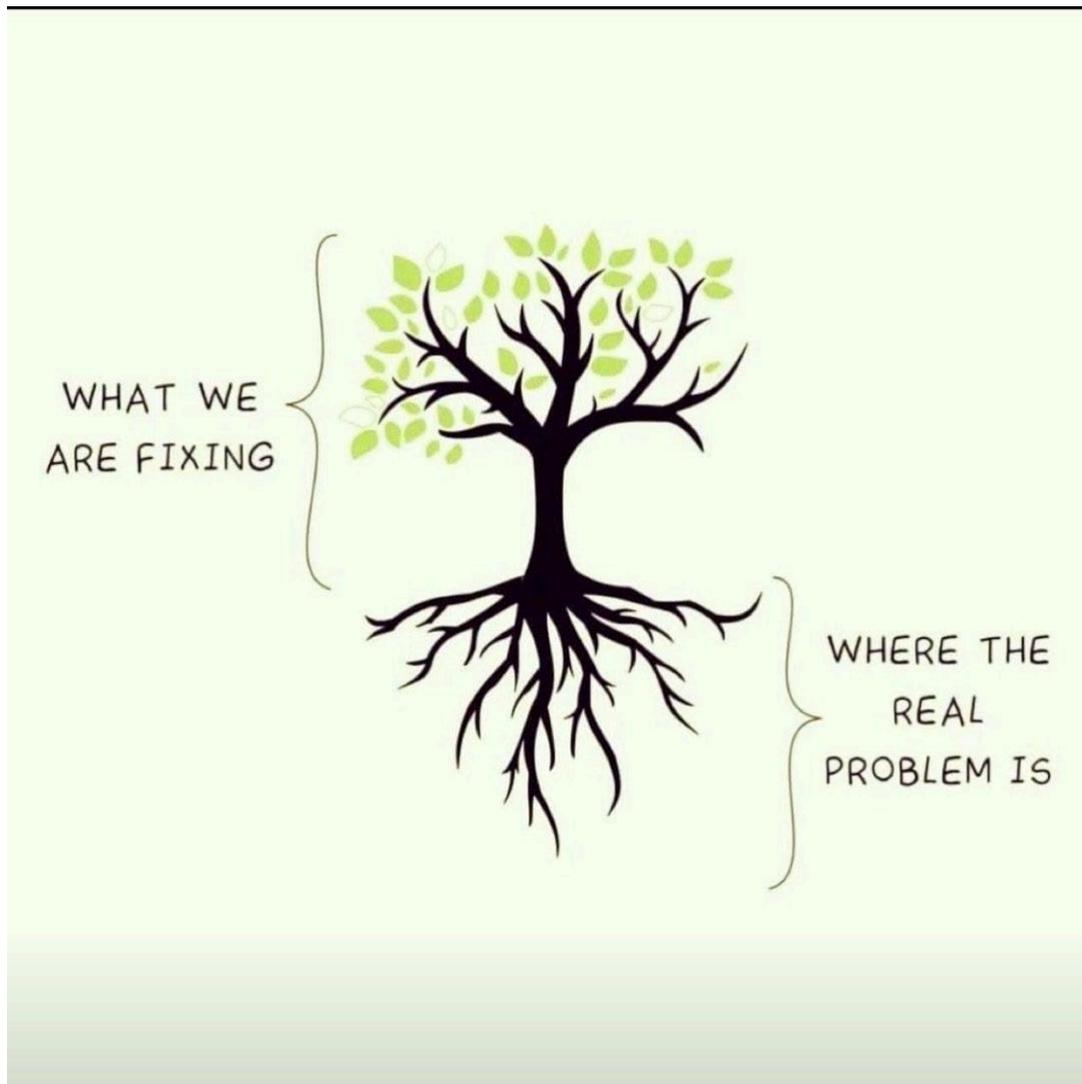


Before and Beyond



Acknowledgments

We would first like to extend our sincere and deepest thanks to all the victim-survivors of violence and abuse, for their willingness to support and participate in this work, their courage and generosity in sharing their experiences of violence and abuse to help inform an improved response for victim-survivors in the future.

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¹ Anonymity requested by benefactor for all activities including roundtable events and publication of this report

² #HernamewasChloeHolland

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Preface

'Entrenched patriarchy at almost every level of society, combined with a rise in misogyny that permeates the physical and online world, is denying thousands of women and girls across the UK the right to live in safety, free from fear and violence' Reem Alsalem, UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women and Girls,

One in three women, will experience violence and abuse, a number that has remained largely unchanged over the past decade³. Metropolitan Police Service Commissioner, Sir Mark Rowley⁴ has said the figures are “eye-watering” and an “inconvenient truth” and has called for a much bigger effort to tackle the problem. Commissioner Rowley has said the scale of offending by men against women and children is beyond the criminal justice system alone to tackle.

At the time of writing this report, we have been awaiting the publication of the Government's Violence against Women and Girls Strategy. The much-anticipated document was finally published on 18th December 2025. There is much to be welcomed in the new strategy, however, it appears there is little in the way of funding and no doubt, in the months and years to come, there will be commentary on what is and is not included in the strategy.

We know that finances are and remain challenging. challenging. However, we urge politicians not to overlook how much it costs NOT to address violence against women and girls (VAWG) or indeed to overlook the potential savings available. And if finances and the moral imperative are not enough - politicians might also want to consider the political capital.

At least one in three women experience domestic abuse alone. Still more experience sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape and a range of other crimes that fall under the umbrella term 'violence against women'. These statistics have barely shifted in decades despite the best efforts of so many. This cannot and must not continue and progress will not be achieved by doing the same things over and over. We need a root and branch rethink

We do urgently need investment in life saving services, but we don't only need money. We also need leadership, imagination and courage. For example, if implemented...

1. A mandatory module on VAWG on all degree courses taken by statutory sector professionals. This would mean all relevant statutory professionals had received some training and would allow any future training to build on this. So much training they currently receive is 101 level OR some professions (teachers and GPs in particular) are almost impossible to reach due to locums needing to be employed when they attend training.
2. An online matchmaking service between VAWG organisations and Masters / PhD students needing a research topic so that evaluations can be done to add to the evidence base.
3. Both the BBC and Channel 4 are public service broadcasters whose aims are to inform, educate and entertain. In 2004, the BBC ran a two-week domestic abuse awareness campaign called 'Hitting Home' across all of its platforms. The campaign aimed to raise awareness of domestic violence and provide support and resources for those affected by it. A request to the BBC to repeat this two decades later would help ensure that

³ <https://www.who.int/news/item/09-03-2021-devastatingly-pervasive-1-in-3-women-globally-experience-violence>

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/article/2024/jun/04/met-chief-says-millions-of-men-are-danger-to-women-and-girls-in-england-and-wales>

information and support could be made available to those who need it. A request to Channel 4 to run a campaign addressing other forms of VAWG would help raise awareness and ensure victim-survivors were directed to resources and sources of support. This would be in line with their public service remits, articulated through the BBC's Public Purposes (Reithian Principles) and for Channel 4 agreed by Parliament and enshrined in legislation.

4. There is some potential mileage in reducing the cost of public education by inviting corporates to subvert their slogans. If the government were able to bring together five or six of these, then others may choose to join. Examples include Nike '*Just don't*', MacDonald's '*Not lovin' it*', De Beers '*A Diamond is Forever – abuse doesn't have to be*'.
5. Mandatory routine screening for experiences of domestic and sexual violence across all statutory agencies. This has been resisted in some services because research evidence does not support that this leads to higher rates of disclosure. However, this misses the point that mandatory screening would help to reduce the stigma associated with VAWG. Even if survivors do not disclose at least a potential source of help and support has been identified to them.
6. Require all Government strategies to include a section outlining its impact on VAWG. In particular, this should include Youth Strategy, Homelessness Strategy, Rough Sleeping strategy; NHS 10 Year Plan and the Child Poverty Strategy. Alternatively, require every Government department to publish an annual report on what it is doing to meet the target of reducing VAWG so that the burden is shared equally across Government.
7. Extend Operation Encompass⁵ to nurseries / preschool / childminders.
8. All statutory inspectorates in England and in Wales to undertake a thematic VAWG review at least once every five years.
9. Encourage the use of Smart Water across all police forces. It's a forensic deterrent - an invisible liquid that marks perpetrators if they approach a protected victim-survivor or property, allowing officers to **link them to a breach** even without eyewitnesses or victim-survivor testimony being necessary.
10. If someone is coming to the UK on a spousal visa, they should have the opportunity to make a Clare's Law application as a matter of course before travelling to the UK and conversely, men who apply to bring more than one woman on a spousal visa from abroad into the UK should be monitored.
11. Introduce a 'kite mark' for statutory sector services as a mark of their quality of response to VAWG. NGOs are required to seek accreditation – why not statutory sector services?
12. Open up a conversation with the press regulator about acceptable/ unacceptable ways to report on VAWG (as has been done with suicide).
13. Make a women's safety audit a mandatory part of planning permission.
14. Information about the law in England and Wales as it relates to violence against women should be provided to all migrant women during the course of their entry to the UK.
15. Allow colleges to enrol women living in refuge on to courses and to access creche facilities without having to disclose the refuge address.

We know the above won't solve everything, but it will make a difference for some women and costs next to nothing.

⁵ Operation Encompass is a safeguarding initiative that ensures police share information with schools before the next school day when a child has been exposed to domestic abuse, enabling timely support and intervention.

VAWG should be removed from the portfolio of the Home Office and given to the Treasury. The issue is a drain on the public purse and there are vast savings to be made. But more importantly, it's the only Government Department that can make the others jump.

Before and Beyond

Sisters: I don't know who you are, or how many, but I will tell you what happened to us. We were brave and we were fools; some of us collaborated; I don't know the outcome. It is [2026] now, and we are losing. Andrea Dworkin

Five key messages

- Before (prevention) requires much more creative thinking and cannot be limited to, or solely the responsibility of schools.
- Beyond (crisis) needs a lot more attention to be paid to it in particular to finance, housing and community.
- Family courts need urgent reform⁶: currently it is a key weapon for facilitating post-separation abuse.
- The myopic focus on risk is hindering progress. Risk is important but it is not the only important thing.
- A more sustainable approach to the specialist sector is needed.

Introduction

Specialist support services for women and children experiencing domestic abuse have been built over the past five decades, by and for women, who have experienced domestic abuse. It is critical to their very mission that they are consciously in touch with the women using their services, their needs and what is happening in their lives. Furthermore, it is critical that we constantly and consistently review the support services offered to ensure that women and children who already face harm, risk and insecurity due to domestic abuse are not subjected to another confounding layer of fear, anxiety and practical difficulties. It is important that we understand the experiences of those supported by these services, of their staff who deliver these life-saving and life-changing services and the myriad systems and processes they navigate in their efforts to reduce the harms of VAWG.

Building on the work of specialist domestic abuse services, the report authors secured funding from a benefactor, who wishes to remain anonymous, to commission and undertake this focused piece of work to inform future responses to VAWG, the ongoing planning of domestic abuse services for themselves, and for wider statutory and community services.

With this funding, the report authors have led and hosted a series of roundtable events with key movers and shakers working to address VAWG, including bereaved families, frontline practitioners, CEOs and strategy officers. The discussions at these events have been continued in hundreds of conversations, some formal, some informal, some group and some one on one. We wanted to consider what kind of services and responses might take us out of the current cul-de-sac in which we find ourselves, to examine what success looks like for victim-survivors rather than agencies, and to develop a model for ensuring that no woman or child is left behind. Although many leaders were involved, we invited participation on condition of anonymity and as individuals rather than agency representatives to try and have different kinds of conversations. Instead of focusing solely on solving existing problems, we wanted to shift our attention to creating healthy contexts that generate fewer problems in the first place. We wanted participants to be able to criticise current provision even as they deliver those interventions. We also wanted to explore how we might act differently if we truly believed that men's violence against and abuse of women, girls and children is not inevitable. The

⁶ https://domesticabusecommissioner.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/DAC_Family-Court-Report_Oct-2023.pdf

conversations we have had have been exciting, creative, illuminating but also at times, depressing. We have heard how services are struggling to survive and to deliver what is needed for victim-survivors whilst meeting the demands and constraints of contracts that are geared to meeting the requirements of the statutory sector and not the needs of victim-survivors.

