



**Violence Against Women and Girls
Snapshot Report 2022-23**

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About EVAW

The End Violence Against Women Coalition (EVAW) is a leading coalition of 135 specialist women's support services, researchers, NGOs and other experts working to end violence against women and girls in all its forms.

Established in 2005, we campaign for every level of government to adopt better, more joined up approaches to ending and preventing violence against women and girls, and we challenge the wider cultural attitudes that tolerate and condone this abuse.

www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk February 2023

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This report is informed by the lived experiences of women whose lives are impacted by violence against women and girls (VAWG), and would not have been possible without the expertise, knowledge, published research and practice-based evidence of our coalition members and others in the VAWG sector.

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Contents

Executive Summary	4
Introduction	10
2022 Trends	13
1. Cost of Living	13
2. The Raid on Our Human Rights	18
3. Prevalence and Awareness of VAWG.....	20
4. Online Spaces and Abuse.....	26
5. Crisis in the Criminal Justice System Response	28
6. Support Landscape.....	33
Key Policy Developments	36
1. Istanbul Convention	36
2. Victims Bill.....	37
3. Online Safety Bill.....	40
4. Nationality and Borders Act.....	42
5. Public Order Bill	43
6. Domestic Abuse Act Implementation	44
7. Protection from Sex-based Harassment in Public Bill	45
8. Transnational Marriage Abandonment	45
9. Rape Review and Operation Soteria	46
10. Tackling Domestic Abuse Plan	49
11. Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse	49
12. Family Courts and Children’s Social Care	51
13. Prevention	52
14. Perpetrators.....	55
15. Health	55
16. Housing	59
Recommendations	61

Executive Summary

This report sets out the state of violence against women and girls (VAWG) in the UK as of January 2023. We have drawn on the latest statistics, research, and insight from specialist VAWG sector organisations, including those led ‘by and for’ Black, minoritised and disabled women, and researchers to spotlight the pervasiveness of VAWG, bring important trends to light and produce an overview of the past year’s key policy developments.

VAWG, which includes sexual violence, domestic abuse, stalking and harassment, female genital mutilation, forced marriage, so-called ‘honour-based’ abuse, exploitation and abuse of women and girls in online spaces – must be understood as a cause and consequence of gender inequality, as these forms of abuse are committed disproportionately against women and girls, and those responsible are overwhelmingly men. Women’s inequality is compounded by structural oppression and discrimination experienced on the basis of race, ethnicity, disability, wealth and social class, sexuality, gender identity, immigration status and age. This inequality increases women and girls’ vulnerability to violence and can mean they are less likely to have access to justice and support. VAWG is commonly experienced as a continuum of violence¹ often across women’s lifetimes, that cannot be properly understood without acknowledging the inter-connected instances and impacts.

Since the previous year’s Snapshot Report, a number of political, social and economic factors have undermined an effective state response to VAWG. Not least of these is the amount of political upheaval seen at all levels of government, including three Prime Ministers in 2022, which has impacted the progress of key pieces of legislation relevant to victims and survivors. Economic conditions have worsened as the UK experiences a deepening cost of living crisis, creating conducive contexts for abuse, greater pressures on

[1 Kelly, L. \(1988\) Surviving sexual violence](#)

women's incomes, and increased help-seeking and demands for support; all of which is widening gender inequality.

The heightened focus on police-perpetrated abuse in 2021 has not abated, culminating in January 2023 when a serving Met Police officer, David Carrick, pleaded guilty to more than 80 sexual offences spanning almost 20 years. That aspects of this officer's horrific pattern of egregious behaviour were known to the Met, including allegations of rape and domestic abuse, and appropriate action was not taken, demonstrates the dangerous consequences of such institutional failures. This followed the publication of a series of reports and reviews exposing the misogyny and racism within policing, underscoring the extent of cultural transformation work that is still needed. Furthermore, findings from the police, CPS and academic programme, Operation Soteria – which was launched in June 2021 to transform the investigative response to rape – further illustrated the harmful social attitudes towards women which underpin many of the problems with rape investigations. Much more work is needed to shift away from a default focus on the perceived credibility of rape victims to suspect focused investigations; to significantly upskill police and prosecutors' levels of specialism; and to improve the quality of data collection and equalities analysis of justice outcomes for minoritised and marginalised women.

Following the 2021 Ofsted Review which helped shed light on sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools and colleges, progress towards the rollout of a 'whole school approach' to ending abuse is frustratingly slow. Despite concerns growing over online misogyny and how social media companies are profiting from inaction on abuse, the Online Safety Bill has narrowed and repeatedly stalled. Furthermore, the government's plans to replace the Human Rights Act with a Bill of Rights have been widely denounced as posing a grave threat to women's rights. At the same time, migrant survivors of abuse have seen their rights curtailed through the Nationality and Borders Act provisions, as well as ongoing commitment to pursue the Rwanda scheme and a punitive approach to migration. For this reason, despite this year seeing the long-awaited (and long campaigned-for) ratification of the Istanbul Convention, the

reservations placed on articles pertaining to migrant women's rights mean there is still a long way to go to ensure equal protection for all women.

Our key recommendations for addressing this violence are:

A strategic investment to end abuse

In light of the cost of living crisis, ongoing chronic underfunding of the VAWG sector and women's income inequality, greater strategic investment to end abuse is urgently needed. This includes an uplift in social security and an exemption of the benefit cap for survivors, as well as meaningful action to address income inequality (including for women with no recourse to public funds) to tackle the rates of poverty for women, and the significant financial barriers women face in leaving abuse. This should sit alongside 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 (distributed by women's sector infrastructure organisations)². Furthermore, VAWG organisations need long-term, sustainable funding to deliver the life-saving work that helps thousands of women and girls every day. This includes ring-fenced funding for specialist, independent led 'by and for' services, as well as guaranteed 3-5 year contracts with inflationary uplifts from public commission bodies, with mid-term contracts being reviewed and uplifted to reflect higher operational costs and a recruitment crisis in a sector that is still dealing with the impact of the pandemic, and concern over levels of staff burnout ³.

Protect human rights

Attempts by government to undermine the universality of human rights weakens our ability to end violence against women and girls.

[2 Statement on behalf of VAWG organisations in England & Wales on the Cost of Living Crisis.](#)

[3 Ibid.](#)

The Ministry of Justice’s proposed Bill of Rights, which is intended to replace the Human Rights Act, is one such example. The Human Rights Act is an essential tool to uphold the rights of women and girls to live free from violence and abuse, and to ensure that the state fulfils its duties to protect women and girls from harm. The government must scrap the Bill of Rights which threatens to weaken these duties, retain the Human Rights Act and commit to upholding the human rights of all.

A Victims Bill that responds to the diversity of victims and survivors’ experiences with greater rights and support

The proposed Victims Bill must deliver on its potential to transform the response to victims and survivors of VAWG inside and outside the criminal justice system (CJS). Within the CJS, there must be safeguards to guarantee victims and survivors’ protections against over-intrusive and excessive police requests for third-party material, such as medical notes, school reports and therapy notes, with greater rights for survivors to access specialist therapeutic and advocacy support at any time. Long-term, sustainable funding of community-based services is also essential to enable the Victims Bill to live up to its ambitions. The Bill should also enshrine principles of equality in justice, with the introduction of independent legal advice for victims and survivors to uphold their rights, and a ‘firewall’ – ending the sharing of migrant victims’ data between the police, other public services and Immigration Enforcement.

Comprehensively tackle online VAWG

The Online Safety Bill should include a VAWG Code of Practice⁴. Secondary legislation and implementation of the Bill should ensure the safety of online spaces for women and girls.

[4 A coalition of experts including the End Violence Against Women Coalition, Glitch, Refuge, Carnegie UK, NSPCC, 5Rights and Professors Clare McGlynn and Lorna Woods came together to create a ready-to-use set of guidelines, or ‘Code of Practice’ to](#)

Far-ranging reform to the criminal justice system's approach to VAWG

A focus on cultural change is needed to tackle the prevalence of misogyny and racism within the police and throughout the criminal justice system. Root and branch transformation is needed within and across the criminal justice system, including improved leadership and mechanisms of accountability within the police, Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and courts, with wraparound support and advocacy for all victims/survivors and access to justice and equality of outcomes for all. This must include an offender-centric approach to investigations, taking forward learnings from Operation Soteria, alongside research into the barriers to reporting, the impact of rape myths and stereotypes on the system, and what rape victims and survivors want from the justice system.

Support for schools to implement a 'whole school approach'

The Department for Education (DfE) must commit to resourcing a 'whole school approach' to preventing and tackling VAWG and working with the specialist VAWG sector.

A multi-year, well-resourced public attitudes campaign to end VAWG

To deliver the profound cultural shift needed to end VAWG, we must see continued investment in national public attitudes campaigns. Long-term and sustainable investment is needed to transform attitudes across society, so that we do not continue to minimise or excuse the violence and abuse experienced by women and girls. This must be informed by meaningful consultation of the specialist VAWG sector.

[tackle violence against women and girls online in 2022. Available here: https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/coalition-experts-code-of-practice-online-violence-against-women-girls/](https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/coalition-experts-code-of-practice-online-violence-against-women-girls/)

Effective protection and support for migrant women

The government must take responsibility for the ways in which hostile immigration and asylum legislation and policies can create conditions for gender-based violence, and remove the barriers to support currently facing migrant women in the UK. This would include the introduction of safe reporting mechanisms for migrant victims/survivors, equal and effective access to protection and support for all women regardless of their immigration status in line with the Istanbul Convention (including women seeking asylum), and the extension of eligibility for the Domestic Violence Rule (DVR) to all migrant women subject to abuse. The government must also include confirmation of its monitoring plans for the Nationality and Borders Act, particularly as it relates to women and girls, and to repeal changes where harmful impacts are found.

Removal of reservations from the Istanbul Convention

10 years after signing up to the Istanbul Convention, the government must commit to removing the reservations placed when it ratified the Convention in 2022, so that all women have access to equal and effective protection and support, regardless of immigration status.

Introduction

2022 saw substantial political, social and economic instability impact everyone. The UK is currently facing a cost-of-living crisis while still dealing with the ongoing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

However, as with the pandemic, it is important to recognise how the harmful impacts of this are felt more by certain groups in society, including women and girls, and especially women and girls experiencing intersecting inequalities.

The cost of living crisis is having a significant impact on the public sector, with rising costs for services already straining from the effects of a decade of austerity policies and the Covid-19 pandemic. This is a challenging situation for women and girls seeking support from such services. In order to end VAWG, we need sustainable resourcing and transformation across housing, welfare, health settings, schools, and the criminal justice system to prevent abuse and provide an effective response to all victims and survivors of abuse. This must be in addition to an emergency uplift and sustainable funding for the VAWG sector.

Faced with a dramatic increase in referrals both in number and complexity, frontline VAWG organisations have been working tirelessly to provide specialist support to women and children, the majority of which are women struggling with the rising cost of living.

For example, Refuge's specialist technology-facilitated and economic empowerment team has seen an 87% increase in referrals for support with complex cases – they say this can be directly linked to the impact of the crisis.⁵ The increase in demand coupled with reduced resources is compounding the long-standing funding crisis faced by the sector due to years of funding cuts and

[5 Refuge \(10 November 2022\) New data from Refuge warns that cost of living crisis is forcing survivors of domestic abuse to stay with abusive partners.](#)

poor commissioning practices, with cuts to statutory services and social security increasing demand.

A culture of systemic racism and misogyny within policing and the impact this has on the way responses to VAWG are designed and delivered has been the subject of many reviews and reports this past year and is highlighted by a serving Metropolitan Police officer, David Carrick, pleading guilty to more than 80 sexual offences in January 2023. To tackle this effectively we need to see evidence of meaningful transformation of the justice system's response to violence against women, starting with addressing internal practices and the culture within criminal justice agencies.

