

Premise

The independent Strategic Review of Funding and Commissioning of Violence Against Women and Girls Services, chaired by Lesley Irving, has been established by the Scottish Government to develop a new funding model that will ensure high quality, accessible specialist services across Scotland for those experiencing any form of violence against women and girls.

This call for evidence is being issued to help gather evidence on a number of key topics including:

- The types of services that should be available for women, children and young people experiencing any form of violence against women and girls
- Who should provide these services
- Whether access to services for those experiencing violence against women and girls should be a right in law
- How barriers to services can be removed
- How the quality of services can be ensured across Scotland
- Whether services and providers should be based on local need
- Action that should be taken to address unmet need and regional disparities
- How to include those who have experienced violence against woman and girls in the co-design/evaluation of services
- The optimum length of funding periods to ensure sustainability of services
- Requirements around funding application processes
- Action that should be taken to reduce/mitigate the impacts of violence against women and girls in Scotland

The Scottish Women's Convention held an in person conference regarding Violence against Women and Girls and held online and physical roundtable events. It became evident that this topic created strong feelings for women and funding was an issue that both women experiencing violence and women who worked in the sector wanted more resources and commitment with regards too. This consultation response reflects the lived experiences of the women who came to our events to speak to us and offered their lived experiences of the funding and commissioning of VAWG services.



The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC)

The SWC is funded to engage with women across Scotland to ensure that their views are represented in policy and decision-making processes. The SWC uses the views of women to respond to a variety of parliamentary, governmental, and organisational consultation papers at Scottish, UK and international levels.

The SWC gathers information using different methods, including roadshows, thematic conferences, surveys, and both in-person and online roundtable events. This submission presents the views of a range of women, reflecting their opinions, ideas and lived experience. Working together with many other equalities organisations and community groups, we use our broad network to ensure that women from a range of backgrounds are heard and acknowledged. We are continually reviewing innovative ways of engaging with women and developing our trauma-informed and culturally sensitive practice to support vital contributions from as many women as possible.

Questions

What do you consider to be the main function or purpose of services challenging violence against women and girls?

Women told us that they felt that the main function or purpose of services challenging violence against women and girls was to protect them and keep them safe. They also advised that they thought that these services should support them when they needed it. They also stated that education especially for younger woman and men was essential to challenge and prevent VAWG as much as possible.

One woman stated "Sometimes you need the services to be there right at the start, to be there to help you get out of the horrifying situation you are in because you are terrified and in fear for your life. The problem is that most of these services only last for a few months. It is later when you are alone and the impact of what has happened hits you and you realise you have some form of PTSD and the support doesn't seem to be there for us. It should be there whenever a woman needs it if she has experienced violence at any point in her life because trauma and your response to it doesn't stick to a timescale"

What services should be available for women experiencing any form of violence against women and girls?

Women told us that they needed multiple services to be available when experiencing VAWG. They advised they needed help with admitting that there was an issue. Some women felt they did not know they were in an abusive relationship until they had watched a program or an advert or had spoken to someone who was experiencing similar things to them. Therefore, they felt that grassroots organisations that could help them understand what was going on and advice regarding numerous issues such as accommodation and housing, benefits and financial advice, counselling for them

and their families would be helpful. They wanted more resources to be given to organisations, which already exist but don't have adequate funding.

"More resources I think is the better way. The women who are having these experiences of violence, they just want to get out of this environment, but where do they go? There are such long waiting lists, so unless they can stay in a hotel, they are having to stay with this violent man. So the government needs to make more funding to deal with this for women."

"I would like the Scottish Government to actually work with organisations that are supporting women and to ensure they have the funding and the resources to support these women."

"My worry is that we're setting people up for failure because people are under this naïve impression that we're out of covid, we're fine, we're not on lockdown anymore. However, as we all know, it's the actual effects of covid that are causing us the most harm. People are really very ill mentally because of what has been going on and sadly most of that extra funding people had has been whipped back again and we can't put on that service anymore."

"A lot of it is about funding and continuing of posts, but also, I know that a strategic review is coming up. More consistent longer-term funding is really important to actually imbed services for women and young people."

"For some women that do have some really serious difficulties to deal with and PTSD and trauma, and the waiting list can be way much longer than 12 weeks, sometimes a year or more which is really not helpful."

"Most women do not have too much knowledge. If they are suffering, this violence but they don't know what to do because they are mostly dependent on their partners. They're not working or they're not fully trained in how to survive. They rely on their husband in their houses so finding out that information is the most important for our women."

"The point is that you cannot talk about something you are not aware about so when women are going through an abusive relationship and they don't talk about it, how would we know about it until women really trust you, and I think that most women have lost trust."

What services should be available for children and young people experiencing any form of violence against women and girls?

Women told us that more education services that teach rights and talk to them about self-worth and self-belief would be a benefit children and young people. They also stated that this could teach them that violence is not acceptable in any shape or form. Women also told us that they would have liked more holistic services to help their children and help them understand what they were feeling and give them ways in which to express these feelings in a more positive way especially if they had witnessed the violence.

“It is hard when you know they have seen you being abused and that you did not leave, they don't understand how scary that is and how terrified you were. I put on this mask and tried to act like everything was okay for them but all it did was teach them that they were not worthy and not to show their emotions. I wish I handled it better for them but when you are in it you can't see a way out. I did not realise it was a protection to shut myself down. I wanted them to learn that this is not okay that they could show their emotions but I wanted it to be in a more positive way so that if they were angry they could show it and it doesn't need to end up in violence, that there are other ways to deal with anger in a healthier way.”

