



EASING OF CORONAVIRUS RESTRICTIONS JOINT STATEMENT FROM VAWG SECTOR ORGANISATIONS

08 July 2020

The Government has announced that the UK's "alert level" in relation to coronavirus has been reduced and that there will now follow a "gradual relaxation of restrictions". We note that the picture is not identical across the four nations, with various approaches to lifting and easing restrictions in each.

Specialist violence against women and girls (VAWG) organisations wish to set out our situation and concerns in this ever-changing context. Over the past five decades our organisations, and the services we represent, have led on innovating to develop the wide-ranging varieties of provision to support survivors of different forms of VAWG – including sexual violence, domestic abuse and specialist services led 'by and for' Black and minoritised women and disabled women. The need for an ongoing dialogue with Government remains vital as coronavirus related measures change over the coming weeks and months and may include the re-imposing of restrictions to address localised spikes in infection rates, as has been seen in Leicester.

Early days

Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in the UK, specialist women's organisations have [appealed](#) to the Government to factor abuse of women and girls into all pandemic emergency planning. We asked the Prime Minister, his Cabinet and all senior leaders in public services to have the VAWG sector at decision-making tables, given our expertise; to make swift emergency grants to our support services; to ensure there was equal protection for migrant women, Deaf and disabled and LGBT survivors and; to put out strong public communications messages for neighbours and friends as well as victims.

Our recent experience: Increased demand, the abuse of restrictions, #BlackLivesMatter

What we have seen over the last 12+ weeks, as organisations supporting women and girls who have experienced sexual, domestic and other forms of violence, is a serious increase in the demand for support as well as reduced capacity in our organisations. What has really spiked for women's organisations is a reliance on our web-based support and information services, because, whilst trapped at home with perpetrators, women cannot make private phone calls or make arrangements to leave as easily. Women who get through to us are experiencing escalating violence and abuse, have needs that are complex and are often

taking longer to work with than average; women have been more desperate than ever, and services have reported increased contact by women who are suicidal. Our organisations have responded to this complexity with wrap around, trauma informed woman-centred support.

It is very apparent that Covid-19 is anything but a 'leveller', with Black and minoritised people in particular more exposed to the illness, less able to self-isolate, and more likely to have become very sick or to die, along with disabled women (who are 11 times more likely to die from the virus). Since the outbreak of the pandemic, we have seen targeted racialised hate crimes against certain groups and against those *perceived* to be of a certain group, namely Chinese and other East Asian communities. The ongoing hostile environment which places Black and minoritized women at particular risk by preventing their access to basic safety nets, forcing women to face the devastating choice of destitution or detention, or remaining with the perpetrator. The reluctance to openly investigate and develop a response to this has been thrown into stark light by the #BlackLivesMatter movement, whose aims are deeply connected to our own, as women's experience of racism is not separate to their needs when seeking support, justice and protection from abuse.

Restrictions easing for some: Ongoing uncertainty

As we move into this phase of restrictions easing, but also uncertainty and possible renewal of lockdown conditions if there are further spikes of the disease, there are still millions of people who need to isolate or shield, either with new symptoms or with underlying conditions or characteristics which make them particularly vulnerable – this also includes our own sector's workforce. Disabled women, those with long term health conditions and older women are more likely to be among those isolating at any time. Women are much more likely to be caring for others who need to isolate, including children and older people, and will experience the impact of ongoing restrictions disproportionately.

Ongoing risk of abuse of women and girls

The ongoing presence of coronavirus means women may still live in periods of isolation with abusive partners and family members, and that abusive men may continue to use isolation requirements as an additional tool for abuse and control (for example in relation to child contact arrangements, through abuse of the contact tracing system, limiting access to information and giving false information about the risks associated with the virus).

The ongoing requirement to isolate combined with school closures means that many critical public services – including GP surgeries, police, housing day centres, physiotherapy or other community health – still have depleted workforces and may not always be on hand in person or in a way that is accessible for women experiencing abuse and seeking help. This is particularly concerning for both migrant women (who may be isolated, without friends or family in the UK and without access to the internet at home) and disabled women (who also may be without access to smartphones or the internet at home), whom, for these reasons are heavily reliant on 'walk-in services' and face-to-face contact as most, if not the only route to support. Women whose only regular contact outside the family is with support or care workers have no-one to turn to if those services have been suspended or reduced due to Covid 19 and the suspension of the Care Act, leaving disabled women more isolated and dependent than ever on abusive perpetrators.

Limited opening of schools means that millions of girls are still not in school and will not return to school until September at the earliest – these girls will not have been to school or been seen by a teacher for more than five months. School closures remain a conducive context for abuse of girls, both online and offline, by peers and by strangers as well as family members, and restrict opportunities to detect abuse and raise concerns.

The need for ongoing “mixed provision” of support services

Women and girls need to be able to access the services we provide – including crisis support, outreach, refuge, long-term move on, therapeutic counselling, advocacy, legal advice and much more – in the most accessible way possible. Digital and IT exclusion, particularly for older and disabled women and those in rural areas has exacerbated isolation during this period. VAWG organisations have faced additional challenges in those contexts where digital technology is not appropriate, for example supporting young children affected by domestic abuse. We want to restore as much live, face to face provision as soon as we can. However, based on our experiences of the last 12+ weeks, we can foresee an indefinite period of “mixed provision” of support, with part of our workforce at home, others working at our premises, and the continuing provision of more phone and online support than existed pre-Covid.