This report is the culmination of our conversations, we hope it will be shared widely and will form the basis of future discussions and actions to reduce and prevent VAWG and lead to lasting, positive change.

Background

The first responsibility of a government is security, of which women's security must be a part. The proof of our national failure is in the bodies, and 1,920 of them since 2010 show that one sex is assaulting and killing the other, regularly and remorselessly. A minimum baseline in a decent society should be no dead women. Whatever resource, whatever effort it takes to reach that goal will be worth it. (Observer editorial 14/07/2024)

In February 2024, Reem Alsalem, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on VAWG urged the UK Government to take urgent action to end all forms of VAWG, designating it a 'national threat'. In December 2024, Sir Mark Rowley, the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police declared there are upwards of 4 million domestic abuse perpetrators in the UK. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) most recent data shows we have been underestimating the extent of the problem – it's now 1 in 3 women rather than the previous 1 in 4. On average, 62% of murdered women in the UK are killed by a current or former partner. ONS data⁷ between April 2013 to March 2023 in England and Wales shows, for victim-survivors over age 16, there were 1,021 female victim-survivors of domestic homicide – a woman killed by a man every three days. The numbers are horrific and yet remain insufficient to warrant VAWG as a political and public priority. Women's organisations are repeatedly asked to provide more and more evidence of the scale of the problem despite the Government's own data. This cannot continue.

The Labour Government has committed to a landmark manifesto commitment to halve violence against women and girls in a decade. This can only be achieved by working with, listening to and learning from victim-survivors, bereaved families, specialist support services, academics and others, in the UK and beyond, to develop a way forward that makes those affected by VAWG safer and able to recover and rebuild their lives.

The ONS⁸ published a combined measure of domestic abuse, sexual violence and stalking from the Crime Survey for England and Wales which has been produced as the main measure for monitoring the Government's mission. The End Violence Against Women Coalition (EVAW)⁹ alongside over 80 expert VAWG organisations are expressing deep concern that the measure fails to fully capture the gendered nature of, or myriad forms of violence and abuse experienced by women and girls.

7

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/appendixtableshomicideinenglandandwales>

8

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/developingacombinedmeasureofdomesticabusesexualassaultandstalkingenglandandwales/july2025>

⁹ <https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/new-ons-crime-data-fails-to-capture-full-spectrum-of-vawg/>

Increasingly, domestic abuse interventions and responses – including those provided by specialist services - feel like women and children are being done to rather than being led by, for, and with, women and children. The women’s movement has driven the life-saving changes we have seen over recent decades. However, there is a sense that the movement to end domestic abuse has stalled and become a service provider sector rather than an agent of change.

It is not helped by the fact that services are stretched to breaking point – not just specialist services¹⁰ but State ones too. The role of specialist services is increasingly one of propping up state failures, whilst many services have shifted away from their origins and purpose. A criminal justice system (CJS) lens has come to dominate and frame funding priorities and the approach of many services despite only 1 in 5 victim-survivors involving the police and still fewer progressing any further through the CJS. In July 2025, a review published by the London Victim’s Commissioner, shows the scales of victim attrition in London’s criminal justice system. It found that 40% of victim-survivors withdrew from the justice process before a charging decision was made, and the figure was even higher for victim-survivors of rape (69%)¹¹. By viewing violence against women solely through a risk/prosecution lens, this not only leaves many needs unaddressed but further entrenches the narrative of victimhood and vulnerability when what victim-survivors need to have realised is their rights to protection and justice. Even more disturbingly, there are some cohorts of women who are routinely failed by services: this can often be summed up as the more needs a woman has, the less help she gets.

Specialist VAWG services are on their knees, having barely recovered from the cumulative effects of the pandemic and the years of austerity. Demand for specialist services has increased, staff churn and burnout has also increased. Only the budgets have dwindled. Meanwhile, we continue to participate in conversations and events with Government in our commitment to effect change for victim-survivors. In the most recent Spending Review, there was no allocation of funding for victim-survivor services¹². When issues of funding are raised, our entreaties are dismissed as us overstating our case, ironically mirroring the general wider cultural disbelief of anything women say about the truth of their lives.

In July 2025, a number of women’s organisations wrote to the Government expressing their deep concern that £53 million, over the next four years, has been allocated to work targeting offenders of domestic abuse whilst specialist victim-survivor support services await announcements on funding. Vital expert organisations providing domestic abuse, rape crisis and other specialist support are facing a funding crisis, with organisations across the country forced to reduce or close down their services while demand for these very services is growing.

¹⁰ In this context, a specialist service is one run by and for women working on violence against women.

¹¹ <https://victimscommissioner.org.uk/news/london-victim-attrition-report-troubling-sign-victims-continue-being-let-down-victims-commissioner/>

¹² <https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/spending-review-fails-women-and-leaves-survivors-at-risk/>

VAWG Strategy

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/freedom-from-violence-and-abuse-a-cross-government-strategy>

*The Strategy is built on three pillars – described as: **prevention & early intervention** to address the root causes of abuse; the **relentless pursuit of perpetrators**; and **support survivors to live free from abuse**. It is accompanied by three supporting documents: 1) an Action Plan, setting out actions bound to each of the Strategy’s pillars, organised around thematic policy areas; 2) a summary of What Works: the ‘evidence’; and 3) a ‘Men and Boys Explanatory Note, included in recognition of the fact that men and boys also experience abusive and violent crimes.*

The feedback from women’s organisations identifies significant gaps within the VAWG Strategy, particularly in its approach to supporting migrant, asylum-seeking, Black and minoritised women. Despite references to intersectionality, the Strategy does not set out meaningful measures to address the distinct risks faced by women subject to hostile immigration policies, no recourse to public funds (NRPF) conditions, or criminalisation, nor does it provide assurance of safety or stability following disclosure for the most marginalised survivors. Insufficient attention is given to specialist and refuge services, existing best practice, and the structural barriers survivors face when accessing support. Furthermore, the Strategy places disproportionate emphasis on the criminal justice system, with limited progress on reforming family courts, addressing online and technology-facilitated abuse, supporting disabled women, recognising children (particularly those under 16) as victims, or protecting survivors criminalised through coercion. Across multiple policy areas, ambitions are not underpinned by clear funding commitments, timelines, or accountability mechanisms. Arrangements for meaningful consultation with the specialist VAWG sector are patchy, inconsistent and tokenistic.

The VAWG Strategy includes a comprehensive array of themes including criminal justice reform, attitudinal change, perpetrator interventions, healthcare and victim support, among others. The narrative prioritises prevention which is a welcome shift from the focus on risk. However, this new focus will take time to yield results, and, in the meantime, there is an urgent need to recognise and respond to the barriers survivors are facing in accessing support.

There are some funding commitments made within the Government’s VAWG Strategy notably £1 billion over the next three years to support victim-survivors of domestic abuse to access services and rebuild their lives. This comprises £550 million allocated across the justice system for measures such as counselling, court support and children’s services, alongside a further £480 million confirmed within local government budgets. While these commitments are welcome, there remains a lack of clarity regarding how much of this funding will be directed to specialist domestic abuse services, as well as how the funding will be allocated and which organisations will be eligible to receive it.

FRAMING

'First we fight the abuse and then we fight the system' (A victim-survivor)

'Let us begin to imagine the worlds we would like to inhabit, the long lives we will share, and the many futures in our hands.' (Susan Griffin)

Angela and I wanted to set up a charity together to help women after domestic abuse. To help women move on and get them back into the careers they wanted to be in whilst also having counselling to suit their needs, there is nothing out there like that, everything is geared towards getting victims out of the situation but very little is there for afterwards when women want to rebuild their lives. [Sister of a woman who took her own life following domestic abuse]

How a social justice issue like domestic abuse is framed has profound consequences. It shapes understanding and subsequent responses. If, for example, domestic abuse is framed as a criminal justice system issue – which is very much the case within the UK - some aspects of this complex issue are highlighted whilst others are downplayed.

It is our belief that the current framing needs to evolve. What resonated two or three decades ago may have lost its relevance. Nothing can be a 'sacred cow' if it cannot be evidenced that it is working. As the National Audit Office said in January 2025: *'The Home Office is not currently leading an effective cross-government response. It has a limited understanding of the extent of resources devoted to addressing VAWG across government and the impact this is having.'*¹³ We believe that MARACs, IDVAs and DASH/DARA are all innovations that have run their course.

Similarly, the Coordinated Community Response model is something that was developed in the 1980s and even where adopted, is not showing tangible results. Indeed it is something of a misnomer as it is really a co-ordinated agency response. Communal refuges, developed even earlier, are not a model fit for the 21st century. Although a lifeline for the first few weeks, residents – both adults and children – subsequently chafe against the necessary rules for harmonious communal living and ache to have their own kitchens and bathrooms again and to be able to live without imposed rules and conditions. Two decades ago, Professor Evan Stark was warning that the domestic abuse revolution was stalling. We are now in a post coercive control world but our responses have yet to catch up.

There's a hierarchy between IDVAs and support workers – in attitudes to the role and in pay. In reality, it's more complicated to work with women who are classed as medium and standard risk. MARAC process is proscribed and women (mostly) and IDVAs understand what high risk means. The challenges are with working with medium risk women because they have less to gain and more to lose – making and sustaining changes are thus more complicated. (International Expert on Domestic Abuse).

He's in prison now. I was high risk until he went there. My case has been to MARAC lots of times. I've been with [service] and done Freedom Programme. They (caseworkers and police) think I should be OK now as he's away. What happens when he's out? Will I have to go through all this again? (A victim-survivor)

Tech Abuse

We are living through a time of particular technological advances – artificial intelligence and virtual reality in particular – but we are now also living in a time when almost everyone has a smart phone, can be contacted any time of the day or night, is familiar with websites, automated processes and so on.

¹³ <https://www.nao.org.uk/reports/tackling-violence-against-women-and-girls/>

Women and children are reporting the myriad ways technology is now being deployed to assert and maintain control within and outside of the home – from the use of tracking devices on cars and in mobile phones, to home security systems and cameras and listening devices –abusers will deploy whatever means they can to monitor, control and coerce victim-survivors.

The UN reported in 2025¹⁴, on how harmful content spread on social media platforms is helping to drive a backlash against feminism and fuel a growth in misogyny and misogynistic content online.

A growing network of online communities known collectively as the ‘manosphere’ is emerging as a serious threat to gender equality, as toxic digital spaces increasingly influence real-world attitudes, behaviours and policies. UN Women¹⁵

A system that is able and equipped to respond to these new challenges is desperately needed if victim-survivors are to be protected. Deploying technology as a means of doing this and ensuring the systems we put in place understand and can respond effectively to these new, emerging threats and dangers is critical.

If women and children are to be supported to live lives free from violence and abuse, recover from trauma and to rebuild their lives as they wish, then change is needed and needed now. Much has been achieved over recent decades and it is time to take the lessons learned from what is in place and ensure that it is relevant for victim-survivors in this current context. From the hundreds of conversations we have had, it was clear that there is both a need and an appetite for change.

¹⁴ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/03/1160876>

¹⁵ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/06/1164531>

What's wrong with our current approach?

During the course of our hundreds of conversations, we heard about the challenges of working within the current framework, its limitations and why this does not work for victim-survivors of VAWG. Please note the list below is not exhaustive and is followed by some suggestions for alternative models and examples of what victim-survivors, experts and practitioners know does work.