“We have to change what we say to kids if a boy hits a girl we tell them it's because he likes you so we are teaching them that boys will be mean and it's a sign that they like them it's so wrong. What we are teaching them is that a boy being violent towards them is a sign of caring for them when it is the complete opposite”

“There's been no real psychological work done, so you've got one that's left with all this hatred and anger, now where's that going to go? Into his relationships and into women. It's a vicious circle.”

“One thing I realise is that, if this is happening to women, it will have an effect on the children. This can then push them into an abusive relationship, either because they feel they want to run away from home, or because they think that it is ok to put up with situations like that.”

“The children are also suffering when they are seeing their father continually beating their mum, what kind of information is that giving to them when they are growing up in that environment then they are growing up and repeating the same thing.”

Please provide any examples of good practice you may have.

North Ayrshire Women's Aid ran a program for families and the women who attended said that while they were getting help the children took part in a project, which found holistic ways of them sharing their experiences with family workers, which let them, put their emotions down in different creative ways. They felt this helped their children and that it helped them bond with their children more as there was an understanding of how they were feeling. This project was only funded for a short time but it was one of many that had a positive effect on the families involved and was run by the children and young person's service.

What role should third sector organisations play in the provision of specialist services to women, children and young people experiencing violence against women and girls?

Women told us that if it was not for some third sector organisations they fear they may not have been alive today. They believe the third sector have a pivotal role in helping women escape violence. It is often the third sector organisations that spot something is going on.

“They talk to you get to know you and you trust them that bit more until you are spilling your heart out. You don't want to burden your family because of the shame and for some reason it seems easier to speak to someone outside of your family and friendship circle. They don't put pressure on you too leave they don't scold you for staying and putting up with it they listen, they build you back up until you are strong enough to leave.”

“I put it down to the way I was and that I deserved it. I had no self-worth. The organisation I worked with was a parenting group and it was there that I realised that the situation was not normal that what was happening to me shouldn't be and then I realised the effect it was having on my children. The guilt was crippling.”

“I tried to speak to the group I was attending as it was the only place I was allowed to go. The person in charge signposted me to the usual website but it would have been nice if they were more specialised in the subject and help me access the support I needed at that time in my area. I don't blame them for not knowing as I didn't really know where to look.”

“I feel very lucky to be here. I wanted to say that the work that Edinburgh Rape Crisis has helped me with, it has been life changing. The therapists there really do care about women's safety. My PTSD has got much better. About a year ago, I was diagnosed with an acute anxiety disorder, and I came off medication because, with therapy, I managed to regain improvement of my life... I feel like it's given me my voice back and my voice doesn't feel like it doesn't belong to me anymore. It used to feel like someone had taken the pen away from me, and wrote my narrative for me as a victim, but now I feel like I am a survivor. I think that the work all these organisations do has a life changing impact for women like me.”

“As a survivor of abuse, I appreciate everything you do. Whether that's an email, or educating people, I know it really does help. In Scotland, I've got lots of help and free therapy and it's been amazing and I know thank-you is very simple but you do change women's lives, you do make an impact and I feel very grateful, so please continue doing what you do. You've helped one woman here today like me so everything you do, I really appreciate it.”

“I wouldn't have been able to get away without Women's Aid. They made me realise what I was going through. There were problems getting through to them at the start because of Covid, but they put me in touch with Children First, and the police put me in touch with GAS, so I feel having all those connections really helped. Each of them would speak to the others if I said they could so that it would help me get through the court and everything else. I do feel they were really supportive and understood where I was coming from.”

Many women spoke about how the third sector from foodbanks to clothing banks helped them get help to change their situation. They also worried about the fact that some of these grassroots organisations lack funding and rely on volunteers. Many spoke about how many third sector organisations had to fold during COVID as they were not seen as a necessary organisation. They stressed how important they were

in helping them reach out to the bigger organisations such as Women's Aid and Rape Crisis.

What role should local authorities play in the provision of services to women, children and young people experiencing violence against women and girls?

When we spoke to women, they said they needed more uniform services across the local authorities and that the funding allocated to each local authority should be used to fund core services as well as third sector. They said that more cross working with other local authorities and similar programs would help women and families who have had to be relocated due to violence. If they had similar services and worked together then there would be less trauma for the women involved, as they would not have to be starting from scratch again in a new area. They would be able to pick up where they left off and would not have to keep retelling and reliving their experiences to get the help they needed. Women felt housing should be looked at and felt that women should be housed in appropriate safe dwellings and that they were not put at risk when fleeing violence. They also felt that the services, which work in local authorities such as social work, should be more trauma informed and help families stay together rather than separating them.

“Sometimes the more subtle forms of sexual exploitation especially in women who are already fleeing violence situations are overlooked, for example landlords demanding sex to keep the rent low and things like that are quite hidden.”

“We've got refuge accommodation and some of that was self-contained and some of that was shared, but because of covid we couldn't have any shared accommodation. That has obviously reduced refuge spaces for women and kids, it obviously all depends on the size of the family whether you could share, but there would often be times it would be two single women who wanted to share to have that wee bit of support off each other. But we had to stop that so there was less spaces. Also, with us being a charity, our housing benefit that we would claim for women in refuge reduced as well because we could only claim for one, so that is our running costs, that is what keeps us running. Local authorities should have done more to support them and us.”