One of the many consequences of the changing political landscape which saw three Prime Ministers in office during 2022 and several ministerial reshuffles to key posts in government, has been that several pieces of legislation such as the Victims Bill and Online Safety Bill have been significantly delayed. The post of Victims' Commissioner for England and Wales has also remained vacant from September 2022 to date.⁶ This has meant victims and survivors have been left without an independent advocate for their interests and necessary measures to respond to and prevent VAWG in key areas have not emerged. At the same time, the government has prioritised a legislative agenda which the third sector is concerned poses a fundamental threat to the human rights of women and girls. This includes plans for a Bill of Rights, which the government intends to replace the Human Rights Act, and would take away some of the most fundamental legal protections that victims and survivors have long relied on to hold the state to account, to protect them from harm, and to seek justice when authorities fail to keep them safe. When taken collectively, this agenda undermines the efforts of the government to address VAWG, despite the promises

[6 Office of the Victims Commissioner \(23 September 2022\) Letter from Dame Vera Baird to Rt Hon Brandon Lewis CBE MP on end of term as Victims' Commissioner](#)

and commitments we have seen in the government's own cross departmental VAWG strategy⁷ and Rape Review.⁸

It remains more vital than ever to understand VAWG as the cause and consequence of gender inequality, and as a continuum of violence and abuse which cannot be easily separated out. An intersecting continuum of oppression⁹ – which is not experienced homogeneously – is a reality which requires sustainably funded, independent, specialist women's support services led 'by and for' Black and minoritised, migrant, deaf and disabled, and LGBT+ women who have the expertise in responding to the complexity of women's experiences and needs.

We know that VAWG is not inevitable and that there are concrete actions that can and must be taken to end this abuse. It requires an approach that centres prevention and seeks to shift cultures of misogyny and sexism within society and institutions, along with the long-term, sustainable funding of both public services and specialist women's services to meet the immediate and long-term challenges women and girls are facing.

[7 Home Office \(21 July 2021\) Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy](#)

[8 Ministry of Justice \(18 June 2021\) End-to-End Rape Review Report on Findings and Actions](#)

[9 Kanyeredzi, A. \(2018\) Race, Culture, and Gender: Black Female Experiences of Violence and Abuse](#)

[Back to Contents](#)

2022 Trends

1. Cost of Living

In 2022 soaring inflation has far outpaced benefits¹⁰ and income for many – in what is now referred to as the ‘cost of living’ crisis. As with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, which shone a light on the fact that crises do not ‘land’ on everyone equally, the gendered impact of the cost of living crisis has been exposed, along with how this is compounded for minoritised and marginalised people experiencing intersecting inequalities.

Financial barriers to leaving abusive relationships are significant for victims and survivors, meaning women feel less able to leave dangerous situations because they fear being unable to survive economically on their own.¹¹ Faced with a dramatic increase in both the number and complexity of referrals, frontline VAWG organisations have been working tirelessly to provide specialist support to women and children, the majority of which are women struggling with the rising cost of living.

This increased demand on the VAWG sector comes at a time when the cost of providing these services is increasing and the resources and capacity of organisations continues to decrease.¹² Frontline services, in particular refuges and specialist community services, are facing spiralling energy prices and will face further challenges covering these costs as the newly announced Energy Bills Discount Scheme, due to come in April 2023, is not as favourable as the energy cap which will end that same month.¹³ This has exacerbated

[10 Following the government’s rejection of calls to uplift universal credit.](#)

[11 Refuge \(10 November 2022\) op cit.](#)

[12 EAW, Imkaan et al. \(17 November 2022\) Statement on behalf of VAWG organisations in England & Wales on the Cost of Living Crisis](#)

[13 HM Treasury \(9 January 2023\) Energy Bills Discount Scheme](#)

the hugely uncertain and unsustainable funding picture that the sector has contended with for over a decade. This is the result of years of gross underfunding of the sector and cuts to statutory services and social security, with specialist services led 'by and for' Black and minoritised women feeling the impact of this most acutely.

UK polling by YouGov in November 2022 found that the majority of people (54%) thought the government should be doing more to support frontline specialist services that support women and children affected by abuse through the cost of living crisis, with only 1 in 5 people of the view (23%) they were doing all they reasonably can. The same polling found that 54% of people think any negative impact of the rise in the cost of living will be greater for women and children affected by abuse, with only 19% thinking it would be the same as those who have not. Three quarters (75%) of those who believe inequalities for women will increase as a result of the cost of living crisis thought the government should be doing more to prevent this.¹⁴

Analysis by the Women's Budget Group highlights that women are more likely to be poor and have been hit harder by cuts to social security and provision of public services over the past decade.¹⁵ Women also typically have lower levels of savings and wealth than men which, as a survey by Women's Aid Federation of England (WAFE) found, abusers can use to their advantage. 66% of survivors surveyed experienced abusers using the cost of living and concerns about financial hardship as a tool for coercive control, including to justify further restricting their access to money. Whilst almost three quarters (73%) of women living with and having financial links with the abuser, said that the cost of living crisis had

[14 Polling by YouGov on behalf of EAW and VAWG sector partners \(November 2022\)](#)

[15 Women's Budget Group \(18 March 2022\) The gendered impact of the cost-of-living crisis](#)

either prevented them from leaving or made it harder for them to leave.¹⁶

Poverty rates are significantly higher among Bangladeshi (53%), Pakistani (48%) and Black (40%) people than among white people (19%), making it harder to meet rising living costs. Single parents, most of whom are women, have been hit particularly badly with a third in financial difficulty, and 11% in problem debt.¹⁷

In their 2022 Conference Report¹⁸, The Traveller Movement noted energy injustice as an ongoing issue for the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community. In a joint letter from Gypsy and Traveller organisations¹⁹ to the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy in August 2022, they addressed the ‘astronomically high energy costs’ associated with living in mobile homes, caravans and boats; and noted recent research that 10 out of 12 households surveyed were not eligible for the Government’s Energy Bill Support Scheme grant.²⁰

Disabled women are particularly vulnerable to the cost of living crisis. Disabled people and their carers may need to keep their homes warmer all day or use specialist medical equipment with high running costs amid rising energy costs.²¹ When disability benefits are included as income, the poverty rate for disabled people is 27%. Excluding these benefits from income increases the poverty rate for disabled people by 5 percentage points to 32%; 12 percentage

[16 Women’s Aid \(2022\) The cost of living is preventing women from fleeing domestic abuse](#)

[17 Ibid.](#)

[18 The Traveller Movement \(2022\) Conference Report 2022 “The Intersection of Poverty, Inequality and Mental Health”](#)

[19 Traveller Movement et al \(2022\): Gypsy and Traveller organisations ask Government to address impact of energy cost crisis on Gypsies and Travellers](#)

[20 Gilmore, V. and Kirkby, A. \(2022\). Access to energy for Gypsies and Travellers living in caravans. Friends, Families and Travellers](#)

[21 The Guardian \(15 Mar 2022\) Disabled people facing ‘impossible choices to survive’ in cost of living crisis](#)

points above non-disabled people. The difference is particularly stark for working-age adults: those who are disabled are more than twice as likely to live in poverty than those who are not (38% and 17% respectively).²² Before the pandemic, disabled women were less likely to be in employment than disabled men or non-disabled people, and on average earned less than both groups.²³

Against the backdrop of the cost of living crisis in the UK, people who have no recourse to public funds (NRPF)²⁴ are excluded from the few government initiatives on offer to those on low incomes or who have specific needs, as they are not entitled to state support.²⁵ This is despite the fact that people who have migrated to the UK are over-represented among those experiencing destitution.²⁶ Migrant women with NRPF are at a particularly high risk of poverty, and often destitution, if they lose work, or separate from a partner.²⁷ A

[22 Joseph Rowntree Foundation \(18 January 2022\) UK Poverty 2022 p.57](#)

[23 Ibid.](#)

[24 Someone with 'No Recourse to Public Funds' \(NRPF\) conditions is unable to claim any benefits that are classed as 'public funds' for immigration purposes. These include, for example, means-tested benefits such as Universal Credit, child tax credits, state pension credit, council tax support, disability living allowance, and social fund payments such as the winter fuel allowance.](#)

[25 People with NRPF are entitled to the energy bills support scheme and Energy Rebate Scheme, however they cannot access the £650 Cost of Living Payment designed to help those on the lowest incomes, as it is only available to people on means-tested benefits such as Universal Credit which they cannot access. They are also excluded from the £300 Pensioner Cost of Living Payment; the £150 Disability Cost of Living Payment; the Winter Fuel Payment; and the Cold Weather Payment - Byline Times \(19 August 2022\) Vulnerable Migrants Cut Out of Cost of Living Support](#)

[26 Joseph Rowntree Foundation \(18 January 2022\) UK Poverty 2022 p.20](#)

[27 Women's Budget Group \(23 March 2023\) The gendered impact of the cost-of-living crisis](#)

woman with NRPF cannot claim any welfare support that is classed as ‘public funds’ for immigration purposes. These include means-tested benefits such as Universal Credit, child tax credits, state pension credit, council tax support, disability living allowance, and social fund payments such as the winter fuel allowance. Southall Black Sisters²⁸ have flagged the cost of food being a primary concern for migrant women, with many struggling to exist only on the subsistence funds frontline VAWG organisations provide, in the absence of support from the government.

Women seeking asylum remain restricted to £45 per week in the cost of living crisis and are barred from employment for undefined periods of time while they await decisions on their claims, relegating them to destitution. In Women for Refugee Women research, nearly a third (29%) of women were made destitute after filing their initial asylum application and while waiting for Section 95 asylum support to begin.²⁹

The VAWG sector is calling on the government to address the impact of the cost of living crisis on women. This includes providing emergency funding to the specialist VAWG sector to enable them to support all women and children subject to male violence, including those with no recourse to public funds. The sector is also calling for guaranteed three to five-year grant funding with inflationary uplifts to address the uncertainty caused by short-term funding and to reflect higher operational costs. These grants should prioritise specialist VAWG services. The sustainable funding of the VAWG sector is a longstanding and urgent need, which is also necessary to address ongoing specialist staff recruitment and retention challenges in a sector still dealing with the impact of austerity policies and the pandemic, with high levels of staff burnout.³⁰

[28 Ibid.](#)

[29 Dudhia, P. \(2022\). ‘Will I ever be safe? Asylum-seeking women made destitute in the UK’. Women for Refugee Women](#)

[30 Statement on behalf of VAWG organisations in England & Wales on the Cost of Living Crisis.](#)

2. The Raid on Our Human Rights

2022 saw the Royal Assent of several pieces of legislation that women's organisations and experts in VAWG warned would pose a grave threat to our human rights and efforts to end VAWG.³¹ Of particular concern were proposals which sought to scrap the Human Rights Act (HRA) in favour of a so-called Bill of Rights.

As a result of the Human Rights Act, public authorities such as the police, local authorities, schools, the CPS and probation services are currently required to take proactive steps to protect women and girls' rights to live free from violence. Known as 'positive obligations', these duties are currently relied upon by victims and survivors of VAWG to ensure that effective action is taken to protect women from harm. This ranges from schools' duties to protect children from sexual assault in education settings to the police taking adequate steps to protect women at imminent risk of domestic violence or homicide, including so-called 'honour-based' abuse.

In September 2022, EVAW worked with Rights of Women, the Centre for Women's Justice and Southall Black Sisters to produce a report compiling women's experiences, along with the latest expert analysis highlighting the ways in which this legislation would remove victims and survivors' ability to challenge poor practices that put them at risk and threaten their ability to seek justice and accountability for failings by institutions with duties to protect them.³² The report finds that the HRA is an effective, and often the only, mechanism available to women and girls to obtain justice and that the application of the Act is diverse and far-reaching, with many of the benefits of the legislation for women and girls going far beyond what reaches the courts.

