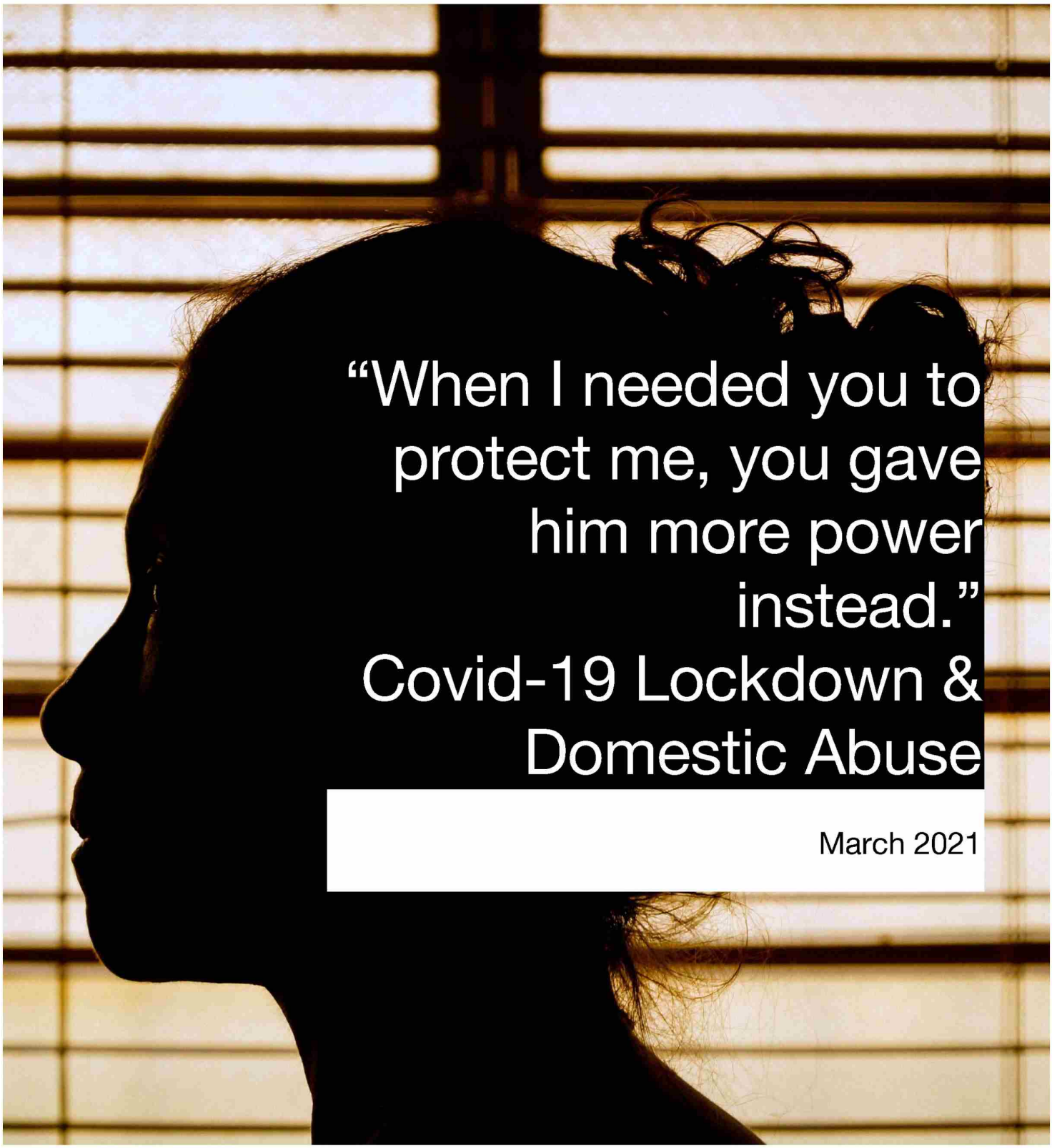

“When I needed you to protect me, you gave him more power instead.”
Covid-19 Lockdown & Domestic Abuse

March 2021

solace

justice studio.

CONTENTS

This report is the result of a collaborative research project between Solace Woman's Aid and Justice Studio Ltd with assistance from the University of Greenwich.

About Solace

Solace Women's Aid is the leading violence against women and girls (VAWG) organisation in London, supporting over 27,000 women, men and children in the past year. Solace exists to end the harm done through Violence Against Women and Girls. Our aim is to work to prevent violence and abuse as well as providing services to meet the needs of survivors particularly women and girls. Our work is holistic and empowering, working alongside survivors to achieve independent lives free from abuse. The need for our services is even more vital during this difficult time.

About Justice Studio

Justice Studio is a compassionate consultancy and research organisation specialised in social justice. We are at the vanguard of an alternative consultancy model motivated by empathy. Our consultants are knowledgeable and experienced in gender justice, child justice and criminal justice. We champion the voices of those in society who are most disadvantaged and un-heard, such as children, adults at risk, offenders, and communities affected by migration, conflict or unequal power relations.

Justice Studio and Solace would like to thank the University of Greenwich for approving the ethics for this research, the Early Career Research Network funding for the transcripts, Camille Stengel for her help with the research and her colleagues in the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences who translated the recruitment materials

This research amplifies the voices of survivors of domestic violence: those who escaped. It is dedicated to those whose voices were silenced: those who did not escape, in the first three weeks of lockdown (23rd March and 11th April 2020):

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Foreword

Solace is the leading specialist Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) charity in London, with over 45 years' experience working with survivors of all forms of violence and abuse. We deliver a range of empowering services that support women and children, from the point of crisis through to recovery and independence. In 2019-20, we worked with 27,414 women, children and men across our services, including 920 women and children provided with refuge accommodation and other specialist supported accommodation.