“Trying to find safe accommodation is like banging your head against a brick wall. So often the women are more or less forced to stay where they are until something more suitable becomes available so that's not an ideal situation.”

“More resources I think is the better way. The women who are having these experiences of violence, they just want to get out of this environment, but where do they go? There are such long waiting lists, so unless they can stay in a hotel, they are having to stay with this violent man. So the government needs to make more funding to deal with this for women.”

“The thinking hasn't changed. The simple examples like why hasn't mum turned up to take the child to the health visitor vaccination appointment or whatever. Well maybe because she's not actually being allowed out of the house by the perpetrator, but that's still not getting thought of, and mum is still to blame.”

What role should the Scottish Government play in the provision of services to women, children and young people experiencing violence against women and girls?

Women told us that the felt funding was a big issue concerning the provision of services and they were worried that because things were being done differently during the pandemic that this might be an issue going forward. They did not have face-to-face meetings, which was a huge issue as they were unable to talk at home due to their abuser being there. They were worried that the Scottish Government would therefore reduce funds so needed to know that the funding would not be cut to these essential services, but increased to ensure the women fleeing violence and the workers in the sector would feel secure and safe. Staff who also worked in this field raised genuine concerns regarding this. It is therefore vital that core funding is given to ensure these services remain in person.

Women also thought it was important to put VAWG into the Women's Health Plan and rights to ensure that women received the best care when experiencing gender based violence. They also felt it was important to look at the benefits system for women fleeing abuse and to ensure we do not trap them in poverty, as economic abuse is another form of VAWG that perpetrators often use. Women from BAME backgrounds advised us that they also thought that the terminology around violence needed reviewed as it over looked so called "honour based violence" Women also commented that they would like more support from their elected representatives when fleeing violence. When we spoke to women, they advised that they think more could be done within the education system with regards to explaining about relationships and rights. They felt that this is something, which should be looked at especially for younger adults. Women also felt that not enough awareness was raised around this issue and more needed to be done through education.

"More resources I think is the better way. The women who are having these experiences of violence, they just want to get out of this environment, but where do they go? There are such long waiting lists, so unless they can stay in a hotel, they are having to stay with this violent man. So the government needs to make more funding to deal with this for them."

"I worked all through covid from home and then we did zoom, that was very popular, and teams and phone calls, but I agree, a lot of them didn't have a safe room to talk confidentially so it was really difficult and sometimes people were not answering their phone or missing appointments so we saw a big increase of people not picking up or attending but as soon as the office has opened."

"Phone calls are not the safest way to work. For one, you don't know who's in the house or what's going on there. In most cases, if they don't know you, you're not really getting the best out of that conversation because you're going to be limited in what you're saying."

“The fact we were working from home and not doing any face-to-face, we were able to deal with a lot more clients. Now we’re going back to face-to-face we’re not going to have the capacity. I’ve already had a couple of workers coming to me with complex cases that maybe take up a worker’s whole afternoon where before in an afternoon she was able to support four women, so that’s going to impact on the number of referrals we’re able to juggle.”

“I’m certainly not advocating to continue phoning women because there have been lots of things we’ve uncovered since we’ve been back in the community. There was one woman who had been saying on the phone she’s not in a relationship, but you go into the house and there’s men’s pants on the radiator and she’s actually pregnant. Everything has just been superficial on the phone, there’s not been the body language and the tell-tale signs. It ticks boxes but it doesn’t give quality.”

“I love the fact we have a Women’s Health Plan. I think it’s fantastic for Scotland, we’re really paving the way. But I was really sad to see that domestic abuse isn’t sitting in there. It is a public health issue and I do think that should be there because otherwise I feel that’s kind of two steps forward and maybe three steps back. All of us on here know that if we could fix anything in this world which is really going to make a difference for women, it’s domestic abuse.”

“I think the laws coming in are brilliant, and showing that all this is wrong is brilliant. I do think they actually need to back it up by following through with things, though. My partner has got away with everything, even though he was caught by the police doing it. There needs to be something backing it up because otherwise it’s good to tell people that there’s something wrong, but you need to do something with it.”

“It’s not just that it’s being overlooked but it’s that the policies we have are actually adding to the problem with the financial aspect. I’ve worked with a lot of women recently who have come away from their partners but they’re being abused all over again in terms of waiting on payments for children and being in that poverty trap yet again.”

“Honour-based abuse, it’s not being ignored completely but it is being partly ignored because of the Scottish Government’s definition of a perpetrator... Although honour-based abuse, female genital mutilation and forced marriage are acknowledged as other forms of domestic abuse, if the women are seeking help, for example if they’re looking for a refuge space, because the perpetrator is not a husband or partner or ex-partner, these cases are not taken.”

“Third or fourth year in high schools, I think it’s too late, especially when you think young people are susceptible to pornography at roughly nine or ten years old; I think we have to start much earlier. And it’s not just about folk finding out about what domestic abuse is, what coercive control is, it’s also about self-esteem and being able to build self-worth in young people, not just girls but boys as well and not having that gender bias... In primary school, they’ve got resilience and health and wellbeing but nowhere in there is it about gender or treating people with kindness so, for me, I think that’s a massive gap... it’s about starting it really early and trying to encourage all children and families to be involved in that.”