[31 EVAW, Rights of Women et al. \(9 June 2022\) Women's rights organisations oppose the Public Order Bill: the right to protest is a feminist issue](#)

[32 EVAW, Rights of Women, the Centre for Women's Justice and Southall Black Sisters \(8 September 2022\) Women's Rights are Human Rights Report](#)

On Human Rights Day 2022 and the final day of the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence, ERAW was one of 69 signatories to a joint statement calling on government and Parliamentarians to save the Human Rights Act.³³ Signatories included frontline support services, campaigners, researchers, lawyers, and experts of VAWG, as well as survivors who have relied on the HRA – including two survivors of so-called ‘black cab rapist’ John Worboys, DSD and NBV; Bekhal Mahmud, bereaved sister of Banaz Mahmud; Kate Wilson of Police Spies Out of Lives; and Nour Norris, bereaved sister of Khaola Saleem and aunt to Raneem Oudah.

This rollback of our human rights is felt most acutely by minoritised and marginalised women. There has been a near constant assault on migrant rights throughout 2022, illustrated by harmful rhetoric from government ministers³⁴ and attempts to send asylum seekers to Rwanda, despite many charities, campaigners and lawyers arguing the scheme breaks human rights laws.³⁵ 2022 also saw the re-ignition of the so-called ‘hostile environment’ through the reintroduction of immigration checks on bank accounts, a policy previously halted amidst the Windrush scandal.

The July 2022 HM Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) report³⁶ found women were being rub-down searched in full view of others; a practice which Women for Refugee Women’s research highlights as

[33 ERAW et al. \(10 December 2022\) Women’s Rights are Human Rights: Statement on Human Rights Day](#)

[34 BBC News \(1 November 2022\) Minister warns on language after Suella Braverman 'invasion' comment](#)

[35 BBC News \(19 December 2022\) What is the UK's plan to send asylum seekers to Rwanda and how many could go?](#)

[36 HM Chief Inspector of Prisons \(July 2022\) Foil, Lydd Airport and Manston](#)

distressing for women,³⁷ and despite Home Office guidance³⁸ stating that this should not happen. HMIP's inspection also highlighted women being detained at Manston were being asked about traumatic experiences of exploitation in 'noisy adjacent booths, which afforded little privacy'.

3. Prevalence and Awareness of VAWG

Sexual Violence

The latest statistics for England and Wales from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) show a record number of rapes were recorded in the year to June 2022. 70,600 rapes were registered – a 20% increase from 59,046 in 2019-20 and almost double the 36,321 cases recorded in the year to March 2016.³⁹ It must of course be noted that this only provides part of the picture, as we know most incidents of sexual violence are not reported.⁴⁰ Figures from Scotland showed that the level of reported sexual crimes has increased by 96% over the last decade. In the past year, reported rape and attempted rape has increased by 9% and sexual assault by 29% in Scotland⁴¹. In Northern Ireland, sexual offences reporting

[37 I Am Human: Refugee Women's Experiences of Detention in the UK](#)

[38 Home office \(2016\) Detention Services Order 06/2016: Women in the Detention Estate](#)

[39 ONS \(27 October 2022\) Crime in England and Wales: year ending June 2022](#)

[40 The ONS state that crime survey estimates for domestic abuse-related crimes and sexual offences are presented for the year ending March 2022. These are based on six months of data collection between October 2021 and March 2022. Caution should be taken when using these data because of the impact of the reduced data collection period and lower response rates on the quality of the estimates.](#)

[41 Scottish Government \(2022\). Recorded Crime in Scotland, 2021-22](#)

has been steadily increasing over the past five years, with 3,864 incidents reported in 2021.⁴²

We know that intersecting inequalities compound experiences of sexual violence and so it is important to understand the specific experiences of minoritised and marginalised groups. For example, research by Galop,⁴³ the LGBT+ anti-abuse charity, revealed the impact of sexual assault on LGBT+ people. They found that 65% of survey respondents had experienced sexual assault and 53% felt that their LGBT+ identity was linked to, or the reason for, at least one instance of sexual violence. Around two thirds experienced an increase in suicidal thoughts (67%) or self harm (64%) following sexual violence. Nearly a quarter (24%) were subjected to sexual violence which they believe was intended to convert them to heterosexuality, their assigned gender at birth, or to punish them for their gender or sexual identity. Lesbian, trans men and non-binary interview participants in particular described being targeted for being gender non-conforming and 'doing womanhood wrong'.⁴⁴

Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation

Between April 2021 and March 2022, the total number of crimes flagged as child sexual abuse in England and Wales is 83,623. For child sexual exploitation, the total number is 17,486. These figures are designated by the ONS as 'experimental statistics' to highlight that they are based on emerging collection. Further work will be conducted by the Home Office and police forces to increase consistency and comparability of CSA and CSE flag data.⁴⁵

In Northern Ireland, between April 1, 2021 and January 15, 2022, there have been 211 reports of sexual activity involving a child under

[42 Police Service of Northern Ireland \(7 February 2022\) Police see increase in reports of sexual offences in 2021](#)

[43 Galop \(April 2022\) LGBT+ People & Sexual Violence](#)

[44 Ibid. p.12](#)

[45 ONS \(27 October 2022\) Crime in England and Wales: Other related tables year ending March 2022](#)

the age of 16 and 189 of such reports involving a child under 13. These figures show reports of sexual assault on girls aged 13 and over in Northern Ireland have risen by 58.8% in the past year, with 791 incidents reported to police, while there have been 267 reports of sexual assault on girls under 13.⁴⁶

In Scotland, 37% of the sexual crimes recorded by the police in the past year (2021-22) related to a victim under the age of 18.⁴⁷

Domestic Abuse

The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) estimates that 1.7 million women experienced domestic abuse in the year ending March 2022.⁴⁸ In that period there were 589,389 domestic abuse-related incidents recorded by the police in England and Wales. Of those who experienced partner abuse, 84.3% experienced non-physical abuse, 12.9% experienced any sexual assault and 20.8% experienced stalking.⁴⁹ The biggest single age group of those who had experienced domestic abuse were women aged 20-24 (15%). Black women were the largest single ethnic group to have experienced domestic abuse – 10.2% compared with 7% for white women.

In the year ending March 2022, the National Domestic Abuse Helpline, run by Refuge, delivered 50,791 support sessions through phone call or live chat.⁵⁰ This remained similar to the year ending March 2021. This suggests that the high demand seen during

[46 Belfast Telegraph \(23 January 2023\) Reports of sexual assault on Northern Ireland girls aged 13 and over rise almost 60pc in the past year](#)

[47 Scottish government \(28 June 2022\) Recorded Crime in Scotland, 2021-22](#)

[48 ONS \(25 November 2022\) Domestic abuse in England and Wales overview: November 2022](#)

[49 Ibid.](#)

[50 ONS \(7 September 2022\) Domestic abuse victim services, England and Wales: 2022](#)

lockdown has not subsided, despite emergency funding for domestic abuse services having now ended.

In Scotland, the police recorded 64,807 incidents of domestic abuse in 2021-22, a decrease of 1% compared to the previous year. This is the first year this figure has shown a decrease since 2015-16.⁵¹ In the 12 months from 1st October 2021 to 30th September 2022, 33,108 domestic abuse incidents were reported in Northern Ireland, an increase of 1,667 (5.3 per cent) on the previous 12 months.⁵²

Femicide, Domestic Homicides and Suspected Victim Suicides

At the time of writing this report, it was reported that 107 women in the UK were killed in 2022, in circumstances where a man or men are the principal suspect.⁵³

In 2020 the Domestic Homicides Project was established by police and government in England and Wales to collect, review, and share quick-time learning from all police-recorded domestic homicides, as well as from suspected suicides of individuals with a history of domestic abuse victimisation in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown. The project's second annual report, published in December 2022, shows an increase in both domestic homicides (16%) and suspected victim suicides (28%) compared with Year 1.⁵⁴ There was a drop in the proportion of older victims (aged 65 years and over) of intimate partner homicide in Year 2 compared with Year

[51 Scottish government \(29 November 2022\) Domestic abuse recorded by the police in Scotland, 2021-22](#)

[52 Police Service of Northern Ireland \(24 November 2022\) Domestic Abuse Incidents and Crimes](#)

[Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland: Update to 30th September 2022](#)

[53 Karen Ingala Smith \(28 April 2022 - last updated 23 January 2023\) Counting Dead Women](#)

[54 Home Office \(December 2022\) Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme \(VKPP\) Domestic Homicides and Suspected Victim Suicides 2021-2022 Year 2 Report p.9](#)

1 (11% compared with 18%). Though the numbers are small, the two-year dataset also found a higher proportion of Black and minoritised victims and suspects compared with the general population as of the 2011 Census. This contrast was particularly pronounced for Black victims and suspects (8% compared with 3% in the Census).⁵⁵

So-called ‘Honour-based’ Abuse

In the year ending March 2022, there were 2,887 so-called ‘honour-based’ abuse-related offences recorded by police in England and Wales. This constitutes an increase of 6% compared with the previous year, when there were 2,725 offences.⁵⁶ Of the 2,887 offences, there were 77 female genital mutilation (FGM) offences and 141 forced marriage offences. 17% of so-called ‘honour-based’ abuse-related offences were for controlling and coercive behaviour, 14% for assault with injury and 14% for assault without injury. There was a slight increase in the proportion of controlling and coercive behaviour offences, from 14% to 17% compared with the previous year.⁵⁷

These reported figures must be understood within the context of a police super-complaint into how the police respond to victims of sexual abuse from a minoritised background and when they might be at risk of so-called ‘honour-based’ abuse. His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS), the College of Policing and the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC)⁵⁸ found that some forces did not clearly understand the risks of so-called ‘honour-based’ abuse, resulting in some victims being left unprotected and unsupported. The Women and Equalities Committee have also announced an inquiry into so-

[55 Ibid. p.10](#)

[56 Home Office \(20 October 2022\) Statistics on so called ‘honour-based’ abuse offences, England and Wales, 2021 to 2022](#)

[57 Ibid.](#)

[58 HMIFRCS \(16 December 2022\) Police response to sexual abuse fails to safeguard victims from risk of honour-based abuse](#)

called ‘honour-based’ abuse to understand its nature and prevalence.⁵⁹

Sexual Harassment

The latest Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN) data showed that in the previous 12 months, 27% of women and 16% of men had experienced at least one form of public sexual harassment. One in two (50%) women aged 16 to 34 years had experienced at least one form of harassment, down from 58% in June 2021.⁶⁰ More than one-third of women (38%) aged 16 to 34 years had been catcalled in the last 12 months. Furthermore, disabled people felt less safe in all settings than non-disabled people.

This echoes research by Girlguiding who found that 78% of girls and young women aged 17 to 21 see or experience sexism in public. Overall, 1 in 6 (17%) girls and young women aged 13 to 21 say fear of sexual harassment holds them back at school. This is slightly higher in Wales (19%) and England (18%) compared to Scotland (12%) and Northern Ireland (11%). Girlguiding’s research found that Black and minoritised girls (described as girls of colour in the report) aged 11 to 16 were less likely than girls who are white to feel safe at school (65% compared to 70%).⁶¹

In Wales the new Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Strategy for 2022-2026 contained a commitment to prioritising tackling workplace sexual harassment. This follows two years of Welsh Women’s Aid’s No Grey Area campaign which found that 4 out of 5 women in Wales had experienced workplace sexual harassment. This was even higher for Black, Asian, and minoritised

[59 Women and Equalities Committee \(4 November 2022\) So-called honour-based abuse inquiry launched](#)

[60 ONS \(25 May 2022\) Perceptions of personal safety and experiences of harassment, Great Britain: 16 February to 13 March 2022](#)

[61 Girlguiding \(2022\) Girls’ Attitudes Survey 2022](#)

women, disabled women, and those within the LGBTQ+ community.⁶²

Public Attitudes Campaigns

At EVAW, we have long called for investment in public attitudes campaigns to tackle and prevent VAWG, and this year we welcomed some promising progress in this area, including through the launch of the government's national public attitudes campaign, "*Enough*".⁶³ The campaign was partly developed in consultation with VAWG sector experts. If we are to see transformation at a societal level, this work to change attitudes and behaviours must be long-term and properly funded. It must also be shaped by organisations specialising in violence against women and girls, including specifically those led 'by and for' Black and minoritised women, Deaf and disabled women and LGBT+ people. The Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) in London and the Mayor of Greater Manchester also launched campaigns,⁶⁴⁶⁵ aimed at reaching men and boys and seeking to disrupt the social norms that see VAWG as acceptable.