What's wrong with the current dominant framework for responding to domestic/sexual abuse?

- In promoting intervention at the point of crisis, what is also being promoted is a time limited intervention which leaves many aspects of a victim-survivor's situation unaddressed.
- Current interventions are far too risk focused where risk is defined as serious injury or death, and this conversely promotes a narrow understanding of safety where the focus is on *physical safety from* and not on safety *to*. Moreover, safety is presented by professionals as existing in a vacuum, separate from women's lifetime experiences of navigating safety on a daily basis, whether or not she is in an abusive relationship. The *actual* risk that woman face, is the risk of not being free.
- Domestic and sexual abuse work has become separated from women's liberation and too many of the responses are framed around what politicians / agencies want such as an increase in prosecutions or for victim-survivors to leave. Moreover, the separation of domestic abuse from violence against women more broadly doesn't match women's reality of cumulative experiences of abuse.
- Woman- and child-centred working is more likely to engage the most marginalised, but underfunding / commissioning structures means that specialist domestic abuse services are ill-equipped to respond in this way.
- Constant pressure to de-gender the issue / public disparaging of anything to do with human rights further undermines progress.
- There are significant barriers for women who face multiple discrimination and disadvantage. These include a lack of investment into 'by and for' services, and a lack of active intersectional practice that seeks to address and dismantle systems, behaviours and attitudes of power and privilege, racism and colonialism, sexism, ableism and intersecting systems of oppression.
- How risk is defined is too narrow, focusing on physical safety from the perpetrator. We already know that the person most likely to kill a victim-survivor is herself but even expanding the definition to include this misses the many and varied ways that women's freedom is curtailed so they lead smaller, quieter lives than they might wish.
- There has been a huge increase in victim-survivor responsabilisation e.g., many safety plans are about what victim-survivors can do to keep themselves safe not what agencies / the State can do to keep its citizens safe and to stop men's violence.
- Conversely, perpetrators are still commonly absent from our thinking, so the focus remains on fixing / changing the victim-survivor and not on perpetrator accountability.
- Multi-agency work has stalled¹⁶ / become only about MARACs. Where they do exist, local partnerships are not truly equal or based on shared power. Indeed, those with the most holistic knowledge of what is needed are frequently at the bottom of the hierarchy.
- Policy responsibility for VAWG within UK Government sits within the Home Office (and within Wales sits within the Department of Social Justice). As such policy, programs and funding for domestic abuse in England (and non-devolved matters in Wales) has a strong criminal justice lens - a system which is falling apart at the seams. Victim-survivors consistently state that the three most significant barriers to ending their

¹⁶ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2021/17/part/4>

abusive relationship are housing, money and their children (in various ways) – none of these issues ‘sit’ within the Home Office.

Some progress has been made on coercive control but even here, it is still framed through a CJS/risk lens.

‘For many women, it is the routine exercise of power in order to control and limit choices, operationalised through sustained and systematic harassment, intimidation and the use and threatened use of violence, and underpinned by an ever-present climate of coercion, that is especially devastating. As intimidation, threats and fear become central to women’s everyday lives, some women attempt to manage abuse by attempting to ‘do everything right’ (Robinson and Tredigda, 2005), constraining their own choices and lives to accommodate this ‘abusive household gender regime’ (Morris, 2009), whilst others continue to resist (Madhok et al., 2013). The debilitating – and often contradictory – consequences on women’s sense of self of this exercise of gendered power, whilst long documented, are now increasingly understood within Evan Stark’s framework of ‘coercive control’ (Stark, 2007).] Kirsty Welsh, ‘Long-term partners – Reflections on the shifts in partnership responses to domestic violence’ 2022

- Specialist services who try to deliver a needs-led service often find themselves at odds with local Commissioners who insist on risk-led approaches. This can result in services being so overwhelmed with referrals that in practice, they are forced to deliver a service to ‘high risk’ victim-survivors only. For example, at the time of writing, one organisation had 400 women on its ‘medium risk’ waiting list. Moreover, with most resources focusing on high-risk, what is left over for those classified as lower is inadequate. This is not to imply that interventions for ‘high-risk victim-survivors’ are adequate either: previous referral to MARAC, often multiple times, is a feature of 20% of Domestic Abuse Related Death Reviews.¹⁷ In contrast, the number of victim-survivors who are killed after going into a refuge is negligible.
- Difficulties with staff retention in specialist services have accelerated post-Pandemic with many leaving because of *‘working in a system that does not work for the women and is broken’*.¹⁸ Staff that do stay are exhausted and levels of burnout and sickness continue to climb. Working in the sector is still rarely recognised as a highly skilled job and is certainly not remunerated as such. Instead, ever more stringent commissioning continues to drive down wages.

*‘Is her life better?’ is a better measure than
‘has the risk been managed?’*

Needs, risk or is it both?

A number of organisations have tried to implement strengths-based and needs-led models of support in a risk-led external service environment, with varying degrees of success.

The rationale for this is summarised in the Change That Lasts literature: *“Often women who disclose abuse are assessed by professionals for risk, which then determines what level of support they are given... with risk being the indicator or gateway to support, women are getting a less tailored package of support and then struggle to escape the abuse*

¹⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/key-findings-from-analysis-of-domestic-homicide-reviews>

¹⁸ Staff exit interview, specialist women’s domestic abuse charity.

permanently.” Working in a strengths-based, needs-led way “supports domestic abuse survivors to build resilience and leads to independence.”¹⁹

We heard from those who had implemented this model that it:

- improved services to victim-survivors so not only do they not have to repeat their story, they can more easily build a relationship of trust with one worker which is itself healing and also builds trust with the organisation.
- reduced hierarchy between ... “high risk” and ... “standard” cases in recognition that all cases are important and support should be provided on the basis of women’s needs and building on their strengths rather as a result of a risk assessment alone.
- is more appropriate for the many women whose level of risk fluctuates due to circumstances beyond their control
- developed/equipped staff so they are confident and skilled to work across all needs and services, so when any woman approaches the service, staff have the requisite skills and knowledge to listen, advocate and support.
- embeds understanding that risk is dynamic.

Single front doors are widely promoted across statutory and risk-led agencies too.

However, there remain several barriers to working this way, including both the Safe Lives Accreditation, in which risk is still prioritised and on which many commissioners insist. DARDs also focus on whether risk was assessed, and access to some services such as MARAC and IDVAs is reserved for those assessed as high risk even as disquiet grows about the efficacy of the risk assessment model.

There are challenges in being able to evidence the strengths of a needs-led approach when all data collection and case management systems are dominated by risk.

Providing a truly needs-led service requires system change. The use of risk-led language is so endemic and entrenched, that even those who strongly believe in a needs-led way of working can find themselves describing what they are doing in terms of risk. This suggests that a more embedded programme of culture change is required albeit that this is often a slow, incremental process.

It is particularly important, when attempting to swim against the tide, that practitioners are effectively equipped with the tools to do so. Without this, staff are left vulnerable, and it can be hard to do their jobs effectively.

A strong alternative – new scaffolding – is required before the old system is dismantled and replaced. The scaffolding provided by a risk led approach provides some safety for workers, particularly in non-VAWG specialist services. If a worker can demonstrate they followed procedure this can be counted as ‘good enough’ by commissioners and other senior staff. Having procedures to follow means you can recruit people without good judgement as they just need to follow procedure.

A shift is needed toward models that integrate both risk and needs, centred on victim-survivors’ lives, not just incidents. This includes recognising risks beyond immediate physical harm, and addressing long-term safety, housing, mental health, legal precarity, and the cumulative impacts of coercion and control.

¹⁹ Welsh Women’s Aid: <https://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk/what-we-do/change-that-lasts/> accessed 12.8.22

What we know does work

What is needed is a focus on the whole journey from entrapment to freedom and not just the crisis phase. We need to do more about prevention (see below for more discussion of this) and more to help victim-survivors – adults and children – rebuild their lives after the devastation that abuse wreaks. The key to getting back ‘on track’ with domestic violence responses is simple yet deeply challenging. It requires services to relinquish control to victim-survivors, to stop labelling them as ‘hard to reach’ but admitting that they are ‘hard to hear’ because they are telling us uncomfortable truths about our approaches. It means treating victim-survivors as whole people with complex lives, not to be confused with complex needs of which domestic violence may only be a part. It means being needs-led rather than risk-focused, and it means addressing all of the abuse a woman has experienced and not just the physical assaults. It means sharing power and building relationships based on respect rather than simply giving the victim-survivor another experience of being the voiceless and powerless. It means not just taking a strengths-based approach in our individual work but also how we present the issue to the general public. It should shift from a deficit narrative to one where we honour resistance and survival and where joy and possibility are our goals.

Examples of different models with different frames

These are just a few examples of different ways of conceiving of the problem and thus different interventions have been developed that show some promise of yielding better results than the CJS ‘lens’. It is not intended as an exhaustive list.

Systems models

Full framework initiative & design for well-being

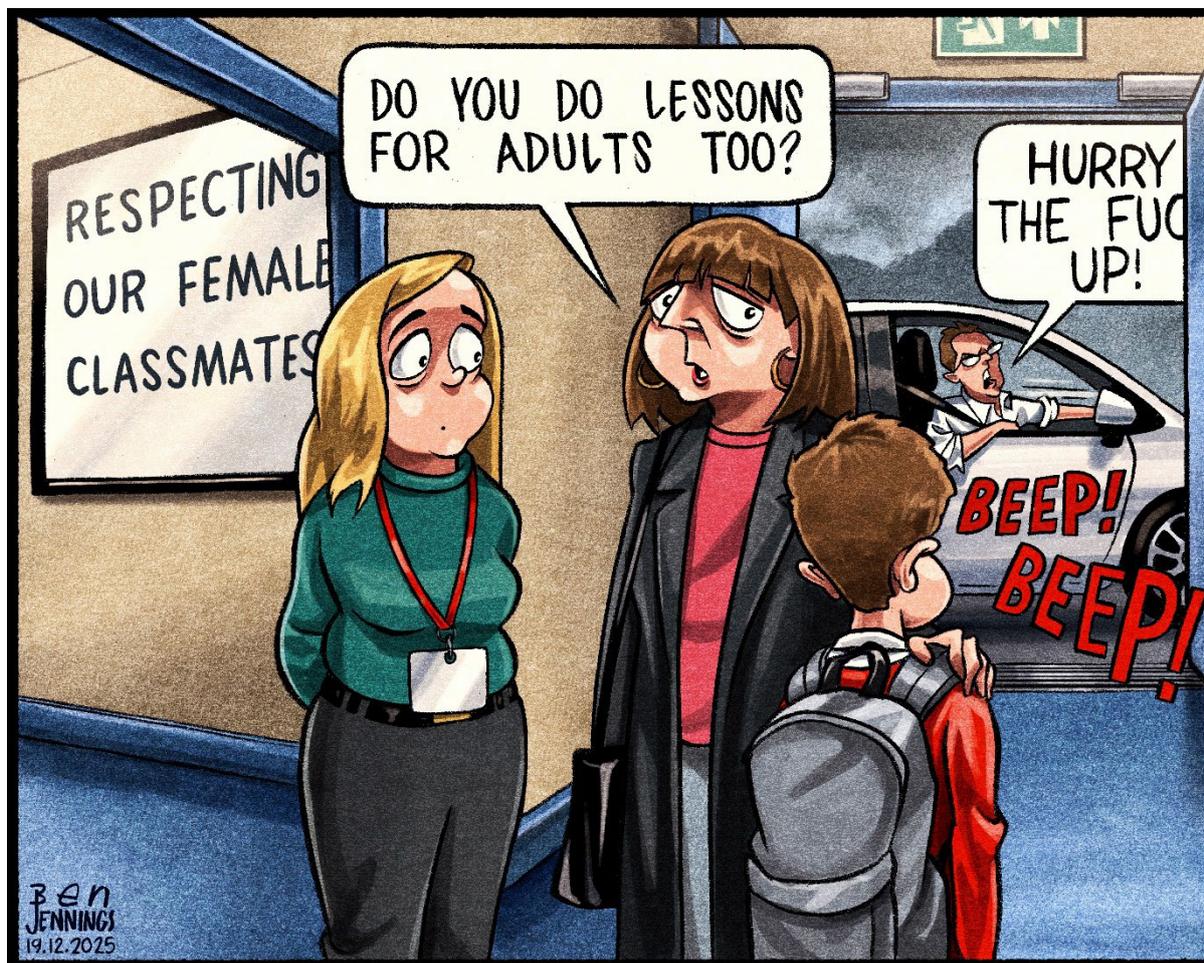
Takes as its starting point that the human drive for wellbeing is universal, but access is not. Racism, sexism, homophobia and other oppressions result in choices that require victim-survivors to lose more than they gain and a system that judges them if they reject such choices. Focuses on creating choices that meet the majority of five areas of well-being: belonging and connection, safety, stability, purpose and choice and meaningful access to resources. The aim is systems change and operates at family and community levels as well as the individual. <https://www.fullframeinitiative.org/>