"I think it could even start in early years, in nursery, because right from the word go you can definitely share these thoughts with regard to respect. Also, in early years parents can be brought into the equation much more easily. There's much more scope for doing parenting programs and bringing the parents in as well which doesn't happen quite so much in primary school where parents tend to fall away a bit... 80% of your learning takes place in early years, it's amazing so before the age of 5 you really should be getting right in there and doing what's really important in terms of how women should be treated, how you should be respectful, all those things."

"I think right through the school. I think it's got to be constantly revisited. I don't think we can have gaps, I think we have to introduce it in early years and keep revisiting it every year."

"That was one of my bug bears about the curriculum for excellence, because I thought there was an actual opportunity to bring in these subject areas, like PSE. I think all these topics need to be included in the curriculum and seen as part of everyday education because we can't assume it's being done at home."

"We can't just concentrate on academia in schools, we need to teach life skills and resilience."

"I think it's something to ask of the Scottish Government is to give more outreach in terms of activities, in the street like stickers and stuff that is more visible for people who just pass over. I have seen at the university stickers in the toilets which are very useful, but I know it's not in all organisations. I think it's very important because the topic we are discussing is very sensitive and so not all women are going to the website looking for it because they are like 'last week I was abused' no it's not happening like that. You have grief and then you are going in the street and you don't know what to do and so if you find just something in the street that will help you, like a sticker or a message, or if you receive something in social media like on Instagram. I think outreach is very important."

What role should the NHS play in the provision of services for women, children and young people experiencing violence against women and girls?

Women told us that they felt there had to be better provisions for counselling and for waiting lists to be reduced for mental health support for both them and their children. They felt that 8 weeks should be the maximum wait for anyone to be seen by a specialised trauma service and that counsellors should be on hand to help address the trauma they had experienced. They felt that NHS staff should also be trained specifically to spot the signs if any women were to come in with a physical injury and to ask the question. Women felt that if they advised this was happening to them that there should be a mechanism to report it as a vulnerable adult without it having a negative impact on their family. Women also felt if the NHS could not provide the services, they should be able to signpost to who can provide them, with these services taking a holistic approach.

"I went to hospital on numerous occasions nobody really noticed what was happening I wasn't able to say anything because he was with me all the time and the Dr's were too busy trying to see everyone else they didn't spot the signs. There has to be more training for staff to recognise these signs"

"I was scared to say what was happening to me to the Dr, I felt they would contact social services and I would be labelled a bad mother and my children would be taken away from me. They were all I cared about and the thought they might be taken from me because I couldn't stop the abuse was more terrifying than the abuse itself."

"You weren't able to really go the doctor so where you might have gone to the doctor and they'd have picked up on something that had happened to a child that's not been happening. I mean with phone calls, it could have been that all that woman and child needed was to actually be in front of that doctor for that all to come out."

"I wanted to reiterate and to say what I've noticed is a real increase in the severity of mental health difficulties in the clients being referred. I work part time for Argyll and Bute rape crisis and 2 days a week as a CBT therapist at the CMHT (community mental health team) and I know that when referrals come through, if there's any reference to child sexual abuse or sexual violence, it's quickly decided that person should be referred on to a specialist service like rape crisis, which is fine except the women generally might need some other help as well and I think that can get overlooked for them sometimes."

"For my PTSD effects afterwards, I've been on a waiting list for EMDR for a long time and they're still saying it'll be a minimum of a year and a half before I'll get seen for that. So many more people were struggling with mental health after the pandemic so it's just made everything a lot slower and harder to access."

"I can honestly say I have fourteen survivors a week and at least 8 have had several attempts to take their own life. Suicide safety plans have gone right up in the last six months, so that's another effect that covid has had because they couldn't see a way out and they thought anything is better than living the way I'm living. A lot of them thought that if they were in hospital for that period of time then help would jump at them, but it didn't. They just get sent home in a taxi, so a lot of them felt really let down."

"If you do not provide a particular service and somebody needs that service, you should know somebody who would provide that service because it is all about supporting an individual. We need to start looking at people in a holistic way when we are supporting them. Yes, I have a remit and have funding for what I'm meant to do, but we cannot sit pretty on other aspects of people's lives that they are struggling with."

What role should Police Scotland play in the provision of services for women, children and young people experiencing violence against women and girls?

When we spoke to women, they informed us of the misogynistic attitudes they faced when reporting their experiences. They felt they were often not believed or felt

pressured into not reporting the event to save the paperwork for the police. They said that all officers should be trained in VAWG and understand the complexity of trauma and how this can impact on a person. They believed that having women police officers come into their home was easier than having a male, as they were more likely to feel comfortable minimising the risk of repeat trauma. They also felt that the lack of speed regarding their evidence should be looked at especially with online abuse. Women also advised us that they felt there should be a need to protect the woman and her family after reporting and felt that the police should do more to protect them.

"I've had this conversation with a police officer about when they're doing their domestic abuse inquiries, do they actually ask them about the sexual abuse. If that woman has been subjected to coercive control for a long time within a relationship, she's not going to have been able to say, 'I don't want to have sex.' His answer was 'You know the police, they'll take a shortcut where they can, they won't ask that question because that then triggers another inquiry.' They'll give the excuse that it's resources and yes, that is understandable, but you can't just touch the surface of what someone is telling you. You have to do a full investigation and if there is sexual abuse, that needs to be asked."