4. Online Spaces and Abuse

In the year that saw the Online Safety Bill enter Parliament, the need to tackle women and girls' frequent experiences of online abuse and harassment has been all too evident. The recent arrest of influencer Andrew Tate as part of an investigation into human trafficking, rape and organised crime⁶⁶ has also raised questions regarding the role

[62 Welsh Women's Aid \(24 May 2022\) Welsh Women's Aid Respond to VAWDASV Strategy 2022-26](#)

[63 https://enough.campaign.gov.uk/](https://enough.campaign.gov.uk/)

[64 MOPAC \(27 February 2022\) Mayor launches campaign to help end violence against women and girls](#)

[65 Greater Manchester Combined Authority \(2022\) #IsThisOK?](#)

[66 The Guardian \(7 January 2023\) 'Vulnerable boys are drawn in': schools fear spread of Andrew Tate's misogyny](#)

of tech platforms in facilitating his substantial online following and the potential radicalisation of young men and boys online. Furthermore, despite being known for vile, misogynistic content, his videos continued to appear on Twitter and TikTok, despite the latter promising to crackdown on accounts that post misogynistic content.⁶⁷ This creates online spaces which are then a hotbed of VAWG both online and offline, yet neither the government nor tech companies have put forward meaningful measures to tackle this. The fact that harmful content can be pushed using social media sites' algorithms to increase engagement and ultimately monetary gain demonstrates that there is much more that must be done to properly address VAWG.

The harmful impacts of online abuse are acutely felt by girls and young women. Girlguiding⁶⁸ found that a quarter (26%) of girls and young women aged 11 to 21 don't feel safe when they're online. 80% of girls and young women had seen or experienced sexism online. This figure was 68% in 2018. Disabled girls and young women were more likely to see or experience sexism online (89% compared to 79% who aren't disabled). It's also a problem for 9 in 10 (90%) LGBTQ+ girls and young women (compared to 76% of those who aren't). Research by Ofcom found that nearly a quarter (23%) of Black women disagreed with the statement that "being online has a positive effect on my mental health", compared to 16% of white women. Additionally, women from a Black and minoritised background are particularly likely to be troubled by their harmful online experiences (52% compared to 42% of white women).⁶⁹

[67 The Guardian \(6 November 2022\) TikTok 'still hosting toxic posts' of banned influencer Andrew Tate](#)

[68 Girlguiding op cit.](#)

[69 OfCom \(2022\) Online Nation Report](#)

5. Crisis in the Criminal Justice System Response

An Institution in Crisis: Police Culture and Abuse

2022 saw the publication of a stream of reviews and reports regarding policing and VAWG including the misconduct of several Metropolitan Police officers; police failings in responding to police-perpetrated VAWG; standards and internal culture of the Met Police; and an inspection into vetting, misconduct and misogyny within police forces across the UK. The overall picture these findings create is one of systemic misogyny, racism and discrimination that enables officers to act with impunity. This was followed in January 2023 by serving Met Police officer, David Carrick, pleading guilty to more than 80 sexual offences committed over two decades, which highlighted a particularly horrific pattern of egregious behaviour known to the Met, and a distressing example of repeated police failures.

The publication of the Operation Hotton learning report⁷⁰ in January 2022 by the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) shone a light on deeply misogynistic, racist and ableist messages shared via WhatsApp between police officers. The report describes a culture of bullying, sexual harassment and the deliberate deletion of material relevant to an ongoing criminal investigation.

The case of the girl known as “Child Q”, a 15-year-old Black girl who was subjected to a strip-search by police officers after wrongly being suspected of cannabis possession, clearly demonstrated the discrimination and adultification⁷¹ that Black girls experience, especially in schools.⁷² A safeguarding report found this treatment unjustified, noting that racism was “likely” a factor, raising serious

[70 IOPC \(January 2022\) Operation Hotton Learning Report](#)

[71 Jahnine Davis for HM Inspectorate of Probation \(June 2022\) Adultification bias within child protection and safeguarding](#)

[72 The Guardian \(2022\) Child Q: four Met police officers facing investigation over strip-search](#)

questions around police presence and conduct in schools.⁷³ As this case reveals, embedded racism within services means that minoritised girls, particularly Black girls, disproportionately experience punitive measures.⁷⁴

The interim report from the Casey Review⁷⁵ into standards and internal culture at the Met Police found that between 2013 and 2022, 1 in 5 officers and staff in the misconduct system had been involved in two or more misconduct cases.⁷⁶ However, less than 1% of those officers have been dismissed, with line managers and supervisors warning staff against taking misconduct action, illustrating how officers are enabled to abuse their power with impunity. Even when misconduct allegations are made, 55-60% received a ‘no case to answer’ decision.⁷⁷

In October 2022 the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) and College of Policing published a review of police-perpetrated VAWG, in response to the super-complaint submitted by the Centre for Women’s Justice. This found that only 40% of reports of police-perpetrated domestic abuse resulted in a misconduct investigation, just 8 cases out of 122 were referred to the IOPC and only 9% of cases resulted in a criminal charge.⁷⁸ It also found inadequate data collection and recording, and a lack of information sharing between

[73 City of London & Hackney Safeguarding Children Partnership \(2022\) Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review, Child Q](#)

[74 Children’s Commissioner \(8 August 2022\) Strip search of children by the Metropolitan Police Service – new analysis by the Children’s Commissioner for England](#)

[75 Metropolitan Police \(October 2022\) Baroness Casey Review - Interim Report on Misconduct](#)

[76 Ibid. p.9](#)

[77 Ibid. p.6](#)

[78 College of Policing and NPCC \(October 2022\) Violence against women and girls: Themes, learning and next steps following police forces’ reviews of police-perpetrated violence against women and girls](#)

criminal and gross misconduct investigations and the Professional Standards Department, undermining disciplinary outcomes.

In November 2022, the HMICFRS published the results of its inspection into vetting, misconduct and misogyny in the police service.⁷⁹ The report found that it is currently ‘too easy for the wrong people’ to join and to stay in the police.⁸⁰ The Inspectorate makes clear the serious failures in vetting, as a review of 725 vetting files found vetting decisions that were ‘questionable at best’ in almost 1 in 5 cases.⁸¹ Police officers and staff received vetting clearance after committing offences of indecent exposure and domestic-abuse related assaults, as well as being suspects of rape, racially aggravated damage, and other serious violence.

A survey of officers and staff found an ‘alarmingly high number’ of female officers and staff experienced harmful behaviour by colleagues, including sexual harassment and serious sexual assault. Female officers provided disturbing accounts of their male colleagues’ behaviour, some of which ‘came from supervisory ranks’. In many of the cases, the perpetrator had been previously reported for similar behaviour, but the force had failed to take the allegations seriously or investigate them. Many spoke about worries of ‘repercussions’ for making reports, and most officers were dissatisfied with the outcome of reporting. Additionally, the Inspectorate found that some forces failed to consider the link between misogynistic behaviour towards police colleagues and members of the public.

The litany of evidence that has emerged this year highlights that the institution of policing is in crisis and raises serious questions about what this means for the rights of women subject to VAWG, given so much of their access to safety and support relies on the police. Despite the ongoing flow of damning evidence about policing and VAWG, the police have not received consistent oversight, in part

[79 HMICFRS \(November 2022\) An inspection of vetting, misconduct, and misogyny in the police service](#)

[80 Ibid. p.3](#)

[81 Ibid. p.1](#)

due to political upheaval and ministerial changes. Furthermore, within this context, the government's decision to hand ever more powers to the police through the Public Order Bill and the potential removal of the Human Rights Act, despite the potential risk this poses to women and girls, is deeply concerning.

A Broken System – The Data

Sexual Violence

Just 4,466 rape cases in England and Wales were referred to the CPS by the police in Q1 2022/23. This is a rise from 3,566 the year before but falls significantly short of meeting the government's own targets of returning to levels last seen in 2016: 6,611 cases. Q1 saw charges brought in just 2,385 cases. While this constitutes an increase on the previous year, it falls short of the 3,671 cases in which charges were brought in 2016. This same quarter saw 2,558 prosecutions completed, nearly half as many as the 5,190 completed in 2016. Despite a creeping increase on the previous year, there were just 1,765 convictions for rape in Q1, compared to 2,991 convictions in 2016.⁸²

In Scotland, figures released in June 2022⁸³ reveal that rape and attempted rape has had the lowest conviction rate of all crimes each year for the last decade. In 2021-22, just 51% of rape and attempted rape trials resulted in a conviction, compared to a 91% overall conviction rate. The number of convictions also decreased by 40% from 130 in 2019-20 to just 78 in 2020-21. The number of prosecutions has also fallen by 49% from 299 in 2019-20 to 152 in 2020-21. Rape Crisis Scotland noted that victims and survivors were

[82 CPS \(20 October 2022\) CPS data summary Quarter 1 2022-2023](#)

[83 Scottish government \(21 June 2022\) Criminal Proceedings in Scotland 2020-21](#)

facing unacceptable delays to justice, even before the pandemic, and these figures show the situation has become even worse.⁸⁴

The Public Prosecution Service (PPS) in Northern Ireland received 600 files for suspected rape offences in 2021/22, an increase of 3.8% from the previous year. 622 suspects were charged or reported for rape (an increase of 2.3% on 2020/21). For offences of rape the increase in the prosecution rate was 5.9 percentage points (17.3% of cases as compared to 11.4% in 2020/21). The number of suspects prosecuted for rape increased from 76 to 103 in 2021/22.⁸⁵

Domestic Abuse

There continues to be a downward spiral in charging, prosecution and convictions for domestic abuse in England and Wales. Police referrals to the CPS are once again down on the previous year, with just 67,790 cases referred compared to 72,527 in the year ending June 2021 (a decline of 6.5%). CPS charges, completed prosecutions and convictions have also all dropped for Q1 2022/23 and are now staggeringly lower than the same period in Q1 2020/21, when the pandemic caused a shutdown in the justice system.⁸⁶

In Scotland, 32,776 charges were reported to COPFS (Crown Office & Procurator Fiscal Service) with a domestic abuse identifier in 2021-22. This is a decrease of 1.9% compared to the 2020-21 total of 33,425. It is the second highest number of charges reported since 2015-16, but lower than the numbers reported between 2013-14 and 2015-16. The vast majority of charges identified as being related to

[84 Rape Crisis Scotland \(1 July 2022\) Rape Crisis Scotland calls for bold action as conviction rates for rape and attempted rape remain lowest of all crimes for the last ten years.](#)

[85 Public Prosecution Service \(1 December 2022\) PPS publishes latest statistical bulletin on cases involving sexual offences](#)

[86 CPS. Op cit.](#)

domestic abuse are prosecuted. An initial decision was made to proceed to court with 93 percent of charges in 2021-22.⁸⁷

Lack of Equalities Data

There continues to be a significant lack of equalities data collected in the criminal justice system, which makes it difficult to undertake an intersectional analysis. Without disaggregated data, there will continue to be a significant hole in understanding of different justice outcomes for Black and minoritised, migrant, Deaf and disabled, and LGBT+ victims and survivors in the criminal justice system. This data is essential to better understand the gaps in and barriers to access to justice, as well as to ensure accountability. Furthermore, police recording of ethnicity has been found to be so patchy and inconsistent that forces are unable to properly monitor the equality of the service they provide to the different communities they serve.⁸⁸

6. Support Landscape

The Domestic Abuse Commissioner published research mapping domestic abuse support provision across England and Wales in November 2022.⁸⁹ This research engaged with more than 500 service providers, 150 local commissioners and over 4,000 victims and survivors to obtain a thorough picture of the state of provision in England and Wales.

