



Statement on behalf of VAWG organisations in England & Wales on the Cost of Living Crisis

Background

Whilst affecting us all, the current recession and cost of living crisis is disproportionately impacting women, particularly those whose lives are impacted by abuse and inequality, and the organisations that are supporting them.

Ample evidence suggests the cost of living crisis will affect the poorest women hardest as they are the most affected by cuts to social security and public services. According to the Women’s Budget Group, women have lower levels of savings and wealth than men, and are more likely to be in debt. They take on the majority of unpaid labour and are more likely to be in insecure employment. All these factors, exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, have resulted in women being less equipped to cope with the current cost of living crisis.

Women are the ‘shock absorbers of poverty’, managing household budgets and families who rely on them. This is even more acute when considering Black and minoritised women, with poverty significantly higher amongst Bangladesh (53%), Pakistani (48%) and Black (40%) ethnic groups than among White people (19%). In addition, disabled women face higher monthly costs for their care and support [Women’s Budget Group, 2022]. Women with intersecting needs will be hit hardest by the cost of living crisis.

Women are being forced to make the unthinkable decision of staying in dangerous situations because they fear they are unable to survive economically on their own. This fear is intensified by the increased risk of homelessness, food insecurity and loss of custody of their children that can be caused by economic instability. In the context of domestic abuse, recent Women’s Aid research found that almost three quarters (73%) of women living with and having financial links with the abuser said that the cost of living crisis had either prevented them from leaving or made

it harder for them to leave. Thus, the cost of living crisis is putting more women at risk of harm, destitution or death.

Women's voluntary and community organisations (WVCOs) are best placed to ensure the safety of women and children. They offer trauma-informed holistic provision supporting women and children in their communities with housing, counselling, legal advice and therapeutic support. These specialist services reduce repeat victimisation of these women and children.

Since the rise in energy costs, the women's led-by-and-for violence against women and girls (VAWG) sector has been working tirelessly to provide specialist support to women and children living in situations of VAWG, faced with a dramatic increase in referrals both in number and complexity, with the majority coming from women struggling with the rising cost of living.

This increased demand on services comes at a time when the cost of providing these services is increasing and the resources and capacity of organisations is decreasing. Frontline organisations, in particular refuges and specialist community services, are facing spiralling energy bills and are struggling to navigate the recent energy price guarantee which lacks detailed guidance for the charity and supported housing sector. They also face uncertainty about what lies ahead after the energy cap is lifted in April 2023. Staff are often covering costs of service users themselves, including feeding women who have not eaten for days.

For frontline VAWG organisations, the increase in demand and reduced resources is compounding the already existent funding crisis present in the sector for a long time. Violence against women is endemic in England and Wales, with rates and demand for services increasing during the Covid-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, frontline women's organisations were supporting a 300% increase in referrals. The emergency funding provided during the pandemic has now ended, but with demand only increasing, frontline services are providing more with fewer resources.

Inadequate resources for the level of demand is not new. The sector has been plugging the gaps created by years of cuts to statutory services and social security, whilst facing funding cuts itself. This has created a funding crisis, with the sector being grossly underfunded for the breadth of essential work it does. In 2020, only 3% of funding to civil society organisations in London went to women's organisations [Women's Resource Centre].

This is felt most acutely by specialist Black and minoritised women's organisations, who have historically been drastically underfunded in comparison with their white-led counterparts and who are dealing with more complex cases due to the intersectional impact of the cost of living and other crises on Black and minoritised women. As of 2021, specialist led-by-and-for Black and minoritised VAWG services supported 129,765 survivors a year whilst operating at a funding shortfall of 39% [Imkaan].¹

¹ *By and For* refers to lived experience organisations for example, organisations representing BME women and girls and disabled women among other groups of women with specific intersectional needs that are not met by generic

Not only do they save lives, but women's led-by-and-for services actually save the state money. On average, the women's sector saves the NHS £500 million per year [Women's Resource Centre].