Public health framework

The principles of public health provide a framework for investigating and understanding the causes and consequences of violence and abuse and for preventing it from occurring through primary prevention programmes, policy interventions and advocacy. It seeks to improve the health and safety of all individuals by addressing underlying risk factors that increase the likelihood that an individual will become a victim or a perpetrator of violence. More holistic than a CJS lens and with a much greater focus on prevention – primary (stop it happening at all), secondary (undoing the harms) and tertiary (stop it from happening again). <https://www.who.int/groups/violence-prevention-alliance/approach>

Change That Lasts: Developed by Women’s Aid (England and Wales), this is a strengths-based, needs-led model that supports victim-survivors and their children to build resilience and leads to independence and which harnesses community members to take action. <https://welshomensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Change-That-Lasts-Summary.pdf>

What's wrong with the framing of prevention



(Cartoon by Ben Jennings published in The Guardian on 19 December 2025)

- We have become stuck on teaching about healthy relationships in schools. It's not enough - and even where it is happening - it is still patchy after some two decades of agitation. While the UK government's 2025–2030 VAWG strategy rightly recognises the need to intervene early with boys and young men, its focus on individual behaviour change risks overlooking the wider social and cultural context in which misogyny develops. By framing the issue primarily as a matter of early intervention and risk identification, the strategy underplays the role of broader structural and cultural factors. It also neglects the vital prevention and education work already being led by specialist women's sector organisations that have long experience in addressing the root causes of violence against women and girls.
- The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT)'s reactive approach to tackling online violence against women and girls may not sufficiently protect those at risk of online harm.
- There are some significant flaws in the current legislation. Despite intensive lobbying, it does not include: criminalising possession of non-consensual intimate images; extending prosecution time limits to account for delayed discovery, so victim-survivors are not locked out of justice; creating a fast-track civil process to order takedown or block access to harmful content or mandating internet infrastructure providers to act

against non-consensual intimate images hosted overseas – blocking abuse at its source. The recent grok enabled nudification scandal laid bare how much more needs to be done in this area.

- If we truly believe that violence against women is a cause and a consequence of women's inequality, then reducing women's inequality has to be a key feature of our prevention efforts. Again, it is not sufficient on its own. Greater equality *has* reduced severe partner violence against women, allowed women to resist abuse more effectively, and made it easier for women to separate from abusive men but the overall likelihood that a woman will be abused by a man has not changed. '*This is because*', Stark²⁰ writes, '*men have expanded their oppressive repertoire in personal life, and governments have tolerated them doing so.*' This paradox appears to be most evident in the Nordic countries, with the world's highest levels of gender equality. In other words, whilst not disputing the link between gender inequality and gendered violence, greater rates of gender equality are not sufficient on their own for the prevention of gendered violence. While stopping the problem at source is an obvious solution, current perpetrator interventions are limited in scope, scale and success making this a piecemeal approach to prevention.

Examples of promising practices in prevention

Reducing neighbourhood sexism

Recent research²¹ has shown that the risk of intimate partner violence is higher in more sexist neighbourhoods. As such, any prevention strategy also needs to address hostile sexism within neighbourhoods.

Closing gender gaps

At work, the most extreme pay gaps occur among couples with children, reinforcing the need for policies that support work-life balance and equal opportunities. In 2022 in Denmark, parental leave was reformed granting six months to each parent. Early data and commentary suggest the reform is nudging cultural norms, encouraging more fathers to take leave and engage in early childcare. In the UK, the long-term impact of income gaps and an unequal distribution of care responsibilities contribute to a 26% gender pension gap. This puts older women at a higher risk of poverty. Gender inequalities are also stark in decision-making roles, particularly in economic leadership positions. Without concerted effort, these disparities will continue to undermine progress.

SASA! is a globally influential, community-driven approach to preventing violence against women and girls, developed by the Uganda-based NGO Raising Voices. The name **SASA!** means 'Now' in Kiswahili and is also an acronym for its four phases: Start, Awareness, Support, and Action. It's not a curriculum, it's a movement that empowers communities to challenge harmful norms and build safer, more equitable relationships. It has been successfully adapted in over 30 countries, including refugee camps, rural villages, and faith-based communities. It is currently being rolled out across Germany. Various evaluations have found significant reductions in physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, and increased community support for survivors. <https://raisingvoices.org/>

²⁰ Evan Stark 'Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life' (2007)

²¹ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0277953625005726?via%3Dihub>

Ask Me: We know that the first time victim-survivors speak about domestic violence is to friends, family or someone in the community. Women's Aid England and Welsh Women's Aid developed, piloted and evaluated a community response, 'Ask Me'. The programme has trained 1,164 Community Ambassadors across 13 geographical sites across the country, equipping them with an understanding of domestic abuse and how to respond to victim-survivors to enable the community to play an active role in ending abuse. Following the training, ambassadors were given resources and support to share what they have learned with those around them in ways that feel most comfortable to them. Ambassadors are encouraged to start conversations that will help others better understand the barriers that victim-survivor's face in speaking out. <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/what-we-do/change-that-lasts/askme/>

Oxfam's #SayEnough campaign is a call to action to challenge attitudes to women and girls, harmful practices and VAWG by standing up, speaking out and making VAWG unacceptable. Individuals and communities are asked to speak out and discuss VAWG on social media, in their homes and in public. <https://www.oxfam.org/en/take-action/campaigns/say-enough-violence-against-women-and-girls>

The **'It's Not OK' campaign** in New Zealand is a long-running, community-driven initiative launched in 2007 to prevent family violence by shifting social norms and empowering everyday people to take action. The campaign evolved through four phases: raising awareness, promoting help-seeking, encouraging community helpers, and finally supporting men's recovery and change-making. Communities were supported to create their own responses using the campaign's messaging, leading to grassroots projects in schools, marae, churches, and workplaces. Community Discovery Projects were initiated to identify conditions that support positive change, rather than imposing external solutions. Over time, the campaign has led to increased help-seeking, greater public understanding of family violence, and more people feeling confident to intervene. <https://www.msd.govt.nz/about-msd-and-our-work/work-programmes/initiatives/family-and-sexual-violence/itsnotok.html>

Wales Without Violence is a comprehensive approach to preventing violence and promoting safety involves strengthening individual knowledge and skills, promoting community education, educating providers, and fostering collaborations and networks. This multifaceted approach aims to create a society where individuals are empowered to prevent violence and where communities are equipped to support safety and well-being. <https://waleswithoutviolence.com/resources/>

What's wrong with the current criminal justice system (CJS) dominated approach?

- There is very limited data on what victim-survivors define as justice or success. The assumption throughout the criminal justice system (CJS) is that a 'good result' (conviction) will benefit the victim-survivor. There is almost no evidence to support this.
- Over the past two decades, the CJS has dominated approaches to domestic abuse and almost everything else, including specialist support services, has become subservient to the CJS and its agenda(s).
- Despite this dominance, only 1 in 5 domestic abuse victim-survivors currently involve the police (and even then, they don't report everything) and far fewer progress any further through the CJS.
- Police recorded crime data shows that **912,000 offences** were flagged as **domestic abuse-related** in the year ending March 2025 - a **17% rise** compared to **777,000 offences** recorded in March 2020. Within these figures, **33,800 sexual offences** were linked to domestic abuse - a **36% increase** from 2020 so reporting is going up even as concerns remain around charging and conviction rates.
- The most recent Crime Survey for England and Wales reports that 59% of victim-survivors of rape or assault by penetration (including attempts) since the age of 16 years stated that the perpetrator was a partner or ex-partner. Yet almost all campaigns *still* focus on date rape / taking care when travelling home / suggesting women shouldn't go out alone but in fact stay at home with the person most likely to rape them.
- DASH and DARA are widely used police risk assessment tools, yet evidence consistently shows they do not reliably identify high-risk revictimisation or repeat perpetration. Using these tools to gatekeep access to support excludes many survivors with serious and escalating risk, prioritising administrative thresholds over safety and need. This raises fundamental ethical concerns about fairness, accountability and harm.
- The CJS is very adversarial in its approach and is informed by a mostly unsupported assumption that victim-survivors want vengeance and thus their input should be limited.
- Police are very hierarchical, very macho, very male²².
- A series of police scandals of individual officers committing violence against women up to and including murder along with both the Casey and Angiolini reports revealing an endemically misogynistic culture, means that women have many reasons not to trust the police.
- The legal system – despite changes in the past few decades – is very much constructed around providing a means for men to reach resolutions without resorting to violence / killing one another AND (historically) is constructed around women as property. Only in 1987 did the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board stop paying compensation to husbands if their wives were raped. It is only 30 years since the average sentence for a man killing his partner was a mere four years. Whilst sentences have vastly improved, especially since the abolition of the 'nagging and shagging' defence, media reporting has barely shifted, and this still poisons the jury pool. (See, for example: '*From Fritzi to #metoo: Twelve Years of Rape Coverage in the British Press*' (2023) Alessia Tranchese).
- Procedural justice – how victim-survivors are treated throughout the justice process – is just as important to victim-survivors as securing a conviction. Feedback from victim-survivors suggests the system fails on both counts.
- The way coercive control is defined in England and Wales means that it rests not on perpetrator behaviour but on the victim-survivor's response. Ten years after it became

²² <https://kar.kent.ac.uk/65679/1/Silvestri-M-37039-AAM.pdf>

a criminal offence, training on coercive control is still being rolled out across police forces in England and Wales.

When feminists embrace individualistic criminal punishment, they relieve the State and society of the responsibility to create the structures and provide the support that prevents gender violence in the first place.

