseeable *now* that the COVID-19 pandemic, and the emergency measures that must be taken to control it, will lead to an increase in all forms violence against women and girls, including domestic and sexual violence. The ongoing planning of the response *must* factor in this predictable impact, and include strategies to protect women and girls and prevent assaults and murders before they happen. This requires leadership at the highest level of Government, and from those leading key areas of public life: policing, health, schools, communities and welfare. Women and girls have rights to protection and safety, and it is everyone's business to be part of the prevention of abuse.

COVID-19 'landed' on top of widespread abuse, deep inequalities, and victim-blaming

COVID-19 has "arrived" in a society where there was already enormous prevalence of violence against women and girls; where the state response to this, from justice through to health and welfare, has been piecemeal; where the voluntary sector specialist women's support services run on a shoestring; where the experience and needs of disabled, BME, migrant, homeless, destitute women and girls are marginalized and made invisible; and where there is a persistent tendency to tell victims to modify their behaviour rather than looking at what drives perpetrators of abuse (such as 'isolated' environments with no onlookers, the diversion of the state to different priorities, and a consequent sense of impunity).

COVID-19 does not cause abuse, it creates a 'conducive context'

Our society already has alarming rates of domestic and sexual violence, with three quarters of a million domestic abuse related offences last year, and around half a million rapes and sexual assaults every year (England and Wales). Increases in the rate of reported domestic violence during the pandemic have been widely [reported](#) in many countries. In the UK there are already [police reports](#) of increased domestic violence, and support services [experiencing](#) higher demand. The home is also where many women and children are sexually abused, and the isolation requirements of the COVID-19 crisis increase the likelihood of sexual violence against partners in the home, and the sexual abuse of children in the home.

Isolation is an ideal context for control, for not being detected and for impunity, as connections to colleagues, friends and family are reduced. Any sense of “lawlessness”, of the police and other statutory services being diverted elsewhere, and there being fewer onlookers as everyone stays home, can drive perpetrators of sexual violence and exploitation to be more confident to offend, both in families and in the broader community. This means there is a serious risk of increased child sexual abuse online, child sexual exploitation of children and young people who are not in school and unsupervised, and sexual violence against girls by their ‘peers’ (on and offline), during this crisis.

Women who already face additional barriers to support and justice, including may BME women, migrant women, disabled women, women with ‘complex needs’ and women in prostitution, will have an even stronger sense that they are not the priority and that their abusers can control them without interruption, unless there is proactive work to counter this.

In planning for the safety of all these women and girls, *it is important to focus not solely on victim vulnerability but on what drives perpetrators* - the decision to offend, and whom to target, is a conscious decision; it includes a calculation about the chance of intervention by others and detection.

The diversion of public services removes vital safety nets, while voluntary sector support services face overload

Isolation, closure of schools and diversion of policing and health resources are a potential disaster for women and girls. There are huge worries about public services maintaining their usual level of service throughout the crisis as they plan for a workforce reduced due to sickness and isolation, and the disruption of transfer to homeworking in many cases. Police forces say they will continue to attend domestic violence call outs and make arrests, but there are worries about non-emergency calls, investigations and getting cases to trial. Most women never report rape or domestic violence to the police. Some might talk to their GPs but these services are now largely closed for face to face services and switched to phone and online. Schools are perhaps the most critical space of all for daily vigilance over children who are at risk, and even for mothers to have contact with other parents and school workers they could talk to if a problem was escalating. Meanwhile, the women’s voluntary sector which provides emergency refuge accommodation through to advice, advocacy, moving on support and therapeutic services to abuse survivors is already perilously underfunded and has had to quickly move everything possible to online and working from home where such infrastructure has not existed.

Recommendations

We set out some detailed recommendations to Westminster, devolved and local government, public sector leaders, business and the public below. These include:

- The Domestic Abuse and Victims Commissioners to feed into COBRA planning immediately;

- Abuse experts to be involved in every level of the crisis response planning at central, devolved and local government levels;
- Emergency funding for the charities which protect and support survivors, taking into account existing inequalities in sector funding and the need to protect BME “by and for” provision and support provision for disabled women;
- The immediate abolition of “no recourse to public funds” rules which prevent migrant women experiencing or at risk of abuse accessing refuges and other support including healthcare;
- Public awareness campaigns aimed at potential perpetrators and at neighbours/family/friends as well as those aimed at victims.

This Briefing does not comprehensively set out all risks and consequences, but it will be updated as any trends, data, analysis and change become apparent. We are making recommendations which are appropriate and urgent at time of writing in early April, according to what we and our members understand is happening for women and girls. This is an unprecedented situation and we do not have a full policy prescription for what Government, frontline public services, funders, businesses and civil society groups should do. **But we do insist that there is a clear duty to foresee the very likely consequences for women and girls in a society which is partially ‘shut down’, and to aim to prevent them.** We must not get to the end of this public health emergency and look back on it as a period when a ‘secondary’ predictable disaster was allowed to happen.

About the End Violence Against Women Coalition

The End Violence Against Women Coalition is a UK-wide coalition of more than 85 women's organisations and others working to end violence against women and girls (VAWG) in all its forms, including: sexual violence, domestic violence, forced marriage, sexual exploitation, FGM, stalking and harassment. We campaign for improved national and local government policy and practice in response to all forms of violence against women and girls, and we challenge the wider cultural attitudes that tolerate violence against women and girls and make excuses for it. Our members and trustees include women who are globally renowned for their pioneering work in setting up the first domestic and sexual violence crisis services, for their academic research in this area, and for having successfully campaigned for considerable legislative and policy change in the UK to end and prevent abuse over the last four decades. The EVAW Coalition is a company limited by guarantee (no. 7317881) and a registered charity (no. 1161132).

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