This high demand for services is showing no sign of decreasing, further exacerbating the ever growing funding crisis in the sector. Without adequate funding for the sector, it is not able to provide the life-saving and life-changing services to women that are so crucial to their survival, especially during this current cost-of-living crisis. It also makes it more difficult to recruit and retain staff, many of whom worked throughout the entirety of the pandemic and get little recognition outside their workplaces. The survival of women facing VAWG is intrinsically linked to the survival of the organisations who are best placed to support them.

Recommendations:

As a result of the ever-growing cost of living crisis that is affecting survivors and women's organisations alike, the VAWG Sector in England and Wales are requesting the UK Government to:

To Government:

- Set up an Emergency Fund to support all women and children subjected to male violence and prevent the risk of death or destitution, including migrant women and women with no recourse to public funds,² to be distributed by women's sector infrastructure organisations in England and Wales. These organisations will be accountable to the Government and ensure full GDPR of all data and financial due diligence.
- Universal Credit, working tax credit and other 'legacy' benefits to be immediately increased in line with rising rates of inflation and acknowledgement of the energy driven crisis
- Introduce a charity energy price cap that is specific to charities and reflects their different status to businesses.
- Ensure all grants are paid to Voluntary and Community Organisations in advance, as organisations do not have the reserves to subsidise this work using their own funds.

To Public Commissioning Bodies:

- Guaranteed 3-5 year contracts with inflationary uplifts
- Prioritise funding for specialist VAWG services in the community
- Mid-term contracts need an uplift to reflect higher operational costs and a recruitment crisis in a sector still dealing with the impact of the pandemic, with high levels of staff burnout.

provision because of the nature of services they require. Staffing, governance and membership structures of these organisations emerge historically from grassroots struggle and reflect the women and girls they serve.

² We recognise that while women are far more likely than men to experience violence and abuse and therefore should be the primary beneficiaries of such a fund, we note that any emergency fund should be accessible to all survivors, including male victims of domestic abuse and those who identify as non-binary.

Signed:

Women's Resource Centre
Imkaan
Welsh Women's Aid
End Violence Against Women Coalition (EVAW)
Rape Crisis England and Wales
Women's Aid Federation England
Respect
Safety4Sisters
Olive Pathway
Saheli
AVA Project
Refuge
Standing Together Against Domestic Violence
IDAS
Women and Girls Network
FORWARD
Kurdish and Middle Eastern Women's Organisation (KMEWO)
London Black Women's Project
Nia
The Traveler Movement
Juno Women's Aid
Asian Women's Resource Centre
Rights of Women
Roshni
Hull Sisters
Aurora New Dawn Ltd
Irisi
Centre for Women's Justice
René Cassin
Women's Budget Group
Faith and VAWG Coalition
Deaf Ethnic Women's Association (DEWA)
Nottingham Women's Centre
Surviving Economic Abuse
Southall Black Sisters
Wearside Women in Need (WwiN)
Shama Women's Centre
Prosper Life Initiatives
Middle Eastern Women and Society Organisation MEWSO
Humraaz
SAWN
Mama Helath and Poverty Partnership – MHaPP

SafeLives
Latin American Women's Aid
Advance
Jewish Women's Aid
Stay Safe East
Latin American Women's Rights Service (LAWRS)
Ashiana Network
Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit at London Metropolitan University
Al-Hasaniya MWC
White Ribbon UK
Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland
Race Equality Foundation
Woman's Trust
Women's Centre Cornwall
The Women's Liberation Collective
Kairos Women Working Together
EACH Counselling and Support
IKWRO – Women's Rights Organisation
Apna Haq
IMECE
Hibiscus Initiatives
Domestic Abuse Services Thrive Women's Aid
Aberconwy Domestic Abuse Service
Cardiff Women's Aid
West Wales Domestic Abuse Service
Montgomeryshire Family Crisis Centre
Solace Women's Aid
FiLiA
Young Women's Trust
DAHA
Women in Prison
Sisters of Frida
Midaye Somali Development Network
Niara
The Consent Collective
Women@thewell
Ella's
SARSAS
The Fawcett Society
The P.H.O.E.B.E. Centre
Network of Eritrean Women-UK
Huda Jawad
Demelza Luna Reaver, PhD Candidate, Cybersecurity CDT, University College London
Professor Aisha K. Gill, Professor of Criminology/Co-Chair of EVAW