Justice

- As Mona Eltahawy says: *'I don't want to be protected, I want to be free.'* Prioritising protection over liberation has been referred to as the *'patriarchal protection racket'*, that is, the threat of stranger rape pushes us into the home and into the arms of husbands and male partners who are more likely to abuse and kill us than a stranger. At a macro level, the essential pointlessness in reforming the CJS is exposed. We are absurdly expecting the patriarchy to protect us from itself.
- Anti-carceral feminism is growing in popularity but with little debate about what is meant to replace it. Whilst acknowledging the limitations of reliance on the police and prison system as a tool of liberation, there is mostly critique followed by utopian visions with no roadmap between.
- Children became victims in their own right under the Domestic Abuse Act but thus far there is little sense of how this is playing out in practice. A recent report²³ from the Domestic Abuse Commissioner was launched with the headline: *'Thousands of children facing domestic abuse alone as support services risk financial collapse'*.
- The presumption of innocence is a central tenet of the CJS and the burden of proof rests with the State. But in civil court, the perpetrator still gets the presumption of innocence but the burden of proof rests with the victim-survivor who is not accorded a presumption of her speaking the truth. Is this fair?
- Common tactics used by perpetrators reach the threshold of international definitions of torture. (*'The harm of normalised violence: re-identifying intimate partner violence as torture in acknowledging the stakes of abusive relationships'* by Elina Penttinen, 2024). This is rarely acknowledged.
- Research²⁴ has found that victim-survivors were found to have multiple perceptions of justice, related to different points in their journey following abuse and regarding individual, community, and societal responses. Perceptions relate to accountability; fairness in outcome and process; protection from future harm; recognition; agency; empowerment; affective justice; reparation; and social transformation. Current understandings of justice in legislative and policy approaches reproduce the 'justice gap' by failing to take account of how victim-survivors themselves understand and demand justice.
- Victim-survivors who had experienced domestic abuse were especially concerned to have 'financial justice' following the creation of debt and their money being taken by the perpetrators, and this was key to their attempts to rebuild their lives.
- The largest cluster of responses [to what is justice?] fell within the category of accountability, which was mentioned by about a quarter of participants: *'Within our category of accountability, we identified a range of sub-themes, including (in descending order of magnitude): recognition by the perpetrator and/or of authorities or*

²³ https://domesticabusecommissioner.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/dac_bcup_executive-summary_FINAL-WEB-3.pdf

²⁴ *'What Is Justice? Perspectives of Victims-Survivors of Gender-Based Violence'* Hester et al November 2023

community of harm done; punishment and rehabilitation; revenge or retaliation; and divine or spiritual accountability'.²⁵

- When we think about justice, we need to think beyond the criminal justice system and think about economic justice, political justice and social justice. True justice would mean that women's lives were not made smaller because of their sex. That our sexuality was respected rather than exploited. That our freedom of movement was not curtailed through fear of rape. That we had bodily autonomy and were seen as people in our own right rather than as extensions of men. That when we were wronged, we were protected and helped, not shamed and stigmatised.
- Empowerment was also evident when victim-survivors talked about the longer-term processes of dealing with the impacts of abuse. Echoing Abrahams' work²⁶ on the longitudinal impacts for victim-survivors, participants talked about empowerment being represented in the little things that they start to have control over once the abusive relationship had ended, or they had undergone some form of healing, for example: buying books, going to a gig, spending time with friends, or removing a huge TV.
- Other research²⁷ echoes these findings, emphasising that *'survivors describe wanting peace of mind and freedom, as well as physical safety. Frequently, they also want the abuser's wrongdoings exposed. They want others to acknowledge what they have endured.'* This can be summarised as constructive accountability (consequences that deliver safety, and which act as a 'wake up call' for the abuser. Notably the focus is less on individual reparation and more on social justice), acknowledgement and validation (an end to victim-blaming, support and social solidarity) social regard and prevention (an end to shame and culture change so others intervene / help and children are educated about healthy relationships) and safety in its broadest sense (safety from continued physical, sexual, psychological, economic, verbal and litigation abuse and an end to financial dependency and isolation).
- When considering how victim-survivors define justice, the specialist domestic abuse sector delivers more justice than the so-called justice system. We acknowledge the harm that has been done. We validate their experiences. We raise awareness in communities that such behaviour is unacceptable. We provide groups where women can share their experiences and see clearly that it wasn't their fault, and they are not to blame.

Examples of different models

New York State Integrated Domestic Violence Courts ²⁸

A single family dealing with domestic violence may have to appear in several different courts involving multiple judges, lawyers, and a myriad of different court-related agencies and service providers at the same time. As a result, each court learns only a piece of the story of the involved family. Decisions are made without all relevant information and there is the potential for judges to issue inconsistent or conflicting orders (eg a restraining order and to facilitate contact).

More than sixty counties in New York state have implemented an Integrated Domestic Violence (IDV) Court; this approach - sometimes referred to as a 'One Judge, One Family' model - places all the issues involving a single family before one judge. This innovation offers

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Abrahams, H. (2007). Supporting women after domestic violence: Loss, trauma and recovery. Jessica Kingsley Publishers

²⁷ <https://www.domesticshelters.org/articles/after-abuse/what-does-justice-look-like-for-domestic-abuse-survivors>)

²⁸ <https://www.criminaljustice.ny.gov/ofpa/domviolcrtfactsheet.htm>

an opportunity to address inter-related family problems in a comprehensive manner, provide integrated service delivery and improve both court efficiency and informed judicial decision-making. IDV Courts are specifically designed to promote: victim safety and defendant accountability; informed judicial decision making; consistent handling of all matters involving the same family; efficient use of court resources; and a concentration of social services that include domestic violence and child victim advocacy agencies. It also prevents the abuser from being able to manipulate the two legal systems to their advantage such as angling for a withdrawal statement to halt criminal proceedings in exchange for reduced hostility in the family court proceedings.

Caring Dads London Ontario

Caring Dads²⁹ programme exists to change current practice to better include fathers in efforts to enhance the safety and well-being of their children. This group programme intervention emphasizes the need to enhance men's motivation to promote child-centred fathering, addressing men's ability to engage in respectful, non-abusive, co-parenting with children's mothers, recognise the impact of trauma on their children's lives and well-being.

Domestic Violence Restorative Circles in Duluth engages men with histories of abuse in facilitated restorative circles, guided by trained community volunteers. It offers space for accountability, healing, and behavioural change outside the criminal justice system. Recidivism rates for participants who complete the program compared to those who fail to complete the program are significant (16.7% vs 42.9%) and participants demonstrate a decrease in their acceptance of violence, in victim-blaming, and in the moral justification of their behaviour.

<https://www.menaspeacemakers.org/dvrc>

Developed from research led by Professor Marianne Hester, the **Justice Project Toolkit** helps survivors define and pursue justice beyond courts—such as recognition, validation, and perpetrator accountability through advocacy and community support. It is currently used by over 13 Women's Aid members and national federations across the UK. Evaluations show that survivors feel more empowered and heard, even without legal outcomes, and that services are better able to measure the impact of their support on survivors' sense of justice.

<https://www.bristol.ac.uk/research/impact/justice-gender-violence/>

FreeFrom in the USA enables survivors to achieve economic justice through cash grants, savings match programs, and policy advocacy. Survivors lead campaigns to change laws on coerced debt and financial abuse. Since its launch, FreeFrom has disbursed \$2.2 million in grants and helped survivors save \$823,000, with many reporting increased safety and dignity.

<https://www.freefrom.org/>

Canadian Centre for Women Empowerment (CCFWE) supports survivors to reach economic justice through financial literacy, trauma-informed coaching, and peer-led workshops. Survivors define justice as reclaiming control over money, rebuilding credit, and influencing policy. Their STEAR app helps survivors track financial harm and access

²⁹ <https://caringdads.org/about-caring-dads-1>

support. Evaluations show improved financial wellbeing and increased survivor-led advocacy for systemic reform.

<https://ccfwe.org/>

Why the current approach is not working for ALL women

- Women with multiple needs are often excluded from specialist domestic abuse services. For example, many refuges do not accept women with active addiction issues or with (often undefined) mental ill-health issues, women with certain criminal convictions or women involved in prostitution.
- Women don't even have to have multiple needs: the majority of refuges (52%) cannot accommodate women with two or more children or women with mobility issues (only 1% of refuges are accessible for a woman in a wheelchair)
- Whilst there may be (some) sound reasons for the above, if the specialist sector doesn't address them, others will. Part 4 of the Domestic Abuse Act has given a new impetus to meeting these gaps and if the specialist sector doesn't step up, it will end up being further marginalised.
- Women with multiple needs are more likely to have children removed from their care – a circumstance that can trigger a downward spiral from which many never recover.
- Women with multiple needs are over-represented amongst homicide victims. Specialist domestic abuse services (IDVAs and MARACs in particular) often fail to engage with them.
- By / for services (services run by staff from the cohort they are serving³⁰) have closed at an alarming rate over the past 15 years but the expertise that they had has not been developed within mainstream services (e.g. on immigration rules or 'honour' based abuse)
- There are also other State structures which abusers can weaponise to continue to abuse (e.g., the ineffectual Child Maintenance Service)
- Survivors with multiple needs are often characterised as 'difficult' or 'challenging' rather than being understood as coping with multiple experiences of trauma

In addition to the above, consultations with victim-survivors highlighted a consistent set of barriers across their interactions with statutory and support services. Many described significant communication and language barriers, including limited access to interpretation and the distress of being required to repeatedly retell their experiences. Survivors frequently reported a lack of clear signposting and information about available support, alongside unsympathetic or poorly informed responses from housing, policing and other statutory services. Several described a transition from being controlled by the perpetrator to feeling controlled by systems, with decision-making power removed at the point of seeking help.

Access to safe and appropriate accommodation and health support also emerged as a major concern. Survivors reported difficulties moving on from refuge or temporary housing when they felt ready, challenges associated with shared or insecure accommodation, and ongoing uncertainty about housing entitlements. Health services were described as difficult to access, particularly counselling, with long waiting times and an over-reliance on medication by GPs, which some survivors reported was later used against them in family court proceedings. Court processes were widely experienced as confusing and retraumatising, with many survivors also reporting victim-blaming attitudes, limited specialist support tailored to protected characteristics, and a lack of communication or helpful engagement from the police.

Overall, victim-survivors found most professionals inconsistent, and the system confusing, biased against them, unsympathetic and underfunded. A lack of communication between agencies and professionals was also a commonly mentioned theme.

³⁰ <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/138343/pdf/>

Instead of recognizing and promoting women's autonomy and strength, we encourage a collective belief in their weakness and vulnerability.

Domestic abuse almost always impacts on a victim-survivor's sense of well-being, and many women self-medicate with alcohol or other drugs. In other words, the co-existence of mental ill-health, problematic substance use, and domestic abuse is very common. It is deeply concerning that the specialist domestic abuse sector is largely unable to meet the needs of women with mental health and problematic substance abuse and is further evidence that the communal refuge model needs to evolve.

The services that are most competent at meeting the needs of victim-survivors with multiple needs are rarely specialist domestic abuse services. Instead, they are (mostly) women's organisations that work a lot around domestic abuse but who are not usually considered as part of the domestic abuse sector (e.g. those working with women involved in prostitution or who have lost children to the care system or street homeless women). It is perhaps worth noting that this is where most of the non-risk led work takes place and which engages the most marginalised cohorts of women.

The debate over victim or survivor is often tone deaf – women who have experienced abuse often don't relate to either term – and nor do they define themselves by their trauma

Examples of different models

Safe Spaces

Safe places are needed where women can safely access support, information, advice and come together to meet and connect. This not only makes pathways to support more accessible, but it also addresses social isolation and mental health challenges particularly for those who have experienced trauma and/or abuse.