"When I was in the police, female officers were being used to speak to rape victims and the quote used to be when you came out 'have you burst them yet?' That term meant have you tried to convince them that they weren't raped, and they maybe consented to it. That's what the male police officers saw the women officers as being 'you go in and speak to her,' and you got a pat on the back if you came out and they said they'd consented to it and if you went in and that didn't happen, if you were seen to support women, you were seen as a troublemaker."

"Dealing with the police was so traumatising. I felt like I was the abuser getting questioned quite a lot of the time... I was already so traumatised, I was already in shock, and I was expected to go through hours' worth of interviews when mentally I was not able. There was no advocate, it was just me, and I was expected to be this big brave woman that, to be honest, at that time, I just did not feel like. I was petrified for my life, and I knew that even if I did tell the police the whole truth and everything, then what?"

"They promised to put me in a Women's Aid, but then what? A person gets out on bail. It's not just the perpetrator, it's the perpetrator's family, it's the perpetrator's friends, it's the internet and how easy it is to find people. Even if you do get put in a refuge, a lot of them have been used for twenty odd years so people in that district know exactly what that house is. The idea that it is safe is just an illusion."

"In that moment, the uniform is quite intimidating, the way they come charging into your house is quite intimidating, especially for someone who is already intimidated and having to go through the whole thing. It's not going to happen, I'm sorry, but that's why so many women will not press charges."

"When they're desperate and they're pleading with you, 'please, we can't have him doing this to any more families.' That's great, but that's also putting a lot of pressure

on someone who has just been traumatised, that's lost their children, that their children have been hurt. You're also getting the blame as a mother."

"They wonder why women find it so hard to follow the police. It's alright the law saying to you this is what's going to happen, and we'll do this and that for you, but they're not there 24/7. You're just left, and I've been left like that for the last 15 years of my life waiting to get murdered."

"I think a much better understanding is needed with the police."

"When women do come forward, they're faced with a wall basically. Not being believed or going through a system where it's not until years later that when it's happened to somebody else that you are then believed. It's sad that it has to go on for 20-30 years before you're actually believed."

"I did leave my situation during 2020 and I can say that I would have left that situation sooner if I wasn't so isolated from the world. When I did get support, I was on a waiting list for a really long time and I did report to the police but everything was a lot slower because of the pandemic and when I did get support from rape crisis, it was over the phone the whole time for 20 sessions, there was no face-to-face, and it was really helpful but not as good as it could have been."

"There's no point putting women into positions if they don't totally believe in it. There was a radio interview during Covid with a retired ACC and she said that to get to where she was within Police Scotland she had to be like a man because if you don't talk and think like a man you weren't getting anywhere. That is unfortunately, what we have. We have a lot of senior female police officers, who are sitting in positions, but they don't buy into it, they pay it lip service."

"The police system hasn't kept up with the technology, so your bobby on the beat doesn't actually know how to gather the evidence from technology. All they know is there's a process and it takes months to get all the messages off a phone, and women just get fed up thinking what's the point of reporting it because there's nothing ever done when it's that kind of abuse."

Are there any other organisations that should provide services for women, children and young people experiencing violence against women and girls?

Yes – women felt there were other organisations that should provide services for women, children and young people experiencing violence.

If yes, which organisations? Please explain your answer.

Women told us that better education and trauma informed practices in school could help children understand what is going on at home and help them to be protected and give another avenue for them to go seek help. If education, health & social care, housing, finances and police services worked together in a non-judgemental and collaborative way this could help families. Some women also told us that places where they are allowed to go such as foodbanks, clothing banks, shops should have more resources to help or should be able to signpost them to services or organisations who could help. They also felt that different sectors from housing, police, NHS, social

security, workplaces should be aware of VAWG and that there should be training to ensure they were trauma informed and aware.

Should access to services for those experiencing violence against women and girls be a right in law for any woman who needs them e.g. like child/adult protection?

Yes – Women advised they thought this should be a right.

Please give reasons for your answer.

Women wanted more protections regarding their rights and for Governments to uphold these. Women were happy that the Scottish Government were looking at a new human rights law that would incorporate these conventions such as the CERD, CRPD and CEDAW into Scots Law. They also felt that it was important to have independent advocacy to become a right so as they could access the services they needed at a time that was suitable for their needs. Although women have rights they advised us that they felt let down by the structural inequalities they face when accessing services and often felt that if this was mandatory i.e. a right in law they would be able to access services more freely when they needed them.

Should access to services for those experiencing violence against women and girls be a right in law for any child or young person who needs them e.g. like child/adult protection?

Yes – Women advised they thought this should be a right for any child or young person.

Please give reasons for your answers.

When we spoke to women, they believed that children should have more rights in law to enable them to access these services. They agreed with the Scottish Government trying to incorporate the UNCRC in Scots Law and felt this would help children understand their rights and access the much-needed services they required to deal with the adverse childhood experiences they had. They felt in order to change the cycle that it was imperative that these children and young people had a legal right to access the services which would help change their outlook to a more positive one for the future. That this would enable the children and young people to have control over what was happening to them going forward.