There has also been a significant impact on the wellbeing of our sector’s workforce as a result of bringing work – which constantly deals with trauma, harm and abuse – into our homes. Additionally, the office and accommodation-based services we are running now need to have carefully risk-assessed delivery, with social distancing, monitoring for Covid symptoms and planning for service users to suddenly be isolated. Further, the Government’s guidance on accommodation-based services has not been updated since March and provides no guidance to services on accepting and managing new referrals safely – this remains a significant concern for those organisations managing communal services such as accommodation. Essential safety measures such as testing for women and children who need to access refuge or other safe accommodation, and clinical guidance on use of PPE for VAWG services, has still not been delivered.

Many of our organisations are relatively small employers, and the management of this indefinite ‘mixed provision’ and constant risk assessment has significant impact on the sector’s already stretched capacity. We are operating in a context of increased complexity in our casework because women are experiencing VAWG as well as wide ranging COVID 19 related socio-economic impacts, including unemployment, welfare benefit and immigration issues, housing challenges and homelessness, as well as complex family and criminal justice matters. We predict there will be numerous ‘surges’ in demand as restrictions ease and women feel they can more easily leave abusive partners, but we know this is also the point at which they are in most danger.

We welcomed the Government’s emergency relief package for VAWG services of £37million but have raised our concerns that it took months and numerous complex funding streams to deliver this emergency funding; most of which is only just now reaching the frontline. We are now critically concerned that the current ‘cliff edge’ arrangement of VAWG organisations being expected to spend the emergency funding and return to ‘business as

usual' by 31 October will leave the women we support unable to seek help and our organisations at increased risk. This arrangement does not recognise that as long as Covid 19 is still in circulation, the needs of women and children experiencing VAWG will be multifaceted and we will experience multiple surges in demand on our services. This challenge will not end on 31st October. Additionally, the Government's funding announcements were not accompanied by any explicit statements or guidance to ensure that at least a portion of these funds reached migrant women with No Recourse to Public Funds, this cohort of women still remain effectively excluded from support services and the emergency funding injection, even though we know there is a great deal of [unmet need](#).

The absence of the planned Comprehensive Spending Review to date means that many VAWG budgets, at national and local level, are highly insecure. It is critical to note that our sector was facing a funding crisis before COVID 19 and was unable to keep up with the demand for help. We do not predict a drop in demand and return to 'normal' provision at that point and even if demand returned to pre-COVID 19 levels we need a long-term sustainability plan for our life-saving sector, starting with a funding settlement for the next 3-5 years.

We would also like recognition for the tremendous work our sector and our workers have done in transforming services so fast to remote provision and being determined not to fail any woman seeking help.

Government agenda: Hidden Harms

We have contributed detailed information and recommendations to the Hidden Harms agenda on domestic violence, child abuse and modern slavery - the below asks should be read in tandem with the [VAWG sector's response to the Government's Hidden Harms Action Plan](#). The recent publication of the related Action Plan contains many recommendations but lacks a connection to an over-arching strategy, questions remain about consistency and alignment across the nations, and there is little clarity about how, and by when, actions will be delivered. There must be a coordinated approach to this work which recognises the VAWG sector's expertise and is linked to the renewal of a cross-government, fully funded Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy.

What we need:

- Government to extend the period of spend for emergency funding beyond the 31st October 'cliff edge'
- Ensure that the interests of all survivors of VAWG - including Black and minoritised survivors, Deaf and disabled women and LGBT survivors and organisations working with them - are represented at all levels of Covid-19 response and "transition" planning, and that the prevention of increasing levels of VAWG, providing specialist support for survivors and tackling perpetrators are priority objectives
- A funding solution to meet longer term demand and ensure sustainability for all specialist VAWG services, which includes ring-fenced funding for specialist led 'by and for' services and sexual violence services, underpinned by clear accountability

mechanisms and delivered through long-term grant funding, with an end to competitive tendering as the default model

- Consultation with a cross-section of the VAWG sector on the resources needed. Our organisations have significant expertise on demand for service provision, the needs of survivors and the level of investment required. This must include consideration of the specialist VAWG sector in Wales to ensure devolved and non-devolved policy, provision and funding are aligned to prevent gaps in provision.
- Ensure that Black and minoritised women and all survivors with NRPF across the country can access safe accommodation alongside specialist support by appropriately funding the specialist led 'by and for' sector to meet the demand
- Lift the 'no recourse to public funds' condition that prevents women experiencing VAWG to escape without fear of destitution
- Provide safe reporting mechanisms for survivors with insecure immigration status
- Urgently consult on, renew and fully fund a new Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy
- The inter-ministerial group on VAWG and National Oversight Group on Domestic Abuse should be urgently reconvened and meet on a regular basis, with a cross-section of representatives from the VAWG sector attending to ensure that the development of policy and practice is based on the needs of survivors

Signed and supported by:

EVAW Coalition (in full)
Women's Aid Federation of England
Imkaan
Southall Black Sisters
Women's Resource Centre
Refuge
SafeLives
Standing Together Against Domestic Violence
AVA (Against Violence and Abuse)
Karma Nirvana
Latin American Women's Aid (LAWA)
Respect
Solace Women's Aid
Latin American Women's Rights Service (LAWRS)

Rights of Women
Welsh Women's Aid
Stay Safe East
IRISi
IKWRO - Women's Rights Organisation
Independent Domestic Abuse Services (IDAS)
Galop
Advocacy After Fatal Domestic Abuse (AAFDA)
Centre for Women's Justice
Surviving Economic Abuse
Woman's Trust
White Ribbon UK