The relationship between social support, community networks, friendships and well-being are well established. The quality and availability of a caring social network is closely linked to health and well-being and for promoting integration and community cohesion³¹. Women's centres and women's organisations play a vital role in recovery and rebuilding and critically in 'bringing back joy' to a woman's life through a range of activities. Below are some examples of such centres:

Nottingham Women's Centre was founded 50 years ago and is one of the oldest Women's Centres in the country. The Centre provides casework support on a range of issues including work and training, finances, housing, justice, substance use and dependency, family and relationships and much more. Women can access affordable counselling, join a range of activities and courses and meet other women. <https://www.nottinghamwomenscentre.com/>

When Women Gather, CIC is dedicated to addressing the growing challenges of isolation and loneliness among women through music, dance, drama, creative arts and wellbeing

³¹ <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9703221/#s1>

focused projects. Offering a wide range of events, workshops, talks promoting friendship and cultivating a deep sense of community. <https://www.whenwomengather.uk/>

Calderdale Women's Centre was established 40 years ago and has been providing support to women and girls through a range of services including domestic abuse, counselling, adult sexual exploitation, 1-1 support, diverting women away from CJS and into health, social care and other support pathways and wellbeing groups. <https://womencentre.org.uk/calderdale/>

Swan Women's Centre in Liverpool was founded by local women who recognised that traditional health services weren't always meeting women's needs – so they created something that did. The centre has grown into a trusted, community-based charity supporting women and girls aged 13 years and over providing trauma-informed and gender specific mental health support. <https://www.swanwomenscentre.org/pages/2-about-us>

Trevi was founded in Plymouth in 1993 providing safe and nurturing spaces where women in recovery can heal, grow and thrive. Trevi services include Jasmine Mother and Child residential family centres in Plymouth and Devon, offering specialist parenting support for mothers with substance abuse issues while enhancing parenting skills and allowing them to remain primary caregivers for their children. The Sunflower Women's Centre provides a safe hub and wraparound therapeutic services for women in recovery. Daffodil Family Centre a residential parenting assessment centre and Blossom Women's House, a safe, trauma - informed women only accommodation. <https://trevi.org.uk/>

WINNER, the Preston Road Women's Centre provides information, support and advice to women in Hull. The Centre offers a range of services including specialist domestic abuse support, legal advice and representation through its family law firm, Affordable Justice, safe, affordable housing (see below for more details), accredited training, registered nursery provision for 0-5 years old, Girls Only Young Women's project, Rainbows Charity shop offering affordable, quality second hand goods and craft groups. <https://www.purplehouse.co.uk/about-us/>

Creating Spaces for Action

Rethinking Traditional Group Work Programmes

Own My Life <https://www.ownmylifecourse.org/> Much more focused on honouring resistance, this takes a strengths-based approach and has a strong emphasis on rediscovering joy.

Embedding coercive control in responses: Finding the Cost of Freedom identified ten areas of life damaged by being subjected to coercive control. Broadens the range and extent of interventions needed for victim-survivors to achieve space for action.

https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Costs_of_Freedom_Report_-_SWA.pdf

Self-defence plays a significant role in the context of VAWG both as a practical tool for immediate safety and as a broader strategy for empowerment and prevention. In the 1970s many Rape Crisis Centres built self defence into their services and in the 1980s, Claudia de Silva, founded the London Centre for Personal Safety³² which was committed to providing free self defence techniques to women affected by VAWG. Self defence initiatives could and have

³² <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2012/nov/21/claudia-da-silva>

been shown to contribute to enabling women and girls to develop a confident relationship with their bodies and to challenging *constructs of a vulnerable and timid femininity*³³.

Stay Safe East is a specialist service led by disabled people, supporting survivors of domestic and sexual abuse who are disabled, Deaf, neurodivergent, or have mental health conditions. Its innovation lies in its **intersectional, rights-based approach**, recognising disability not as a vulnerability but as a lived identity. The service offers **accessible advocacy**, including British Sign Language support, Easy Read materials, and trauma-informed casework. It also trains mainstream services to improve accessibility and challenge ableism. Evaluations show that **over 70% of clients felt safer and more in control** after engaging with the service.

Notts500: Juno Women's Aid has launched a campaign to galvanise support from 500 men across Nottinghamshire, calling on them to publicly stand against VAWG and become visible allies in ending gender-based violence. By engaging men as advocates and as upstanders, Juno aims to shift the narrative from awareness to responsibility.
<https://junowomensaid.org.uk/notts500-campaign/>

Centring Survivors: In Nepal, community facilitators, themselves survivors of the country's civil war, hold storytelling workshops, involving other women about their experiences of violence, offering them a chance to own their personal narratives to break the cycle of intergenerational violence. The Story Kitchen conceives of such spaces, not only as 'safe spaces', but also as 'brave spaces'. <https://www.linkedin.com/company/the-story-kitchen-tsk/about/>

Centring Communities: Victim-survivors are far more likely to confide in a friend or family member than a professional. Despite this, almost all efforts focus on improving the agency responses. Having an ill-informed community compounds the isolation which survivors experience both before and beyond abuse. It is also worth noting that an ill-informed population also doubles as the jury pool. Research shows that most people want to help and to be supportive, but they don't know how, and they have fears for their own and their family's safety if they do intervene.

Swayam is a feminist organization in India that mobilises grassroots networks to tackle domestic violence, child marriage, and trafficking. It trains survivors to engage with lawmakers and shape policy. Swayam helped drive the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005) and continues to monitor its implementation through local forums. Evaluations show increased legal literacy and survivor confidence. They focus on building alliances across many levels - from village groups to parliamentary committees and utilise a variety of techniques, including theatre, to generate discussions about male violence.
<https://swayam.info/>

In partnership with MADRE, **Wangki Tangni** in Nicaragua mobilises Indigenous Miskito communities to create collective action plans against domestic violence. These plans are developed through community assemblies, where women identify priorities and design culturally relevant interventions. The initiative uses radio broadcasts, healing circles, and youth education to shift norms. Evaluations by UN Women highlight its success in reducing stigma, increasing reporting, and embedding survivor support in local governance.
<https://www.madre.org/partner/wangki-tangni/>

The **TEARS Foundation** in South Africa operates a mobile crisis response system that connects survivors of domestic and sexual violence to emergency care, counselling, and legal

³³ [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/571385/IPOL_STU\(2016\)571385_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/571385/IPOL_STU(2016)571385_EN.pdf)

aid. It utilises tech-enabled grassroots outreach by using SMS and geolocation to reach survivors in rural and underserved areas. TEARS also trains community volunteers to act as first responders. Evaluation data shows a 30% increase in early reporting and improved access to justice for survivors in remote regions. <https://tears.co.za/>

One-Stop Centres in the Philippines are government-supported but community-embedded hubs offering shelter, legal aid, medical care, and counselling support. They integrate services under one roof, often within barangay (village) health centres. Survivors can access help without navigating complex bureaucracies. Evaluations by UNFPA show increased survivor retention in support programs and reduced re-victimization. OSCs also train local leaders to recognize and respond to abuse, embedding VAWG responses in everyday governance.

https://www.icrw.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ICRW_DRLToolkit_Dec.2020_ENGLISH.pdf

Economic Freedom for Victim-Survivors

*Financial autonomy isn't just a safeguard
– it's a foundation for empowerment*

Economic freedom is one of the hardest elements to establish and sustain. Few VAWG projects provide assistance in this arena but even when they do, the focus is on detangling them from economic abuse rather than establishing financial freedom.

For many women, childcare is central to being able to access and sustain any form of education, training, volunteer/work experience and employment. Costs and availability of childcare can be prohibitive. Preston Road Women's Centre has established a registered nursery for 0–5-year-olds for the children of staff and victim-survivors. However, provision of affordable, accessible, flexible childcare for all age groups is critical if women are to be supported into employment, self-employment and further education or training.

Paths towards employment for victim-survivors

Encouraging victim-survivors to explore the various options open to them through work and work experience, training, education and/or the possibility of self-employment is a crucial step towards their recovery and independence. These options can offer financial stability, a sense of purpose, a support network outside of the home and promote health and wellbeing, all of which are vital for rebuilding their lives after abuse.

Work and work experience

Employers in all sectors can play a vital role in supporting victim-survivors to (re)enter the workforce by offering work experience opportunities, flexible working arrangements, providing support services and raising awareness amongst staff of domestic abuse. Many women may not have been able/allowed to work as a result of the abuse they experienced. Work experience and volunteering offers the opportunity for victim-survivors to gain knowledge, skills and experience of work and work settings and can act as a gateway into future employment. <https://www.royalvoluntaryservice.org.uk/news/volunteering/productivity-boost-from-volunteering-adds-46-billion-to-uk-economy-each-year/>

Self-employment can offer a more flexible and empowering path allowing victim-survivors control over their work hours and income.

Public-private partnerships with a focus on a shared goal of supporting victim-survivors of abuse into work can be achieved by creating a shared goal of facilitating employment opportunities and providing tailored support services. This collaborative approach should involve specialised domestic abuse services, employers, and government agencies working together to address the unique needs of survivors and break down barriers to employment.

By working together, public and private sector partners can create a supportive ecosystem that empowers victim-survivors to rebuild their lives, gain financial independence, and thrive in the workplace.

Promising practices / innovations

“I would feel fully supported if services were in place to cover all of my basic needs in the few years after escaping the abuse. E.g. rent, food, basic necessities, and therapy (and other medical needs) covered so I could focus solely on my healing, rather than making ends meet” <https://www.ownmylifecourse.org/post/own-my-life-employability-final-evaluation>

FinAbility is a trauma-informed financial education platform designed by and for survivors of domestic abuse. Its innovation lies in its survivor-led design, ensuring emotional safety and relevance. The platform offers budgeting tools, peer forums, and financial safety planning. It partners with shelters (refuges) and legal aid providers to embed financial recovery into broader support services. In 2024, FinAbility reported that over 80% of users felt more confident managing money after using its tools. Its digital-first approach allows discreet access, even for those still in abusive situations. <https://www.finabilityus.org/>

The **YWCA National Emergency Survivor Support Fund (NESS)** in Canada provides direct cash grants to survivors fleeing domestic violence, covering rent, utilities, and relocation. It's innovative for bypassing bureaucratic delays and putting money directly into survivors' hands. In 2024, the fund supported over 1,000 survivors, with 95% stating the grant was the primary reason they could leave an abusive situation. The fund also reduced the pressure on refuges and improved long-term stability, with 93% reporting increased safety and confidence. [https://irp.cdn-website.com/7bbf7df5/files/uploaded/2024 NESS Impact Report SlaightFamilyFoundation.pdf](https://irp.cdn-website.com/7bbf7df5/files/uploaded/2024%20NESS%20Impact%20Report%20SlaightFamilyFoundation.pdf)

Commonwealth Bank's Next Chapter is a banking initiative that helps survivors regain financial control. It includes specialist support teams, secure banking options, and a Financial Independence Hub offering free coaching. In 2025, CommBank reported that its programme had reached over 5 million customers, with \$1.6 million in coerced debt waived and 600+ survivors supported into employment or education. Its industry-wide influence has prompted other banks to adopt similar protocols, making it a promising model for systemic change. <https://www.commbank.com.au/articles/newsroom/2025/07/Next-Chapter-Innovation-addresses-financial-abuse.html>

The **Swadhar Greh Scheme** is a government-led initiative in India and provides shelter, vocational training, and financial assistance to women escaping abuse. It integrates economic empowerment with psychosocial recovery. In 2020–21, the scheme supported 7,785 women across 362 refuges. Despite funding challenges, its community-based model offers job placement, legal aid, and microfinance access, especially in rural areas. It is one of the few schemes globally that links housing, income, and rehabilitation under one umbrella. <https://www.india.gov.in/spotlight/swadhar-greh-scheme>

The **Zahra Foundation** in Australia offers financial literacy workshops, hardship grants, and one-on-one counselling for women affected by domestic abuse. Unusually, it focuses on long-term recovery, not just a crisis response. In 2023, Zahra supported 184 women, secured \$168,600 in debt relief, and administered \$25,000 in essential services payments. Its survivor-led advocacy has influenced banking and welfare policies, and its Pathways to Empowerment program saw 94% of participants enter education or employment. <https://zahrafoundation.org.au/annual-reports>

FreeFrom in the United States is a survivor-led organisation that provides cash grants, savings match programs, and policy advocacy. The Cash Assistance Programme has been able to distribute over \$1.3m to 4,100 survivors in all 50 states and Puerto Rico to meet their basic needs like food, rent, and utilities. Operating on trust, Freefrom does not request any proof of receipts which tends to make the survivors more confident, and this flexibility also helps them to be safer. A comprehensive report (*'Survivors Know Best'*) sets out data relating to this programme which contributes to the body of knowledge about economic harms taking place in abusive relationships and roadmaps towards economic security. In a similar vein, that is, a scheme based on trust, their Savings Matching Programme supports survivors in building up to \$500 in emergency savings over six months. Survivors receive up to \$40 per month. A total of \$262,000 has already been distributed among 400 people. Freefrom have also developed Gifted by FreeFrom, a social enterprise focused on generating wealth for survivors through entrepreneurship and living wage work. <https://oakfnd.org/survivor-led-strategies-for-tackling-economic-abuse/>

Dress For Success began by providing professional attire to survivors so that they could look their best when seeking employment. It has since developed a number of additional programmes including *Beyond the Suit* which offers career coaching, financial literacy, and digital tools like *The Career Hub*, which includes webinars, job boards, and skills training. With affiliates in 27 countries, each local branch develops services specific to its community such as Mexico City's leadership training or Sydney's outreach to older women at risk of poverty.