How can barriers to services for women, children and young people experiencing violence against women and girls be removed across Scotland?

When we spoke to women, they advised we need to stop the stigma and discrimination that comes from the abuse. We need to be speaking about it on a bigger level. We need to be making examples of men that perpetrate these crimes. Women often feel that the whole system is against them. They could have had years of abuse in many forms but often feel that their perpetrators get a slap on the wrist and told not to do it again. They feel that there has to be a change in the culture regarding this issue and

the gender stereotyping of both males and females. They believe that children should be taught from when they are young with regards to their rights and many are in favour of the UNCRC being introduced to Scots law. They believe that males need to be part of the solution as women have been battling this for generations. Women also advised us of the systemic issues and barriers that need to be looked at to enable women, children and young people to access services.

“They feel that no change will be made if they put their hand up and say ‘I don’t accept this, I don’t like this, I don’t feel comfortable with this’ because they’re seeing that there is no challenge to it, sadly, in our education system. They’re not seeing change happen, so they have just accepted that both for themselves and for their peers, which frightens me and saddens me... For one, they don’t see it as something they can change, but they also don’t see it as something that should be changed because it’s just the way that it is.”

“It is underreported which I know because I have had to deal with some cases and have signposted some women to Women’s Aid. It is likely about what is my family going to think, what is going to happen to the children, and stuff like that all for the sake of the children, but the reason they don’t want to report is because of what the family and the community is going to say.”

“There are going to be issues where the women would not report the abuse because they are scared that their children will be removed so they endure it. They think if I report it, I will never see my children again. How do we support these women so that they can trust us that we will provide them with the support they need?”

“Especially in my [African] community, there are going to be issues where the women would not report the abuse because they are scared that their children will be removed, so they endure it. They think if I report it, I will never see my children again. How do we support these women so that they can trust us that we will provide them with the support they need?”

“The majority of women we support are either first generation migrants or from BME communities, so it can be very difficult for us to contact women who are living with their abusers and or women who are staying alone without any family or friends nearby for support.”

“I think people who had unstable immigration status, I think their abusers had more control over them than in normal times. We also had quite a few students, as well during the Covid period who could not go back home but could not afford to live here. They weren’t getting any support either.”

“It is time to change the narrative and educate the men. It is always the girls and women that are told what they should do to avoid violence but actually when you think about it they can put all those measures in place and still get hurt because the man decided to do it, let’s educate them that this is not acceptable and they need to change their behaviours.”

“The thing that concerns me is there’s never any work done with these men. When they’re on remand, even if they get a custodial sentence, they just go and do their

time. You've got HMP Addiewell which is known as Addiewell Hotel. There is no work done. They go to the gym, they get fed, they have no responsibilities while their partners are juggling jobs, trauma, kids, everything. Then they're released with no work done on their behaviour, no rehabilitation, no recourse. It's the same with bail as well and they go and live with their mother or their sister and they're not allowed to come near the partner or the kids so what does that do? It just puts the whole responsibility on to the non-offending parent to do everything for the kids. They're just let off."

"Obviously perpetrators should be held responsible and, if there is something out there that will help stop them doing it again, that's a good thing. The only thing I struggle with is that it's court-ordered. It's not like they're going there because they want to change. They've been made to do it and that is the alternative to a prison sentence, so I think although these programs are good, I just don't know how effective these programs can be when they're forced on people."

How can a consistent quality of services for women, children and young people experiencing violence against women and girls be ensured across Scotland?

Please include examples/ideas/minimum standards you are aware of.

Women told us that the funding and resources have to be there and this should not be tendered out to the cheapest contract. They believe if the Scottish Government funded local authorities better with regards to their VAWG initiatives it would mean specialist services would be available when needed and waiting times could be reduced.

Should services and providers for women, children and young people experiencing violence against women and girls and providers be based on need in their local area?

Don't know

Please give reasons for your answer.

Women told us that it should be based on the need of each individual woman and their children if they have any. If one area has a higher need then more support would be required. However there should not be more services in one area than others as that again can stop women for example in rural areas getting the help they need because the services are all in a highly populated area. If services were consistent across the board then if a woman had to change areas because of her abuser she would get the same level of care she needed.

Should services and providers for women, children and young people experiencing violence against women and girls be the same in every local area?

Yes – Women advised us that services and providers should be the same in every local area but that more enhanced services might be needed in areas to deal with the intersectional characteristics of women such as race, ethnicity, sexuality and disability.

Please give reasons for your answer.

When we spoke to women, they gave a number of reasons why they feel the same services and providers should be the same in every local area.

“The Scottish Government are investing in Equally Safe but not really, in fact it's a postcode lottery. All the different local authorities set up their own. I know every area where I've worked, they've all been different. One has a children's service, one doesn't, one does it this way, one does it that way. They're all very different but women are transient, so that doesn't help because none of these services are joined up so if women are trying to transfer from one service to another when they move, they don't have that same sort of consistency to make that move smoother.”

“I'm working in Clacks and we have the third highest domestic abuse but they don't have an Aura service, they have a women's aid and that's it. In Caledonian, we can only work with women whose perpetrator has been given a CPO, but if that man moves into an area without Caledonia he just moves onto a service order, he doesn't move onto a domestic abuse program and then the support for the woman goes as well because we can only work with her until the end of his order. I know the Scottish Government are going to roll out Caledonia for the remainder of local authorities, that will give a level of consistency, but what about the women who don't want to go through the jurisdiction? What about the women who need that support but don't want to go to court? What they need is somebody to believe them and somebody to work with them.”