The report found that there is a ‘postcode lottery’ for accessing specific types of support, with many victims and survivors unable to access the support they need. Victims and survivors also reported needing a different types of support to help them find safety and to recover from abuse, including 83% who said they wanted

[87 Crown Office & Procurator Fiscal Service \(21 September 2022\) Domestic Abuse and Stalking charges in Scotland, 2021-22](#)

[88 HMIFRCS \(16 December 2022\) op cit.](#)

[89 Domestic Abuse Commissioner \(29 November 2022\) A Patchwork of Provision: How to meet the needs of victims and survivors across England and Wales](#)

counselling and therapeutic support.⁹⁰ The independence of services was also found to be highly valued by victims and survivors. A third of service providers (34%) reported running their services without any dedicated funding, and 27% had to cease services altogether due to lack of funding (this rose to 45% for ‘by and for’ services).⁹¹ This highlights both the need for a “considerable injection of long-term funding”⁹² in the sector, and the precarious situation for victims and survivors of domestic abuse seeking support from an under-funded sector in high demand.

Victims and survivors’ needs were found to vary across groups – for example over half (59%) of Black survivors sought refuge in comparison to a quarter (25%) of white survivors.⁹³ There was a stark difference in feelings of safety, as Black and minoritised survivors who accessed a service led ‘by and for’ them felt considerably more safe, compared to a non-‘by and for’ service (78% vs. 48%). Unfortunately, only half (51%) of Black and minoritised survivors who wanted access to specialist support were able to access it. This fell to less than one in five (19%) for LGBT+ survivors and only 7% for Deaf and disabled survivors.⁹⁴ This illustrates the stark inequalities in access to support for Black and minoritised, migrant, Deaf and disabled, and LGBT+ survivors, as well as the lack of specialist ‘by and for’ services set up to support them.

Funding was found to be often short-term and insecure, meaning services struggle to build capacity and plan for the future; affecting efficiency, service delivery, and recruitment and retention of staff. This echoes EAW’s own findings in our survey of members, who reported concerns over the harm of competitive tendering for short-term funds, with there being a consistent call for core, long-term funding that enables the sector to do what works right for them and

[90 Ibid. p.22](#)

[91 Ibid. p.15](#)

[92 Ibid. p.3](#)

[93 Ibid. p.6](#)

[94 Ibid. p.19](#)

the women they support. The Domestic Abuse Commissioner's report found that over a quarter of organisations relied on a main source of funding that lasted less than a year – and this was particularly acute for 'by and for' organisations. The report contains a series of recommendations including a £263m fund over three years to support specialist 'by and for' services and addressing the paucity of specialist counselling and therapeutic support.⁹⁵

The Domestic Abuse Commissioner also published findings which found that if the government addressed the current gaps in protection and support for migrant women, there would be a high cost-benefit ratio. If the government were to pay the expected costs of c.£536m to extend automatic right to apply the Domestic Violence Rule (DVR) to all migrant victims and survivors regardless of immigration status, and to ensure all women have access to specialist support, this would generate overall social gains worth c.£2.293bn over ten years (both in present value terms).⁹⁶

Women's Centres

Women's Centres are another key part of the landscape of support provision. Women's Centres are community-based services that provide tailored support covering every aspect of women's lives. Many of these services support women who are in contact with, or at risk of contact with, the criminal justice system. It is an established model that has delivered positive outcomes for women.

In Women in Prison's report on the value of Women's Centres,⁹⁷ the economic cost-benefit analysis of these support services when women leave prisons found that a hypothetical Women's Centre receiving £1m investment in a given year can support over 650 women and generate £2.75m in socio-economic benefits, including

[95 Ibid. p.59](#)

[96 Domestic Abuse Commissioner \(13 December 2022\) Safety Before Status: The Solutions \(Executive Summary\)](#)

[97 Women in Prison \(6 October 2022\) The Value of Women's Centres](#)

savings for public services and significantly improved wellbeing of women and their children. Among the agencies and departments that benefit, nearly half (47%) of the public sector savings is returned to the local authority, 17% to the Ministry of Justice and 15% to the NHS.⁹⁸ Despite the government recognising the value of Women's Centres, no cross-departmental funding has been allocated to Women's Centres in spending reviews and budgets since the publication of the 2021 National Concordat on women in or at risk of contact with the criminal justice system.

Key Policy Developments

1. Istanbul Convention

Ten years after signing the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, otherwise known as the Istanbul Convention, the UK government finally ratified the Convention and enshrined it into law on 1 November 2022. As the 'international gold standard' for responding to and preventing VAWG, the Istanbul Convention sets out how governments can prevent and effectively prosecute VAWG, protect women and girls, and put in place comprehensive and fully-funded co-ordinated policies to respond to VAWG. Ratification will mean that the government can be held to account for its action on VAWG against the Convention's standards. This was a long-awaited step forward, given EVAW and many VAWG experts have been calling for ratification for a decade.

However, the ratification of this Convention disappointingly arrived with reservations on:

- Article 44 – which requires the UK to take the ability to prosecute UK nationals and people who live in the UK but are not UK nationals, for crimes such as rape which they commit overseas; and

[98 Women in Prison op.cit. p.7](#)

- Article 59 – which requires member states to grant residence to victims whose immigration status depends on an abusive partner. This reservation means that the government does not have to meet the requirements of this article and so would not be held to account on how they respond to the needs of migrant women who have experienced abuse.

The exclusion of Article 59 leaves migrant women vulnerable to abuse and targets them for exclusion from life-saving support. Such an exclusion also runs contrary to the spirit and principle of the Convention, which includes the core principle Article 4(3) that states all victims/survivors of VAWG should be able to receive protection and support without discrimination on any grounds, including immigration or refugee status.⁹⁹

2. Victims Bill

The draft Victims Bill was published on 25 May 2022 with the aim of enshrining the principles of the Victims' Code¹⁰⁰ into legislation. The government states that the Bill will improve support for victims to cope and recover; enabling them to engage with the criminal justice system, amplify their voices, and strengthen transparency and oversight of criminal justice agencies.¹⁰¹ EAW agrees with the former Victims' Commissioner and Justice Select Committee that the draft Bill needs to go further to be a landmark piece of legislation,¹⁰² as it is currently underwhelming in its scope. In order to deliver for all victims and survivors and address inequalities in access to justice, the Bill must address the gaps in protection and support for Black

[99 EAW \(30 May 2022\) More than 80 organisations call for Istanbul Convention to be made law without exceptions](#)

[100 Ministry of Justice \(21 April 2021\) The Code of Practice for Victims of Crime in England and Wales and supporting public information materials](#)

[101 Ministry of Justice \(25 May 2022\) Draft Victims Bill](#)

[102 Victims Commissioner \(20 June 2022\) Annual report of the Victims' Commissioner 2021 to 2022](#)

and minoritised women, migrant women, Deaf and disabled women, and LGBT+ survivors.

The recommendations for the Victims Bill set out in the former Victims Commissioner's annual report identify key additions needed to ensure the Bill protects the rights of victims of sexual assault in the criminal justice system.¹⁰³ These include ensuring the Bill transforms how victims are treated across the criminal justice system, so that they receive procedural justice, support and are guaranteed their rights; extending victims' rights to currently excluded groups; and assessing who does engage with the criminal justice system, as well as the barriers to justice and the experiences of those who do not report.

What do we want to see in the Victims Bill?

Firewall

The introduction of safe reporting mechanisms for migrant victims and survivors to report abuse without fear of their information being shared with immigration enforcement has been long called for by many in the VAWG sector - led by Black, minoritised and migrant women, including the Step Up Migrant Women coalition led by the Latin American Women's Rights Service (LAWRS), and Southall Black Sisters. This call was endorsed by the Justice Committee's pre-legislative scrutiny report on the Victims Bill, which recommended "an immediate end to the sharing of victims' and witnesses' data between the police and the Home Office for immigration enforcement purposes and the introduction of a complete firewall for those groups".¹⁰⁴

[103 Victims Commissioner op. cit.](#)

[104 Justice Committee \(21 September 2022\) Pre-legislative scrutiny of the draft Victims Bill p.10](#)

Funding for Community-Based Services

The Justice Committee’s report also notes that “the Victims Bill will likely put additional strain on already stretched services, as victims of domestic or sexual abuse become more aware of their rights. Advocacy services already face unmanageable referral levels and caseloads, given the lack of resourcing. It is therefore clear that long-term, sustainable funding is required to enable community-based services to meet demand and allow the Victims Bill to live up to its ambitions”.¹⁰⁵ It is important that the government takes heed of this and puts long-term, sustainable funding for VAWG services, particularly led ‘by and for’ services on a statutory footing.

Pre-trial Therapy

Pre-trial therapy is therapy and counselling received by survivors of sexual violence and abuse who are engaged in criminal justice proceedings. While the latest CPS guidance¹⁰⁶ on pre-trial therapy acknowledges the barriers victims and survivors face in accessing both therapy and justice at the same time, counselling notes remain subject to disclosure and are not subject to legal privilege. This dissuades many survivors from accessing the therapy they need, with many feeling that they must choose between seeking justice and therapeutic support. The Justice Committee agreed that the primary purpose of counselling is therapeutic not investigative; and Rape Crisis England and Wales, the Centre for Women’s Justice and EVAW will continue to call for change via the ‘Keep Counselling Confidential’ campaign, and highlight other jurisdictions who have afforded legal privilege to counselling notes, such as New South Wales.¹⁰⁷

[105 Justice Committee, op.cit. p.41](#)

[106 CPS \(26 May 2022\) Pre-Trial Therapy](#)

[107 Rape Crisis England & Wales, with EVAW and CWJ \(October 2022\) Keep Counselling Confidential briefing](#)

Independent Legal Advice

Free independent legal advice and representation for victims of sexual offences is vital for survivors expected to engage in a criminal justice system which so often leaves women and girls wishing they hadn't reported. It is therefore encouraging that the Justice Committee's report recognises the need for independent legal advice for victims and survivors.¹⁰⁸

3. Online Safety Bill

Previously described as a 'world-first'¹⁰⁹ piece of legislation, the Online Safety Bill was introduced to Parliament in 2022, with the ambition that it would mark a milestone in the fight for a new digital age which is safer for users and holds tech giants to account for the abuse occurring on their platforms. The Bill has seen significant delays and changes due to the political upheaval, including the wholesale removal of previous provisions relating to so-called 'legal but harmful' content. The government had previously provided reassurance that the legal but harmful provisions would 'likely' include 'misogynistic abuse' as a priority category, so it is therefore disappointing to see the government withdraw future protections against VAWG in the name of 'freedom of speech', without regard for how this impinges on women's rights, including their ability to express themselves freely online without the threat of abuse.¹¹⁰

Currently, the Online Safety Bill does not adequately address online violence against women and girls in its entirety. There are some offences included in the Bill that address specific forms of gendered online abuse, such as new offences to address 'downblousing',

[108 Ibid. p.54](#)

[109 Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport \(17 March 2022\) World-first online safety laws introduced in Parliament](#)

[110 Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport \(22 April 2022\) Online Safety Bill: factsheet](#)

‘deepfake’ pornography,¹¹¹ and cyber-flashing, as well as coercive control being added to the priority offences list.¹¹² However, these fall short of the sector’s calls for VAWG to be named on the face of the Bill within an overarching human rights framework and a systems-based, prevention-first approach. The concern remains that without this, the Bill will not provide the solution to many of the far-ranging harms women and girls experience online.

The government will also be introducing new image-based sexual offences to simplify the law; repealing existing offences and introducing a new base offence of sharing an intimate image without consent, as well as two more serious offences based on intent to cause humiliation, alarm, or distress and for obtaining sexual gratification. This followed the Law Commission’s recommendation for a consent-based offence for image-based sexual abuse (referred to in the report as intimate image abuse).¹¹³ However, even with this consent-based framing, the systemic problems within the criminal justice system make it very challenging for the new offences to result in significant rates of prosecution. Nor is pursuing a criminal justice outcome necessarily a route sought by most victims and survivors. For this reason, tech companies must also be held to accountable to ensure they prioritise preventing and responding to online VAWG. EAW, as part of a coalition of experts including Glitch, Refuge, Carnegie UK, NSPCC, 5Rights and Professors Clare McGlynn and Lorna Woods, have therefore created a VAWG Code of Practice¹¹⁴ and call on the government to include it in the list of mandated Codes of Practice within the Online Safety Bill.