In Canada and the United States during the 1970s and early 1980s, **Feminist credit unions** (often called Feminist Federal Credit Unions or FFCUs) were member-owned financial cooperatives founded by feminists to challenge discriminatory banking practices. They offered women access to loans, savings accounts, and financial education at a time when mainstream banks often required a male co-signer or denied credit based on marital status. Though most disbanded by the mid-1980s due to financial strain and changing legal landscapes, they helped catalyse the Equal Credit Opportunity Act of 1974, which made sex-based credit discrimination illegal. Should consideration be given to a revival of these cooperatives?

Project E.A.T. in Tennessee & Mississippi is a survivor-led initiative offering a 60-day transitional employment program with cash stipends, job placement, and financial coaching. It addresses economic abuse by building autonomy through income and skills. Evaluations show increased survivor confidence and reduced reliance on abusive partners. Its innovation lies in combining trauma-informed employment with peer mentorship and survivor leadership. <https://gradusproject.org/>

Pathways to a safe, secure, sustainable future

We repeatedly heard that women's organisations are focused so heavily on keeping women safe, delivering services, responding to the demands of funders/commissioners and overall survival that the space to think, innovate and create has diminished drastically. And yet, innovation is taking place and new ways and models of working and delivering support to victim-survivors are being seen across the country. From accessing social investment, to developing partnerships with the private sector to generating new, independent means of income generation, the women's movement is taking the lead and is at the vanguard of new and exciting developments and rethinking traditional ways of working.

Rethinking Refuges

Underpinning refuges is the idea that women must retreat from men's violence

Refuges fulfil a vital, recognised role by providing safe spaces for women and children fleeing domestic abuse. The Domestic Abuse Act (2021) has enshrined the need for safe accommodation provision into law. However, the Act does not contain a specific statutory definition of a "refuge," although it places duties on local authorities in England to fund support in "accommodation-based" services. Instead of "refuge," regulations refer to "relevant safe accommodation," which includes refuge, specialist, and second-stage accommodation.

Women's Aid England state in their *No Woman Turned Away*³⁴ report that there continues to be insufficient refuge spaces available, with an estimated 61% of referrals rejected in the 2022-23 financial year. As previously mentioned, traditional models of refuge are not always able to accommodate disabled victim-survivors, older victim-survivors, those with multiple and complex needs, such as severe mental ill-health, problematic substance use, large families or those with older male children, victim-survivors with pets and transgender victim-survivors. For those who are able to access emergency refuge accommodation, services are seeing longer and longer average lengths of stay increasing from months to up to 2 years. This is due to the severe lack of available, affordable housing in the social and private sectors. This situation has resulted in refuge spaces being 'blocked' for those needing to flee violence and abuse, as existing residents are unable to move to alternative accommodation or move forward in rebuilding their lives. Communal refuges, a model developed in 1970s, are not what most victim-survivors want or need. Dispersed accommodation³⁵, providing safe spaces for some of those who face additional barriers when accessing traditional refuge space is now available alongside communal refuges as a form of emergency accommodation for victim-survivors.

The ONS published qualitative research³⁶ on the experiences of victim-survivors who having left domestic abuse have lived in different types of accommodation including hotels, hostels, self-contained and shared accommodation and the barriers they faced in navigating complex processes and systems. The report highlights women feeling excluded from decisions affecting them and their children, wanting accommodation most similar to a traditional home setting and the importance of both physical and emotional safety. Victim-survivors suggested

³⁴ <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Nowhere-to-Turn-2024-Report-PDF.pdf>

³⁵ <https://refuge.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/V6-dispersed-accommodation-report-Web-higher-dpi.pdf>

³⁶ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/womenwhohavesurviveddomesticabuseandtheirexperiencesoftemporarysafeaccommodationinengland/latest#1-main-points>

priorities for future service provision, which included offering flexibility in recognising and addressing accommodation and support needs, better availability of accommodation with safe and appropriate facilities for day-to-day living, and better mental health provision for survivors within accommodation and after they leave.

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has published a 3-year evaluation of Part 4 of the Domestic Abuse Act (2021)³⁷. Part 4 places a statutory duty on Local Authorities in England to provide support within safe accommodation for victim-survivors of domestic abuse and their children. The report confirms that the numbers of survivors accessing support in safe accommodation has risen since the duty came into effect and that, as a minimum it had secured continuity of existing provision. The report confirms that access to support was improved by having a broad breadth of provision (both support and forms of safe accommodation) especially for those with additional needs or specific characteristics.

In 2022, the **Safe Ireland, Safe Spaces Project** published a guide on how safe places, safe practice and safe community can be achieved. The guide includes suggested guidance on the design of refuge services for women and children fleeing abuse, to assist in the planning of a safe space that meets the needs of individual domestic abuse service providers working in particular communities. The guide is underpinned by the physical, psychological and professional wellbeing of the residents, staff, visitors and communities who will engage with the refuge into the future and contains 11 key recommendations for refuge design.

<https://www.safeireland.ie/policy-publications/>

Rethinking housing:

The issue of longer-term housing remains a huge challenge. A stable and secure place to live is the basis of stability, security and dignity which enables victim-survivors to set down roots, build networks of friendship and support, rebuild and recover. A victim-survivor's experience of violence and abuse should not define and determine their future; they should be supported to realise their own potential and make their aspirations a reality. A safe and secure home with security of tenure is fundamental to achieving this.

Many women's sector organisations do not currently own any property. However, there is now a shift in the approach to owning property, delivering refuge and other accommodation and services taking place within the women's movement. This is in part a response to the very real threat of cuts to funding and to ensure sustainability into the future but also a recognition of the threat posed by registered social landlords who have successfully secured domestic abuse contracts in many areas resulting in the closure of women led by and for domestic abuse services.

Preston Road Women's Centre³⁸ and their trading arm Winner Trading Limited³⁹ (Winner), in Hull, have led the way and now have an extensive property portfolio. Some of the properties were secured through social investment funding from SASC⁴⁰. Many other domestic abuse organisations have or are in the process of pursuing property acquisition through SASC, Resonance⁴¹ and traditional mortgages.

Other women's organisations, including Staying Put, Juno Women's Aid, Sheffield Women's Aid, IDAS, Oasis and others are now adopting the model established by Winner Trading

³⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/domestic-abuse-duty-for-support-in-safe-accommodation-evaluation/domestic-abuse-duty-for-support-in-safe-accommodation-evaluation-executive-summary>

³⁸ <https://www.purplehouse.co.uk/>

³⁹ <https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/charity-search/-/charity-details/5166006>

⁴⁰ <https://www.socialandsustainable.com/portfolio/thrive-womens-aid/>

⁴¹ <https://resonance.ltd.uk/for-investors/investment-opportunities/property-funds-1/wish-fund>

Limited and Preston Road Women's Centre and acquiring properties for women and children affected by VAWG.

Social Investment and a vision of a Network of Feminist Social Landlords

Traditionally women's services supporting victim-survivors of domestic abuse or sexual violence have been precariously dependent on short term revenue streams of funding from various government departments and/or charitable funders. Some also have insecure arrangements for the accommodation they lease. Work undertaken across the sector in recent years has identified that most women's sector organisations typically lease or have precarious management agreements with local landlords or housing associations to provide safe accommodation for vulnerable women. This leaves them exposed to the risk of the accommodation being withdrawn, as has been experienced by many organisations in the last few years.

Rosmerta CIO seeks to provide a capital asset base providing secure access to safe accommodation from which women sector organisations (WSOs) can operate. This asset base will grow over time and be owned by and for the sector.

Rosmerta seeks to provide a viable alternative source of quality accommodation for organisations of all sizes in the sector enabling them to have security of tenure over the safe accommodation they operate. Rosmerta (named after the Celtic goddess of wealth and innovation) is a collaboration of senior leaders in the women's sector in England which has been established to create solutions to intractable problems in funding services which tackle VAWG, in particular safe accommodation.

Work is progressing well with capital funders/social investors to identify monies to purchase properties for Rosmerta Housing which will then be leased on fair and reasonable terms to women's sector organisations delivering refuge and supported accommodation to victim-survivors of domestic abuse across the country. This is the first step in moving towards the establishment of a network of feminist landlords across the country that can provide secure, safe accommodation for victim-survivors of VAWG that includes but goes beyond refuge and supported accommodation to meeting long-term housing needs.

Forever Fund (dormant assets)

Led by Women's Resource Centre (WRC)⁴² the Forever Fund is a bold, new initiative dedicated to securing long-term, sustainable funding for women's organisations across the UK and advancing gender equality. These organisations play a vital role in tackling inequality, supporting marginalised women and strengthening communities, yet many are at risk of closure due to chronic underfunding. WRC is calling on the Government to invest in an ethical endowment model, the Forever Fund. This Fund will, in time, reduce reliance on short-term grants and public funding, shifting to a strategic, future focused approach that will generate independent income, reduce pressure on public finances and will drive lasting systemic change. The model is based on an initial investment which will come mainly from Government, with a growing share from corporate partners and philanthropists. The goal is long-term financial autonomy for women's organisations. <https://www.wrc.org.uk/forever-fund>

Social enterprise

Women's organisations have developed social enterprise models to support victim-survivors into employment and self-employment and as a way for developing sustainable income streams for their service. Examples below are:

Thrive Group Wales is a social enterprise, founded in June 2017, with the key purpose of developing a sustainable income stream to support the work of Thrive Women's Aid. The

⁴² <https://www.wrc.org.uk/our-approach>

enterprise delivers high-quality, commercial cleaning services to businesses and organisations, in both public and private sectors across South Wales. They create family-friendly employment opportunities for those furthest from the labour market. <https://thrivedas.org.uk/about/thrive-group-wales/>

Chayn is a global non-profit, run by victim-survivors and allies around the world, creating resources to support the healing of victim-survivors of gender-based violence, Chayn creates open, online resources and services for victim-survivors of abuse that are trauma-informed, intersectional, multilingual and feminist. Chayn is a registered training provider and now generates more than 50% of its income from training. <https://www.chayn.co/about>

The **Rebecca Bender Initiative & Elevate Academy** in the US was founded by a trafficking survivor of the same name. This enterprise offers online leadership and career development courses for survivors of exploitation. Revenue from course sales and speaking engagements funds scholarships, survivor mentorships, and advocacy work. Elevate Academy has trained thousands of survivors in digital skills, entrepreneurship, and personal branding. Its survivor-led model ensures content is trauma-informed and empowering. The initiative also partners with corporations to create employment pipelines, turning survivor expertise into systemic change. <https://rebeccabenderinitiative.org/>

Azadi Kenya is a survivor-led social enterprise that provides safe housing, trauma care, and vocational training for trafficking survivors. It generates income through ethical fashion and handmade crafts, sold locally and online. Survivors are paid fair wages and trained in business skills, with profits reinvested into victim services. Founder Sophie Otiende, a globally recognized survivor advocate, ensures that survivor voice drives every aspect of the enterprise. Azadi challenges traditional charity models by proving that dignified work and healing can coexist. <https://www.azadiinc.org/#:~:text=Azadi%20is%20a%20survivor%20led,after%20their%20experience%20with%20trafficking.>

The **Independent Collective of Survivors (ICOS)** in Australia is a **national survivor-led organisation** working to end domestic, family, and sexual violence. It generates income through **consulting, training, and policy advisory services** that embed lived experience into government and nonprofit systems. ICOS played a pivotal role in shaping Australia's *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022–2032*, securing **\$1 million in federal funding** to ensure survivor engagement throughout the plan's lifespan. Its members—over 30 survivor advocates—offer **expertise to institutions**, helping them ethically integrate survivor knowledge into service design. Revenue supports **advocacy, community building, and capacity development** for survivors, with a strong focus on **diversity and inclusion**. <https://icos.org.au/>

Building and Sustaining an Expert Workforce

The following two sections of this report address concerns we heard in relation to workforce development and funding. In order to achieve the changes we wish to see outlined in this report, there must be in place a valued, skilled, knowledgeable and expert workforce to deliver the services victim-survivors need. Furthermore, without long-term sustainable funding in place the specialist women's sector will continue to see organisations close and for those that remain, the impossible task of meeting an ever-increasing demand for safety and support from those affected by VAWG.