“Although services should be the same we have to think about the specialist services which are sometimes needed in areas. An example of this is to deal with different cultures. Places like Shakti women's aid are needed when cultural understanding is not available in standard women's aid services. We have to think about the intersectionality of women and take this into account when looking at services in different areas not one size fits all but if there were minimum standards then it would be easier to transfer to more specialist services if needed.”

What action should be taken to ensure unmet need is met and regional disparities are addressed?

Please give reasons for your answer.

Women told us that a cross over in services all delivering the same thing would be helpful. One woman gave an example of how she was quite far in a process with one local authority but was moved to another with no resources and they did not have the same program running, this meant she had to start from scratch.

“You're basically starting from the beginning again rather than building on something. That is on top of dealing with trauma, and the fact your mental health is suffering. It's a lot for you really.”

How can women, children and young people who have experienced violence against women and girls be meaningfully included in the co-design/evaluation of services?

When we spoke to women regarding this issue they said that they have to be listened to and not talked at. They felt it was important that they were part of the process and not just going along with it because they felt they had to.

"I was told what to do for nearly 20 years I did not have a mind of my own, the last thing you want is for these organisations to come in and control what you are doing you need to be part of it to be empowered to start thinking and doing for yourself. What happens when they do all this to you then their time working with you is finished and then you are left alone not knowing what to do. You feel worthless and feel like you haven't achieved anything. It feels like you are being abused again"

"Reach out to the hard-to-reach women. I know it's very hard to reach these women, BME, disabled, LGBT. They're all hard to reach because agencies and funders are mainly speaking to the already reached people like us. For me, hard to reach is really hard-to-reach... Women like me, we do have a voice, but there are many women who are still not having a voice, and researchers are telling you what the grassroots experiences say, but why don't you listen to those people themselves."

"Involve the women who have the experience. Involve the survivors. Involve the people who are supporting the survivors. And keep going, keep moving forward."

"Listen to what women are saying. Don't just tick boxes, actually listen and follow through with what you say you're going to."

"The answer is not just to keep throwing money at loads of different things. They need to give money and then get the evaluation and listen to the evaluation, and not listen from a management and strategic level but from grassroots, from people who can say here's my experience here's where it's still not working and then review everything again on a regular basis."

"I would like to say listen to the women. Listen to their voices. They're the experts, they know what it's like. People much higher up the chain don't, they live in their bubble, so listen to the women."

For services receiving funding, what would be the optimum length of funding period to ensure they are able to continue to provide services effectively for women, children and young people experiencing violence against women and girls?

5 Years – As a minimum is what we have been told by survivors of VAWG and workers who provide the services.

Please give reasons for your answer.

Women told us that the problem in the sector has been the lack of consistent funding. One woman from a women's aid charity said "We are applying for sometimes 2-4 different pots of funding to keep the work going which means 2-4 reports on the same thing for different funders this takes our time away from the women and girls who genuinely need our help. We can't afford to pay someone to apply for all these grants and write these reports so we are diverting resources away from the women who need

our time and support that is where the change happens not the time spent filling out multiple forms”

“For us as a centre and the sector, it’s about funding and staff retention. We are constantly on these short-term funding cycles, currently a lot of our funding is the DES funding (Delivering Equally Safe). We are on a two-year cycle at the moment... We are constantly fighting for funding, applying for funding, or writing funding reports instead of actually getting core funding to be able to concentrate on the work... Staff retention is a huge issue for us as well because women who are committed come into services, but they also have families, mortgages or rents. We are continually advertising for posts because we get people in who will stay for a year, 18 months, 2 years, saying I love the job but I do not know where my next bit of funding is coming from. I think that is a huge issue in terms of the Scottish Government’s commitment to action against violence against women and girls. Fund it properly.”

“It was good to get that money coming through Covid, but there were some of our women who on 31st March didn’t know whether they had a job or not. The day before they’re asking what is happening with the funding, but we had to tell them we’re going to have to cut your hours because there’s an increase in wages but the funding didn’t increase.”

“On the coal face, we’re all working and we’re all trying to give that support and everything... We will always find the opportunities to support and connect with people, but I think there needs to be an actual layer of resources that potentially we’re not getting at the moment, and that can only come from the government.”

“It comes back to resourcing and implementing things and providing funding and access. We already had a crisis in our mental health system for young people. Referrals to CAMHS is the highest it has ever been. If you look at other agencies, we’re all struggling to keep up with the demand, so funding has to be available for it.”

“I think the Scottish Government has a great opportunity. The networks are there, the people working with people on the ground are there, so give them the resources. They’re the ones that have got relationships with people. They are the ones that have shown 100% commitment to supporting people, but we need resources, and we cannot do that on a shoestring. We can’t do it on small pots of money because you spend your whole time trying to find funding that enables posts to continue.”

“Somebody was talking about the impacts on staff and not knowing if you’re going to have enough money for their salaries or to increase their salaries to take into account the increase in cost of living so infrastructure is what will support people and the relationships so that all needs to be fed with resources and money. The people are there and they’ll all do it 100% even without funding, taking food packages to people outside of office hours, they’ll do that, but give us the resources to make that infrastructure even stronger and then we’ll do it even better.”