[111 The Guardian \(24 November 2022\) Online safety bill will criminalise ‘downblousing’ and ‘deepfake’ porn](#)

[112 Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport \(28 November 2022\) New protections for children and free speech added to internet laws](#)

[113 Law Commission \(7 July 2022\) Taking, making and sharing intimate images without consent](#)

[114 EAW et al. \(16 May 2022\) VAWG Code of Practice](#)

The VAWG Code of Practice sets out comprehensive recommendations for social media companies on areas such as risk assessment, safety by design, moderation, transparency, victim support and remediation, enforcement of criminal law, and education and training. The detailed guidance is aimed at supporting tech companies to understand the breadth of VAWG perpetrated online and to enable them to respond effectively, so that women and girls' right to access online spaces is upheld. The Code of Practice also highlights the importance of tech companies taking into account the intersectional experience of abuse, since minoritised and marginalised women and girls are disproportionately harmed by gendered online harms.

Adoption of the VAWG Code of Practice would position the UK as world-leading in its oversight of tech companies' record on VAWG. However, without naming VAWG as a harm on the face of the Bill and introducing a VAWG Code of Practice, the Online Safety Bill will fall disappointingly short.

4. Nationality and Borders Act

The Nationality and Borders Act reached Royal Assent in April 2022. This law was opposed by ERAW and almost the entirety of the VAWG sector,¹¹⁵ in a campaign led by Women for Refugee Women and other refugee and migrant rights organisations. The legislation created no safe routes for those seeking asylum. Instead, it introduced a two-tier asylum system, in which people can be excluded from a path to settlement and accessing support based on their mode of arrival and how quickly they make a claim. It also ramped up the criteria that people must meet to determine refugee status and removed a ground for claiming protection that has been critical for survivors of gender-based violence.¹¹⁶ Its provisions

[115 Women for Refugee Women \(24 November 2021\) 52 Organisations unite to tell Priti Patel that the Nationality and Borders Bill will have a “cruel and discriminatory” impact on women](#)
[116 Joint briefings by Women for Refugee Women and ILPA on both the well-founded fear test and the definition of ‘particular social](#)

contradict long-standing evidence from the VAWG sector about the challenging circumstances in which women and survivors of violence arrive in the UK, and the significant barriers to disclosing abuse and trauma. The Act increases the risk of women being incorrectly denied asylum and suffering further violence and abuse as a result. Over six months after Royal Assent of the Act, there remains no monitoring by the government of the impact of these changes on women and survivors, despite repeated warnings from VAWG organisations about the risk of harm.

5. Public Order Bill

The collective and concerted effort of civil society and human rights campaigners saw 14 harmful proposals in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act removed during its passage through the House of Lords. However, these resurfaced again through the Public Order Bill. The Bill, introduced a month after the Policing Act was passed, contains measures which pose a threat to the right to protest, a fundamental part of the longstanding and ongoing struggle for women's rights. These include protest banning orders which could include intrusive electronic surveillance of protesters; unlimited fines for those carrying items suspected as being for protest; further expansion of stop and search, including suspicionless stop and search; and a new offence of obstructing stop and search. These measures will increase surveillance and discriminatory treatment of already over-policed Black and minoritised communities.¹¹⁷ Five UN Special Rapporteurs have written to the government expressing grave concerns about the Bill.¹¹⁸

[group' can be found](#)

[here: https://www.refugeewomen.co.uk/clauses-31-and-32-nabb/](https://www.refugeewomen.co.uk/clauses-31-and-32-nabb/)
[117 EAW et al. \(2022\) Women's rights organisations oppose the Public Order Bill: the right to protest is a feminist issue](#)

[118 The letter \(22 December 2022\) can be accessed at](#)

<https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=27724>

6. Domestic Abuse Act Implementation

The implementation of different elements of the Domestic Abuse Act in 2021 continued into 2022.¹¹⁹ This included the recognition of children as victims in their own right from January 2022, and the publication of the Domestic Abuse Statutory guidance. Special measures for victims in criminal proceedings for offences involving domestic abuse, such as video-recorded evidence and cross-examination, were introduced in May, and special measures for civil proceedings were introduced in June. The prohibition of cross-examination in both family and civil proceedings was also introduced in July 2022 to protect victims and survivors in these processes. The Act also introduced the offences of non-fatal strangulation and non-fatal suffocation that came into force on 7 June 2022. Parts of the Act that extended the extraterritorial jurisdiction of the criminal courts in Northern Ireland to further violent and sexual offences came into effect in February 2022 (for England and Wales, offences against the person committed outside the UK came into effect in 2021). This is not only limited to offending that occurs within a domestic abuse setting.¹²⁰

Almost two years after the government rejected proposals to extend the Domestic Violence Rule (DVR) during the passage of the Domestic Abuse Act in 2021,¹²¹ the government has not provided any long-term solution to tackle the dangerous circumstances that migrant women with insecure immigration status face. The Home Office is yet to publish the evaluation of the Support for Migrant

[119 Home Office \(Updated 21 December 2022\) Domestic Abuse Act 2021 commencement schedule](#)

[120 CPS \(Updated: 5 October 2022\) Jurisdiction](#)

[121 Specifically, Southall Black Sisters tabled amendments to extend the Domestic Violence Rule \(DVR\) and its accompanying Destitute Domestic Violence Concession \(DDVC\) for six months so that migrant women with NRPF can access refuge accommodation but this was voted down by the government in the House of Commons.](#)

Victims pilot scheme that they chose to temporarily implement instead.

7. Protection from Sex-based Harassment in Public Bill

In December 2022, the government announced, following a public consultation, that they would introduce a specific public sexual harassment offence¹²² through backing a Private Member's Bill introduced by Greg Clark MP.¹²³ It is EAW's position that criminalising public sexual harassment is unlikely to have a deterrent effect, given the systemic issues relating to prosecuting VAWG currently in the criminal justice system. Encouraging women and girls to report violence in the context of a criminal justice system where rape is effectively decriminalised and domestic abuse prosecution rates are falling steeply is a limited solution that will likely compound the structural racism already experienced by Black and minoritised communities. Greater investment and research in innovative and creative alternative justice approaches, which are developed in partnership with the specialist VAWG sector and which are survivor-focused, can provide a transformative approach to tackling public sexual harassment.

8. Transnational Marriage Abandonment

There were some positive legal developments in 2022, such as a landmark ruling in relation to transnational marriage abandonment.¹²⁴ This is described by Southall Black Sisters, who have campaigned on this issue for many years, as “the deliberate

[122 Home Office \(9 December 2022\) Government supports a new public sexual harassment offence](#)

[123 UK Parliament \(last updated 12 December 2022\) Protection from Sex-based Harassment in Public Bill](#)

[124 Transnational marriage abandonment is a form of abuse which consists of women being deceived into returning to their country of birth and having their travel documents confiscated before being abandoned.](#)

removal of vulnerable migrant women from the protections of this country by their husbands and in-laws who discard them abroad as if they were disposable commodities. It is an extreme form of psychological abuse since it denies women access to justice in the UK. It amounts to a gross violation of dignity and human rights.¹²⁵

A judge found on 14 October 2022¹²⁶ that women subject to this form of abuse have been unlawfully discriminated against and should be allowed to return to the UK. A legal representative for the woman at the centre of the case said that the ruling meant that the Home Office will need to facilitate victims' re-entry to the UK, and the Home Office have stated that they are currently considering how to implement the judgement. A Home Office spokesperson stated that "anyone who has suffered domestic abuse must be treated as a victim first and foremost, regardless of immigration status." Unfortunately, this statement is undermined by the continued exclusion of migrant women from protection on the basis of their immigration status.

9. Rape Review and Operation Soteria

Rape Review

The publication of the 18-month Rape Review Progress Report in December 2022¹²⁷ is a means of monitoring progress against the action plan that followed the government's End-to-End Rape Review examining the treatment of rape in the criminal justice system, from when a survivor reports, through to court. This progress update included some positive announcements, such as the new 24/7 Rape & Sexual Abuse Support Line run by EAW member Rape Crisis England and Wales. The reported developments in technology

[125 Southall Black Sisters \(3 April 2020\) The Phenomenon of Transnational Marriage Abandonment](#)

[126 AM, R \(On the Application Of\) v Secretary of State for the Home Department \[2022\] EWHC 2591 \(Admin\) \(14 October 2022\)](#)

[127 Ministry of Justice \(15 December 2022\) End to End Rape Review Progress Report](#)

which seek to reduce the burden of intrusive demands for the evidence needed from a victim or survivor's phone are also welcome.

The introduction of Section 28 (pre-recorded cross examination for vulnerable witnesses) was also announced in the report. This is promising as a means to try and reduce the trauma often experienced by survivors going through the criminal justice system. However, the lack of resources to support it and lack of coordination in its implementation are concerning. There are ongoing concerns regarding how it is operating in practice. We await the evaluation of the scheme and call upon the government to sufficiently resource this work to ensure it benefits survivors.

The Rape Review Progress Report states that victims of rape are now seeing significant improvements in the criminal justice system's response to rape. It is positive to see movement in the right direction,¹²⁸ however we have not yet reached the charging levels last seen in 2016, which was already considered a low bar. It is also important to be cautious about broad claims of 'success' when there continues to be a lack data about which victims this progress does and does not apply to. It is therefore welcome that the CPS has finally committed to research the "needs of vulnerable victims and intersectionality" in a refreshed joint action plan with the National Police Chiefs' Council, though we await further details.¹²⁹ The absence of improved police-recorded disaggregated data risks undermining progress in this area.

Without disaggregated data on protected characteristics of victims and survivors, we cannot know whether these marginal improvements are felt by all, especially those who are being most failed by the criminal justice system – for example Black and minoritised women, Deaf and disabled women, LGBT+ people, and migrant survivors. There also continues to be a lack of equivalent political will towards the question of preventing sexual violence and

[128 CPS, *op. cit.*](#)

[129 CPS \(20 October 2022\) Police-CPS Joint National Rape Action Plan – refresh 2022](#)

meeting the diverse priorities of survivors not engaged in the criminal justice system,¹³⁰ including determining what ‘justice’ looks like for many women.

Operation Soteria

After much delay, 131 the findings from Year One of the pilot Operation Soteria were published at the end of 2022.¹³² Operation Soteria was one of the most promising developments from the Rape Review due to its commitment to interrogating the culture of policing, and its focus on moving towards ‘suspect-centric’ investigations, as opposed to focusing on perceptions of victim ‘credibility’. Although we are still awaiting findings from the CPS side of the pilot which is still in process due to delays, Operation Soteria has been regarded as a ‘transformational change in the investigation of rape’.

Operation Soteria has provided almost unprecedented evidence and insight from five pathfinder police force areas into the practice of the police and CJS towards victims and survivors of VAWG, and points to the multitude of failures that women and girls are confronted with in pursuit of justice. These include police forces lacking sufficient specialist knowledge about sexual abuse and rape, and a problematic culture, including officers both victim-blaming and disbelieving victims. It also documents the frequent crossover between domestic abuse and rape, as part of the continuum of VAWG, but policing and victim support for domestic abuse and serious sexual offences are often treated as entirely separate areas.

[130 See ‘Access to Justice for All’, Page 40 of Decriminalisation of Rape: Why the justice system is failing rape survivors and what needs to change: https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/C-Decriminalisation-of-Rape-Report-CWJ-EVAW-IMKAAN-RCEW-NOV-2020.pdf](https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/C-Decriminalisation-of-Rape-Report-CWJ-EVAW-IMKAAN-RCEW-NOV-2020.pdf)

[131 EVAW \(29 April 2022\) Charities write open letter to Home Secretary calling for Operation Soteria findings to be made public](#)

[132 Home Office \(15 December 2022\) Operation Soteria Year One Report](#)

A significant area of concern was the poor quality of data collection found in every pathfinder area. This is especially the case for equalities data, preventing a greater understanding of how Black and minoritised survivors are experiencing the system. Across all pathfinder forces, police records were missing or contained incorrectly entered data in a significant proportion of cases, for example on victim ethnicity, the victim-suspect relationship and incorrectly applied outcome codes. Poor quality police data is a long-standing barrier to obtaining a solid grasp of any differences in justice outcomes for cohorts of victims.