Workforce Development

Workforce development is essential for the delivery of a safe, quality service to victim-survivors and for the ongoing sustainability of women's organisations. In recent years, most notably since the pandemic, women's organisations have experienced unprecedented difficulties in recruitment and retention of staff.

A pathway from victim-survivor to volunteer to professional

Many of the organisations in the present domestic violence/VAWG sector arose originally out of pioneering women's activism, fighting for social change. This history is recorded in detail in Professor Gill Hague's, *History and Memories of the Domestic Violence Movement: We've come further than you think*. It charts the domestic violence, rape crisis and sexual violence movement, campaigns and service development. It records the struggles around funding and the development of competitive commissioning frameworks. This important work records the vital contributions of victim-survivors to the creation of the current domestic violence/VAWG sector. Many of those who established these organisations became senior leaders within the sector but are now on the brink of retirement and in the interim, the pathway from victim-survivor–volunteer–professional has shifted

These collectives formed a movement of women who achieved astronomical success; convincing politicians and the public-at-large that abuse was a serious matter. Power and money have a tendency to corrupt and while most of the services who seek to support women subjected to abuse remain committed as workplaces to that very same goal; the commissioning climate demands these organisations act as service providers in a neo-liberal, capitalist system which demands everything be done for the lowest price. In such a situation, there is no space for support workers to build the skills and knowledge to eventually become the organisation's CEO. Instead, a corporate specialist, who knows nothing about abuse and everything about budgets, is parachuted in to lead an organisation that is no longer a community of committed women, but instead is a service provider with targets, a three-year plan and recommissioning looming on the horizon. Then there's the shark-like companies circling, ready to convince commissioners they can do twice as much for half the price. A feat that the company's large, bid-writing team are skilled at articulating; whether the company can ever achieve such impossibilities becomes irrelevant. (Natalie Collins, Own My Life)

We have heard from some that, a pathway for victim-survivors needs to be much more than sitting on a Lived Experience panel and that too much recruitment in the charity sector is based on privilege and not potential. Victim-survivors must be valued and appropriately remunerated for their contributions in the workforce, as volunteers and as experts through lived experience.

Personal development for existing staff

Providing personal development for existing staff, opportunities and resources for employees to enhance their skills, knowledge and overall performance is a foundation for ensuring the delivery of a high-quality service. There has been a huge growth in VAWG/DA training in recent

years alongside a move to 'professionalise' the VAWG sector. IDVA/DAPA are Home Office recognised qualifications. Tenders and contracts often stipulate the number of IDVA/DAPA qualified staff needed to deliver the service and yet, contracts do not include the costs towards ensuring staff can develop and gain the qualifications required by commissioners and funders. Furthermore, Safe Lives Leading Lights Accreditation and Women's Aid/Imkaan National Quality Standards require frontline staff to have IDVA/DAPA qualification and for Leading Lights, managers to have undertaken Safe Lives training for service managers for the organisation to be eligible for (re)accreditation. Although valuable and necessary, it is becoming more and more difficult for organisations to meet the costs of training given the financial challenges being faced by women's organisations. More financial support is needed to ensure staff can access the training required and to ensure standards are met. However, costs are only one aspect of the discussions we had in relation to workforce development.

Those we spoke to stated the need for training that is:

- rooted in the values and principles of the feminist movement and be part of a wider approach to systemic change, reducing inequality, exclusion and discrimination
- victim-survivor centred throughout and reflects the whole journey from entrapment to freedom
- created with victim-survivors and rooted in Lived Experience
- trauma-informed and intersectional
- iterative and cyclical to ensure ongoing learning and implement improvements

Examples of positive practice and innovations

Gender at Work works in partnership with activists and researchers to bring together new knowledge on deep structures of inequality and discriminatory social norms, with innovative approaches and tools to transform them in organisations and communities. <https://genderatwork.org/resource/gender-at-work-associates-kalyani-menon-sen-and-ray-gordezky-on-their-approach/>

The focus for many years has been on professionalising the VAWG sector with barely any focus on professionalising the statutory sector to create the systemic change needed to meet the needs of victim-survivors. Reverse mentoring is an approach that has been used to influence and improve agency responses and service delivery for victim-survivors. See examples below:

SEEDS Cornwall are a group of female victim-survivors of domestic abuse, representing the voice of survivors to increase understanding amongst those working in the statutory sector. <https://seedscornwall.org/>

Work in Practice: was established by Geraldine Bilson, a professional consultant and victim-survivor of domestic abuse. This reverse mentoring programme brings together those with lived experience and professionals to create systemic responses that meet the needs of those who access services. <https://anzmh.asn.au/blog/s5-e06-geraldine-bilston>

VAST Methodology provides training for those working in social justice and other organisations to reduce harm from trauma and to drive systemic evolution. <https://vastmethodology.com/vast-training/>

Women's Resource Centre provides a range of feminist training courses including leadership and power, feminism, campaigning, procurement and commissioning, fundraising, unconscious bias and peer support through networks such as Black Women Leaders Network. <https://www.wrc.org.uk/Pages/Events/>

Terms and Conditions

Any discussion about workforce development, must include a focus on terms and conditions. Women's organisations are delivering life-saving, and life-changing work. They are a partner of and commissioned by the State to deliver this work. Recent decades have seen the salaries of those working in women's organisations (and across the voluntary sector) driven down by competitive commissioning and procurement processes. Furthermore, salaries have seen reduction in real terms with multi-year pay freezes in place in many organisations as a way of saving money and cutting costs in order to remain competitive.

A Scottish Widows Women and Retirement⁴³ report has warned of the 'very real risk' that pension parity will remain out of reach for generations and that women will be most adversely affected, condemning those working in the voluntary sector (68% are women) to a working life earning less and an old age in poverty. This is yet a further example of gender inequality in practice and further strengthens the argument for the need for an urgent review of the current system and structures.

⁴³ <https://adviser.scottishwidows.co.uk/assets/literature/docs/61324.pdf>

Funding

Research published by Rosa⁴⁴ in 2023, found that only 2% of funding for the voluntary sector is allocated to women's organisations.

Funding and the lack thereof, was a significant issue in so many of our conversations. Those we spoke to stated that services are still recovering from the hugely negative impacts of Government imposed austerity measures, the global pandemic and lack of funding available for VAWG focused work. However, despite the challenges, services continue to do all they can to work within these constraints to support victim-survivors and their children. Women's Aid England's Annual report⁴⁵ (2024) echoes much of what we heard from those we spoke to which included but is not limited to the following:

- The rising cost of living and the impact of this on victim-survivors and services
- Impact of increase in employer National Insurance Contributions⁴⁶ in already difficult operating conditions is having severe consequences for future of many organisations
- Constraints of current commissioning and competitive tendering practices
- Power dynamics especially seen between Local Authorities and specialist services e.g. constant threats of having funding withdrawn/ended as a direct response to challenge
- Concerns about the over reliance on State funding
- Domestic abuse sector is significantly propped up by non-commissioned services
- Organisations – which expanded to meet the demands of commissioners are now often excluded from applying for alternative funds due to the size of their organisation
- Competition for funding is increasing, and the success rate is reduced,
- This work is often not a priority for funders which further limits sources of possible funding,
- Non-specialist services undercutting the cost of support.

Funding for Women's Organisations

In 2024, Women's Resource Centre's, *Currency of Change* Leadership⁴⁷ conference brought together over 150 organisations from across the UK to address the systemic barriers to women's economic independence. The conference highlighted the urgent need for radical economic solutions including WRC's calls for the establishment of a National Women's Fund – a permanent endowment dedicated to funding women's organisations and advancing gender equality. (see above).

Funding will be needed to ensure how, where and what type of services are delivered to improve responses to all forms of VAWG. However, funding must be focused on financing interventions which are safe, quality and most importantly, evidence based. Women's organisations and specifically second tier organisations e.g. Women's Aid England, Welsh Women's Aid, EVAW, Rape Crisis England and Wales and Women's Resource Centre have been working with government and services to improve local commissioning practices. Whilst this is welcomed, we heard time and again, concerns about the need for improvements in the way funding is distributed from national government through to local

⁴⁴ <https://rosauk.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Women-and-Girls-Sector-Research-Mapping-Report-Final.pdf>

⁴⁵ <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/annual-audit-2024/>

⁴⁶ <https://www.acevo.org.uk/2024/11/ncvo-and-acevo-are-calling-for-urgent-action-by-the-treasury-to-avoid-additional-financial-burden-on-sector/>

⁴⁷ https://www.wrc.org.uk/blog/currency-of-change-womens-economic-independence-and-the-power-of-solidarity?dm_i=7NA3,B8HM,2T7HY5,17Q9A,1

government, Police and Crime Commissioners, Mayoral Authorities, Health Authorities etc. Those we spoke to expressed deep concern at the *leaky pipeline of commissioning* which has the potential to reduce the amount of money available for frontline services. Furthermore, we also heard significant concerns about the absence of funding for core costs and lack of recognition for business support functions despite ever-increasing commissioner demands for more performance management information. Funding cuts have led to unsustainable workloads across the sector with record levels of both staff burnout and resignations.

How can the money from our benefactor make a difference?

We are immensely grateful to the anonymous benefactor for their support; without which we would not have been able to undertake this work. However, this is only a first step in making the changes we need to create a safer world for women and children. Much more work is needed to develop a model of support that meets the needs of victim-survivors of VAWG from now into the 2030's and beyond. We hope that this report is a start from which we can build.

Those we spoke to in the course of this work have said they would like to see:

- Funders commit to funding work to reduce and prevent VAWG
- Funders to provide more opportunities for flexible and multi-year funding to reduce application burdens, cover non-delivery costs, and support organisational learning. Proportionality is key.
- Funders should commit to minimum standards of contracting, including covering the full costs of delivery.
- Funders should align on reporting requirements suitable to the size of grants and the specifics of activities, which would likely reduce the time spent for organisations without sacrificing rigour. Proportionality is key.
- Funders should enable specialist services to lessen their dependence on the State
- Invest in some of the suggestions contained in this report
- Invest in systems change rather than projects

As a next step we would like to see this report and its findings widely shared in order to start a wider conversation, using the recommendations and examples detailed above, and begin the work of creating a new model of service delivery that will bring about the change victim-survivors need to ensure their safety, dignity, and freedom.

*There ***is*** money for doing this work and if done properly, the potential savings to the public purse would run into millions. The problem is that it isn't enough of a political priority, and it requires a shift in thinking that would upset a number of dominant narratives about women, relationships and culpability.*

The illustrations below reflect the discussions held at the roundtables held as detailed above.