Should funding application processes remain 'lighter touch' as was the case at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, or revert to a higher level of scrutiny as previously?

Women told us that the lighter touch funding approach was better as it meant they had more time to spend with the women and families that needed their support. They felt they were always applying for pots of funding or writing funding reports. They felt that the money as a core cost should always be there for those organisations and that they felt they shouldn't have to apply for the funding on such a short cycle as these services have been helping women and girls for years and have proved time after time that they need the funding to keep these women safe and support them through their trauma.

"There was quite a bit of extra funding at the beginning, but I don't feel there was any real strategy, it was all quick, apply but it is only for 3 months and you have to spend it within 3 months, but it is not that easy. Staff were already trying to work out how we were going to work during this Covid period on top everything else. It is not that you didn't need that funding, you do need that funding but the extra amount of work that it takes you to apply, then distributing it - that was hard."

What is the single most important thing that can be done to reduce/mitigate the impact of violence against women and girls?

Women told us that teaching children young especially young boys and men that violence is not acceptable would be a start. They advised getting men involved in the conversations could help tackle VAWG. They advised that men need to be part of the solution.

"We teach girls how to be safe, we teach them to walk in pairs, to not walk home late at night without texting and calling, to hold keys in their hands when walking alone, to ensure that they say the safe words in pubs if being harassed all the responsibility is on the women. When are the men going to take responsibility for their actions? We need to change the narrative and the misogynistic culture that women face every day. It is not acceptable and it never has been."

"I'm trying to get a lot of my male friends involved in these types of conversations. I'm 25 and, when I'm around a lot of guy friends, I do hear some really misogynistic comments about women, their bodies, what they look like, and how a woman only has value if she is sexually attractive. I've been challenging that, but it is hard because I've changed in their eyes from fun to confrontational. But I think I've had enough of being quiet around those comments. Of being obedient, meek, palatable. It's hard to challenge your own friends but I think it starts within those little groups."

"I did a placement in Dundee with Women's Aid and we did get to go into a P5 and P6 class. I did think that was good to see because they did simplify it for them to understand it. I just think we need so much more of that and for it to be a regular thing all over Scotland. I know I didn't get anything like that in school myself and I genuinely didn't recognise the signs that my partner was doing these things. I didn't know it was

unusual as my dad had been similar with emotional abuse so it wasn't something I would know was weird behaviour or anything."

"I think we need to be talking about it more. I've got a ten-year-old son and I speak to him openly about everything and there's no question that's out of bounds. It needs to be there and a constant in society and it needs to be more prevalent and talked about."

"It should be a compulsory thing. We go in and give talks to the high schools in the area. We do it for every new first year group to get an understanding of what domestic abuse is, and then we do it again for 3rd year and it's more of an understanding of what a healthy relationship should be because they're starting to get into boyfriends and girlfriends."

"Yes, we need to teach girls what is a healthy relationship but I think boys need to really get that what is acceptable and the respectful behaviour regardless of what they've seen in the house because they will just mirror

"We have to realise that young men are not just the problem, they're part of the solution as well, and we have to do a lot of work with young men about education, expectations, and how we can move forward to be a more positive society for everybody in terms of equality and diversity."

Is there anything else you would like to tell us?

Support for Workers in with funding applications to support staff. Women told us across many roundtables, that staff are at risk of burnout as there is no adequate support for them. When funding is applied for, consideration should be given to resources to help staff with the trauma they may experience through helping others. It is fine to fund the core program but this often does not take into account funding for the mental and physical wellbeing of the staff and this is something which needs looked into for future funding models.

"We will all have stories of our own... and it can be a burden, to try to support, encourage and help people. It can often be to the detriment of our own mental health and physical health, so I would encourage all of us to seek that support from somewhere, and maybe that is something we can do as a network is to share that support."

"I decided to seek support as best I could in that I have to signpost women to support. It thought it was necessary for me because sometimes I have to school myself to be strong to be able to support somebody because you can't support somebody with something you don't have, so I decided to take up some counselling sessions."

"We only talk about service-users but [the pandemic] also affected the staff as well. Yesterday I was speaking to one of our supervisors and we were saying about how prices have increased but wages have not, and some of our staff are struggling. You're earning but you're not really earning enough, so we have life problems even though we are the ones providing the service."

“Somebody was talking about the impacts on staff and not knowing if you’re going to have enough money for their salaries or to increase their salaries to take into account the increase in cost of living so infrastructure is what will support people and the relationships so that all needs to be fed with resources and money. The people are there and they’ll all do it 100% even without funding, taking food packages to people outside of office hours, they’ll do that, but give us the resources to make that infrastructure even stronger and then we’ll do it even better.”

“Consequently, there’s a vicarious trauma that workers are experiencing. We have workers who, despite having good internal and external support and supervision, are experiencing burnout and many have experienced Covid themselves or in their families. I think also there’s a lot of women in the sector who are the sandwich generation who are still looking after young people but also looking after older people so I think that’s a huge thing we need to take into account in planning our services and our workforce.”

Conclusion

The SWC is grateful for the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Government’s consultation on the Independent strategic review of funding and commissioning of VAWG services. As an organisation, we will continue to work with women from across Scotland to gather voices and experiences relating to this topic and its effects on women’s equality.

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