The Operation Soteria pilot has been expanded to a further 14 police force areas, and a national operating model has been developed, though these findings have not been subjected to public scrutiny.

10. Tackling Domestic Abuse Plan

In March 2022, the Home Office published its Tackling Domestic Abuse Plan,¹³³ which reflected some long-standing calls for multi-year funding for community-based support services and a greater emphasis on both prevention and a ‘Pursuing Perpetrators strand’. EAW also welcomed the government’s reversal of an earlier decision to separate domestic abuse and VAWG strategies altogether, which the VAWG sector strongly advised against.¹³⁴

11. Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse

2022 saw the publication of the final report of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA).¹³⁵ This marked the conclusion of a seven-year inquiry set up to review the extent to which state and non-state institutions failed in their duty of care to

[133 Home Office \(30 March 2022\) Tackling Domestic Abuse Plan](#)

[134 Southall Black Sisters \(12 January 2021\) SBS and women’s organisations are alarmed by Government’s dual strategy on VAWG](#)

[135 IICSA \(October 2022\) The Report of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse](#)

protect children from sexual abuse and exploitation. It consisted of several hearings, investigations and the voices of thousands of survivors through the Truth Project. The final report makes a series of recommendations, including mandatory reporting of child sexual abuse for people working with children in England and Wales.

The report also details how the Online Safety Bill's interim Code of Practice on Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (CSEA) sets out what is 'expected' of companies, but does not mandate pre-screening of child sexual abuse material, even though the technology to pre-screen exists and is effective in preventing known child sexual abuse material being made available to users.¹³⁶

Victims and survivors described huge barriers in accessing child mental health support, such as long waitlists, with one survivor having to wait for three years. Access to specialist support was flagged as important, with women frequently stating that they only wished to speak to female counsellors. Additionally, minoritised and marginalised victims and survivors described a lack of access and availability of specialist voluntary sector services, as well as how mainstream support services lacked the cultural awareness to provide appropriate support.¹³⁷ The Inquiry recommends the introduction of a national guarantee that child victims of sexual abuse will be offered specialist and accredited therapeutic support, which is welcome. However, this must include providing funding for independent, specialist VAWG services, who support many survivors of child sexual abuse (CSA), including ring-fenced funding for led 'by and for' services.

The Inquiry highlighted that 89% of the Truth Project survivors were abused by men or multiple men and that CSA disproportionately affects girls (1 in 6 girls under 16 were victims, compared to 1 in 20 boys). This clearly illustrates how CSA, like all forms of sexual violence, is deeply gendered. It also showed the need for an intersectional response to child sexual abuse, as survivors reported feeling unable to ask for support due to fear or previous experience

[136 Ibid. p.213](#)

[137 Ibid. p.87](#)

of homophobic or racist prejudice. One individual who had been racially abused at school stated that “reaching out and asking for help from a country I felt was hostile towards me was almost impossible”.¹³⁸

12. Family Courts and Children’s Social Care

Two years after the government’s Harm Panel report into the family courts, Women’s Aid’s research found the justice system is still failing domestic abuse survivors and their children.¹³⁹ Frontline VAWG organisations report a culture of minimisation of domestic abuse and a pro-contact approach in family courts, resulting in unsafe conditions for women and children. The report also notes that while some family court professionals’ understanding of coercive control is beginning to improve, the impact of coercive control on victims and survivors, and post-separation abuse, even during court proceedings themselves, is still not fully understood.

Additionally, mothers are often accused of “parental alienation” or “alienating behaviours” when they raise concerns about unsafe contact between a child and an abusive parent. Several had their children removed from them as a result of allegations by the perpetrator. Urgent action is needed by the government, Family Division of the High Court, the Judicial College, Magistrates Association and Cafcass to ensure that family court professionals are aware of, and able to identify, allegations of “parental alienation” being made by perpetrators to undermine, obscure and deflect from their abuse.

The report also highlights concerns about the extra barriers faced by Black and minoritised women, women with NRPF, women whose first language is not English, and Deaf and disabled women. Some of these barriers centre around a lack of accessibility, while other barriers are caused by limited understanding and awareness of the

[138 Ibid. p.82](#)

[139 Women’s Aid \(June 2022\) Two years, too long: Mapping action on the Harm Panel’s findings](#)

particular forms of harm that victims and survivors have experienced, and the ways that structural discrimination impacts on their interactions with family court processes and professionals.¹⁴⁰

Many of these problems with family courts can also be found in child social care, as AVA's Staying Mum report illustrates.¹⁴¹ System-wide lack of knowledge about domestic abuse and trauma across social services and family court professionals led to poor decision-making and missed opportunities to reduce harm for mothers and children. Furthermore, Black and minoritised mothers, Muslim mothers and migrant mothers experienced racism and cultural stereotyping from both perpetrators and professionals. The report calls for the Department for Education to prioritise work to develop alternatives to permanent child removal. Additionally, it calls for children's social services to apply strengths-based approaches that enable women to make safe plans for their children and allow decision-making about a child's welfare based on a proper understanding of the family context.

13. Prevention

Whilst a lot of public policy focus is placed on improving responses to VAWG, predominantly in the criminal justice system, a central message of EAW's work is that a different world is possible, and this requires the prioritisation of prevention work. Commitment to implementing a 'whole school approach'¹⁴² to ending abuse is a core part of this aim. It must involve engaging the whole school community to prevent violence against women and girls. In

[140 Ibid. p.43](#)

[141 AVA \(2022\) Staying Mum: Findings from peer research with mothers surviving domestic abuse & child removal](#)

[142 A 'Whole School Approach' means schools embedding gender equality with training for all school staff on sexual violence, training for teachers on how to deliver relationships, sex and health education, and giving both young people and staff the skills to respond to, challenge and prevent violence against women and girls within their establishment and the local community.](#)

September 2022, we saw Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) become part of the new statutory curriculum for Wales, alongside the publication of updated Keeping Children Safe in Education statutory guidance and Behaviour in Schools: Advice for Headteachers and School Staff guidance from the Department of Education. Yet, despite it being over two years since Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) became compulsory in England (September 2020),¹⁴³ one year after the Ofsted Review into sexual abuse in schools and colleges, and after four Education Secretaries in 2022 alone, we are seeing disappointingly little attention and resource placed on prevention in schools.

There is a wealth of evidence illustrating the urgent need for progress in this area, including research published in July 2022 by Scottish Women's Aid and the Young Women's Movement Scotland (YWCA). This research found that 36% of young women had been harmed physically or emotionally by an intimate partner and nearly three quarters knew someone who had experienced abuse. Young women said they wished they had been taught about emotional abuse and other toxic behaviours at school, which could have helped them recognise abuse earlier in their own relationships.¹⁴⁴

While compulsory RSE has now been introduced in schools in England, there are questions regarding its quality and consistency. A report by SafeLives found that only half (52%) of young people have been taught about gender roles and gender equality.¹⁴⁵ Students also reported that they felt the stigma surrounding RSE impacts the quality of education they received. The variable quality of how RSE is delivered is evident from the fact that only 58% of teachers agreed

[143 RSE became compulsory in September 2020, with schools expected to teach an RSE curriculum from September 2021:](https://neu.org.uk/relationships-and-sex-education)

<https://neu.org.uk/relationships-and-sex-education>

[144 Scottish Women's Aid and YWCA \(12 July 2022\) New report finds that over a third of young women have experienced abuse in intimate relationships](#)

[145 SafeLives \(6 December 2022\) 'I love it - but wish it were taken more seriously' - exploring Relationships & Sex Education in schools](#)

with the statement ‘I have had sufficient training to teach RSE effectively’.

Women’s Aid Northern Ireland published its evaluation of its prevention education capacity building training programme, Social Guardians, with promising findings about the positive impact for teachers. This teacher training is eleven years into delivery, with widespread participation of schools in Northern Ireland and further rollout planned together with a new refresher course of the training - one of the key recommendations of the evaluation.¹⁴⁶

Research by Agenda Alliance¹⁴⁷ shone a light on the experience of young women in alternative education provision, including the experience of re-traumatisation within male-dominated settings such as Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) where some girls reported feeling unsafe, uncomfortable and experiencing sexual harassment and abuse.

Agenda Alliance also identified the persistence of a gender-neutral approach to prevention in local authority services for children and young people, with findings that 60% of local authorities do not provide any gender-specialist services for girls and young women and 90% of local authorities do not provide any gender-specialist support for Black, Asian, and minoritised girls and young women.¹⁴⁸ Furthermore, only 15% include any commitments to funding or commissioning specific provision for girls and young women within their local strategy for children and young people.¹⁴⁹ A gender-neutral approach fails to take account of the deeply gendered experiences of girls and young women and the disproportionality of sexual assault and harassment. Such an approach also does not meet the intersecting needs of Black and minoritised girls and young

[146 Women’s Aid Northern Ireland \(8 February 2022\) Education Minister Michelle McIlveen Launches Evaluation of Helping Hands & Social Guardian Training](#)

[147 Agenda \(November 2022\) Pushed Out Left Out - Girls Speak: Final report](#)

[148 Ibid. p.51](#)

[149 Ibid. p.52](#)

women whose specific experiences of adultification, hyper-sexualisation and racialised sexism are not met by generic, gender-neutral services.

14. Perpetrators

In 2022/23, there were a number of developments in the area of tackling perpetrators' behaviour, including multi-year funding towards behaviour change interventions, research and evaluation and proposed pre-charge bail reforms. The Home Office launched a two-year, £36 million Domestic Abuse Perpetrator Intervention Fund for projects designed to improve victims' safety through reducing the risk posed by perpetrators,¹⁵⁰ along with new Domestic Abuse Perpetrator Intervention Standards.¹⁵¹ Also announced was the fourth edition of Respect's quality assurance framework,¹⁵² which provides guidance and assessment for services working with perpetrators of domestic abuse. Whilst many of the actions taken by government in the Tackling Domestic Abuse Plan towards addressing the behaviour of those responsible for abuse were welcome, sector experts were more sceptical regarding others, such as the introduction of a register for domestic abusers and the use of mandatory polygraph examinations for perpetrators¹⁵³ - given the contested evidence on their accuracy.

15. Health

Although much of the focus on tackling VAWG centres on criminal justice, a holistic approach is vital to ending abuse, with VAWG

[150 Home Office \(9 January 2023\) Fund launched to protect domestic abuse victims through prevention](#)

[151 Home Office \(9 January 2023\) Standards for Domestic Abuse Perpetrator Interventions](#)

[152 Respect UK \(6 January 2023\) Respect launches fourth edition of the Respect Standard](#)

[153 Home Office \(30 March 2022\) Tackling Domestic Abuse Plan p.54-55](#)

understood as a public health issue. It was encouraging that the VAWDASV Strategy for Wales included a commitment to a public health approach, though we await further details on what this entails.¹⁵⁴

Women's Health Strategy

It is positive that the health impacts of VAWG are included as a priority area of the government's Women's Health Strategy for England.¹⁵⁵ However, we echo Women's Aid's disappointment that the Women's Health Strategy does not explicitly recognise VAWG as a fundamental driver of ill mental health. The Strategy also does not include any actions to address the specific intersecting inequalities that minoritised and marginalised women experience in terms of VAWG. Furthermore, none of the actions attached to the health impacts of VAWG have any new funding attached, although the government did separately announce 'up to £7.5 million for domestic abuse interventions in healthcare settings'.¹⁵⁶

Mental Health

Women's Aid's 2022 Domestic Abuse Report found that 45.6% women in refuges were depressed or had suicidal thoughts as a direct result of the domestic abuse they had experienced.¹⁵⁷

Professor Ravi K. Thiara and Professor Christine Harrison also published an important literature review for Women's Aid into Black

[154 Welsh government \(24 May 2022\) Violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence: strategy 2022 to 2026](#)

[155 Department for Health and Social Care \(updated 30 August 2022\) Women's Health Strategy for England](#)

[156 Home Office \(25 November 2022\) £15 million funding boost for women who are victims of violence](#)

[157 Women's Aid \(2022\) The Domestic Abuse Report 2022: The Annual Audit](#)

and minoritised women, domestic abuse and mental health.¹⁵⁸ The review noted a ‘considerable tension’ between the contrast of survivors’ perceptions of the causes of their ‘mental ill-health’ and the compounding structural factors, and the pathologising and individualising approach of mainstream mental health services. Other issues raised included inappropriate assessment frameworks; lack of recognition of the strengths of Black and minoritised women; cultural relativism; over-medication; high levels of compulsory hospital admissions; criminalisation/diversion into criminal justice systems; and lack of access to talking or alternative therapies.

This follows the Domestic Violence and Abuse APPG’s inquiry into Domestic Abuse and Mental Health which found that despite an increase in media and political attention over the last decade, survivors continue to face barriers and challenges when trying to access help for their mental health needs. These include insufficient understanding of domestic abuse from statutory health services alongside an inadequate level of partnership and funding for specialist domestic abuse services who hold such expertise. This is compounded by structural inequalities including the impact of sexism, racism, ableism and homophobia. The APPG’s recommendations include recognition of domestic abuse and its mental health impacts as a public health priority; a whole-system approach to prioritising domestic abuse across NHS Trusts; better data collection and monitoring of the mental health needs of survivors; and ring-fenced funding for specialist community-based services, including led ‘by and for’ services, in the forthcoming Victims Bill, and increased funding for specialist refuges.¹⁵⁹

Significantly, this year also saw the first time a coroner drew an explicit link between suicide and domestic abuse, writing to the to

[158 Thiara, R.K. and Harrison, C. \(2021\) Reframing the Links: Black and minoritised women, domestic violence and abuse, and mental health - A Review of the Literature. Bristol: Women’s Aid.](#)

[159 All-Party Parliamentary Group on Domestic Violence and Abuse \(24 January 2022\) The Road to Recovery: Meeting the Mental Health Needs of Domestic Abuse Survivors](#)

the Home Secretary to press for “the need for the recognition of the link between domestic abuse and suicide” at all levels of society.¹⁶⁰ It is vital that the government commits to investing in mental health support for victims and survivors of VAWG, so that women and girls can get the support they need.

It is encouraging that part of the Department of Health’s 10-year ambition is producing robust research to understand the immediate and long-term physical and mental health implications of VAWG, as well as the ways to prevent violence and abuse. However, any research into the physical and mental health implications of VAWG must take account of intersecting inequalities as part of a strong equalities analysis. Involving VAWG sector organisations with expertise in these areas, including ‘by and for’ organisations, will be crucial.

Healthcare Interventions

A 2022 evaluation of the IRIS programme of domestic abuse training, support and referral programme for General Practices found that the value of this work extends far beyond increasing referrals to domestic abuse services or improving service users’ lives.¹⁶¹ It found interventions can improve the visibility of domestic abuse in the primary care system, can increase optimism among those in the system that domestic abuse can be addressed, and improve alignment between the values and priorities of organisations addressing domestic abuse at a system level. The evaluation also found that the return on investment in pure monetary terms was £16.79 for every £1 spent. Furthermore, the return on social investment analysis of the IRIS programme was estimated to be on average £10.71: £1. This demonstrates a clear case for investment in specialist VAWG interventions within the healthcare system and a systems approach to tackling domestic abuse.

[160 Channel 4 \(1 November 2022\) Urgent need to act on domestic abuse and suicide link](#)

[161 IRIS \(24 November 2022\) The social value of improving the primary care response to domestic violence and abuse](#)

Health and Care Act

The importance of centring the needs of marginalised women was highlighted by Stay Safe East, a user-led organisation run by disabled people, during the passage of the Health and Care Act. They raised concerns that the legislation would mean disabled women could be discharged from hospital without a safeguarding assessment. Disabled people are more than three times more likely to experience domestic abuse than non-disabled people and it may be even harder for a disabled person to disclose abuse if their abuser is their carer. A safeguarding assessment may therefore be the only opportunity they may have in hospital to disclose abuse. Without such consideration of the needs of disabled women, the Act risks leaving marginalised women more vulnerable to abuse.

The Health and Care Act also introduced a ban on ‘virginity testing’ and hymenoplasty across the UK. This success was the result of years of campaigning by a coalition of organisations including ‘by and for’ women’s organisations such as Iranian and Kurdish Women’s Rights Organisation (IKRWO) and Middle Eastern Women & Society Foundation (MEWSO). This victory was recognised at the Sheila McKechnie Foundation National Campaigner Awards where the Coalition to Ban Virginity Testing & Hymenoplasty won the Best Coalition or Collaboration Award.¹⁶²

16. Housing

Women’s Aid’s Nowhere To Turn 2022 report highlighted some of the problems with inadequate housing that women can experience while waiting for refuge accommodation. Over a fifth (21.7%) sofa-surfed while waiting for an available refuge space, with one survivor noting the difficulty of having to sleep in a communal area and not having the privacy to process the domestic abuse and sexual

[162 MEWSO \(2022\) Best Coalition Award 2022: The Coalition to Ban Virginity Testing and Hymenoplasty](#)

exploitation that she had just left. Survivors staying in emergency accommodation or hostel/B&B accommodation reported struggling with not having basic cooking facilities, making meals more expensive.¹⁶³

The Public Interest Law Centre’s 2022 report on domestic abuse and housing¹⁶⁴ outlined the various ways that trying to access housing support can, in the words of one survivor quoted in the report, feel like being “abused twice—once by the perpetrator, and once by the council”.¹⁶⁵ The number of refuge spaces in England is 24.2% lower than the Council of Europe recommends.¹⁶⁶ Within the context of this limited supply of refuge accommodation, victims and survivors experience various forms of ‘gatekeeping’. This includes unlawful delays, failure to provide emergency accommodation, unsuitable offers of short- and long-term accommodation, unlawfully high evidence thresholds, and victims and survivors being inappropriately instructed to stay in their borough/leave their borough. The report calls for an immediate independent investigation into ‘gatekeeping’ in domestic abuse cases.

The report highlights that migrant victims and survivors face an increased risk of abuse as a result of non-eligibility for housing support. The report highlighted cases of women forced to remain in abusive homes due to lack of accommodation options.

[163 Women’s Aid \(June 2022\) Nowhere to Turn 2022](#)

[164Public Interest Law Centre \(September 2022\) “Abused twice” The ‘gatekeeping’ of housing support for domestic abuse survivors in every London borough](#)

[165 Ibid. p.7](#)

[166 Women’s Aid \(2022\) The Domestic Abuse Report 2022: The Annual Audit p.5](#)

Recommendations

Our key recommendations for addressing this violence are:

A strategic investment to end abuse

In light of the cost of living crisis, ongoing chronic underfunding of the VAWG sector and women's income inequality, greater strategic investment to end abuse is urgently needed. This includes an uplift in social security and an exemption of the benefit cap for survivors, as well as meaningful action to address income inequality (including for women with no recourse to public funds) to tackle the rates of poverty for women, and the significant financial barriers women face in leaving abuse. This should sit alongside 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 (distributed by women's sector infrastructure organisations).¹⁶⁷ Furthermore, VAWG organisations need long-term, sustainable funding to deliver the life-saving work that helps thousands of women and girls every day. This includes ring-fenced funding for specialist, independent led 'by and for' services, as well as guaranteed 3-5 year contracts with inflationary uplifts from public commission bodies, with mid-term contracts being reviewed and uplifted to reflect higher operational costs and a recruitment crisis in a sector that is still dealing with the impact of the pandemic, and concern over levels of staff burnout¹⁶⁸.

Protect human rights

Attempts by government to undermine the universality of human rights weakens our ability to end violence against women and girls. The Ministry of Justice's proposed Bill of Rights, which is intended to replace the Human Rights Act, is one such example. The Human

[167 Statement on behalf of VAWG organisations in England & Wales on the Cost of Living Crisis.](#)

[168 Ibid.](#)

Rights Act is an essential tool to uphold the rights of women and girls to live free from violence and abuse, and to ensure that the state fulfils its duties to protect women and girls from harm. The government must scrap the Bill of Rights which threatens to weaken these duties, retain the Human Rights Act and commit to upholding the human rights of all.

A Victims Bill that responds to the diversity of victims and survivors' experiences with greater rights and support

The proposed Victims Bill must deliver on its potential to transform the response to victims and survivors of VAWG inside and outside the criminal justice system (CJS). Within the CJS, there must be safeguards to guarantee victims and survivors protections against over-intrusive and excessive police requests for third-party material, such as medical notes, school reports and therapy notes, with greater rights for survivors to access specialist therapeutic and advocacy support at any time. The long-term, sustainable funding of community-based services is also essential to enable the Victims Bill to live up to its ambitions. The Bill should also enshrine principles of equality in justice, with the introduction of independent legal advice for victims and survivors to uphold their rights, and a 'firewall' to end the sharing of migrant victims' data between the police, other public services and Immigration Enforcement.

Comprehensively tackle online VAWG

The Online Safety Bill should include a VAWG Code of Practice.¹⁶⁹ Secondary legislation and implementation of the Bill should ensure the safety of online spaces for women and girls.

[169 A coalition of experts including the End Violence Against Women Coalition, Glitch, Refuge, Carnegie UK, NSPCC, 5Rights and Professors Clare McGlynn and Lorna Woods came together to create a ready-to-use set of guidelines, or 'Code of Practice' to tackle violence against women and girls online in 2022. Available here: https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/coalition-experts-code-of-practice-online-violence-against-women-girls/](https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/coalition-experts-code-of-practice-online-violence-against-women-girls/)

Far-ranging reform to the criminal justice system's approach to VAWG

A focus on cultural change is needed to tackle the prevalence of misogyny and racism within the police and throughout the criminal justice system. Root and branch transformation is needed within and across the criminal justice system, including improved leadership and mechanisms of accountability within the police, Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and courts, with wraparound support and advocacy for all victims/survivors and access to justice and equality of outcomes for all. This must include an offender-centric approach to investigations, taking forward learnings from Operation Soteria, alongside research into the barriers to reporting, the impact of rape myths and stereotypes on the system, and what rape victims and survivors want from the justice system.

Support for schools to implement a 'whole school approach'

The Department for Education (DfE) must commit to resourcing a 'whole school approach' to preventing and tackling VAWG and working with the specialist VAWG sector.

A multi-year, well-resourced public attitudes campaign to end VAWG

To deliver the profound cultural shift needed to end VAWG, we must see continued investment in national public attitudes campaigns. Long-term and sustainable investment is needed to transform attitudes across society, so that we do not continue to minimise or excuse the violence and abuse experienced by women and girls. This must be informed by meaningful consultation of the specialist VAWG sector.

Effective protection and support for migrant women

The government must take responsibility for the ways in which hostile immigration and asylum legislation and policies can create conditions for gender-based violence, and remove the barriers to support currently facing migrant women in the UK. This would include the introduction of safe reporting mechanisms for migrant

victims/survivors, equal and effective access to protection and support for all women regardless of their immigration status in line with the Istanbul Convention (including women seeking asylum), and the extension of eligibility for the Domestic Violence Rule (DVR) to all migrant women subject to abuse. The government must also include confirmation of its monitoring plans for the Nationality and Borders Act, particularly as it relates to women and girls, and to repeal changes where harmful impacts are found.

Removal of reservations from the Istanbul Convention

10 years after signing up to the Istanbul Convention, the government must commit to removing the reservations placed when it ratified the Convention in 2022, so that all women have access to equal and effective protection and support, regardless of immigration status.