When the Covid-19 pandemic took hold in the UK and the Government announced a national lockdown, our sector braced for the escalation of domestic abuse that we knew was coming; from the reports coming out of other countries that locked down before the UK; from the spike in calls to our own Advice Line and from our years of experience of working with survivors and perpetrators.

Together with Southall Black Sisters (SBS) and a range of specialist partner organisations, Solace mobilised an emergency crisis accommodation project in London, supported by the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) and the Julia and Hans Rausing Trust. We were pleased to secure a number of spaces in the crisis accommodation specifically for women with insecure immigration status and/or no recourse to public funds - who have even greater barriers to escaping their abusers. This no recourse support was coordinated by SBS, a specialist VAWG organisation run by and for black and minority ethnic women, with particular expertise in supporting women with insecure immigration status.

I'm grateful to Justice Studio for lifting the lid on the experiences of survivors accessing the crisis project over the summer of this year. Fleeing an abuser is always an act of immense courage and while so many services and support networks were closed to these women, their journeys to freedom are astounding. The next steps for them are no less challenging, as Justice Studio sets out in this report. We look forward to seeing the recommendations here taken up by the Government, particularly as it develops the next cross-Government VAWG strategy for 2021-24, which holds an opportunity to embed long-term funding for the services survivors need, not just to escape violence and abuse, but to recover from that abuse and rebuild their lives.

I am also so pleased that some of our brilliant and dedicated staff from across all our services were interviewed for this report. Our staff are passionate about the work they do even in these extreme circumstances, and I couldn't be more proud or grateful for the ways they have adapted our services and their work to meet the needs of survivors, all the while dealing with the impact of the virus and restrictions on their own lives and loved ones. Their care and expertise shines through in the quotes included in this report.

The road to recovery from the pandemic is in sight, with the roll out of new vaccines underway. Our services meanwhile are braced for the next wave of demand that will no doubt spike when the third lockdown lifts. We have secured funding for a second crisis project in response to the second lockdown, but for long term recovery, our service users need much more than a vaccine.

Fiona Dwyer

CEO, Solace

Executive Summary

INTRODUCTION

Domestic abuse is a deep-rooted problem that attracted greater recognition during the first national lockdown than perhaps ever before. Globally, one in three women have experienced domestic abuse in their lifetime, and more than a third of femicides are committed by an intimate partner. In the UK, over the last decade, a woman has been killed by a man approximately every three days.

The global coronavirus pandemic, sweeping across the UK in March 2020, led the Government to issue orders for people to stay safe by staying at home. Sadly, for many women, those subjected to domestic abuse, home had never been safe. In response, Solace Women's Aid (Solace), in partnership with Southall Black Sisters and other specialist services that support survivors of violence against women and girls (VAWG), set up emergency crisis refuge provision with funding provided by London Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) and the Julia and Hans Rausing Trust. To further understand the impact of the pandemic on those escaping domestic abuse, Justice Studio, and Solace decided to partner on a piece of pioneering research. The University of Greenwich provided additional support to the research.

The research took place from April to November 2020 in London. In total, 23 in-depth qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted; 13 with female survivors in emergency refuge accommodation and 10 with Solace staff and management. An extensive literature review supplemented the primary data collection.

"HE JUST SAW ME AS AN OBJECT" - CONTEXTUALISING COERCION

Perpetrators of domestic abuse do not necessarily use physical violence every day, and some never use it at all. Domestic abuse often consists of coercive control, a pattern of abuse that can sometimes be so small as to be difficult to detect. Perpetrators use a variety of tactics including: presenting as affable to the outside world, 'gaslighting' (manipulating someone by psychological means into doubting their own experiences of events), isolating, and more overt forms of control. As one survivor realised, the abuse happened, *'once I would question and stand up for myself… I realised that's the pattern.'*

Despite the fact that anyone can be a victim of domestic abuse, the majority of perpetrators are men, and the majority of victims are women. As such, in a context where there are unequal power relations between women and men, it is impossible to analyse domestic abuse without acknowledging and questioning the structural domination of men (patriarchy) and how this perpetrates and excuses the systematic subjugation of women. The majority of Solace's service users are women, and around 65% are Black or minoritised women, which means there are additional and intersecting structural inequalities that compound their experiences of abuse. Children are victims of domestic abuse either directly or by witnessing abuse in their own homes. They can also be used by the perpetrator. As one survivor explained to us, her abusive partner would get his four-year-old son to mimic him. *"He would tell me,*

"Go away and don't come back," and then he would tell my son to tell me the same thing… "Go away mum."

When there is domestic abuse in a household, the onus should be on the perpetrator to leave, rather than the victim and her children. Yet economic inequality, control of the finances, and property, are often in the perpetrator's hands. In this context, and without the necessary support in place for their protection, many women just want the abuse to stop. At the same time, many know that there are few safe options for them if they are to escape.

"HE USED IT" – THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 LOCKDOWN

The first Covid-19 lockdown in the UK began on 24th March 2020. In the run up to this lockdown, many domestic abuse charities were dismayed that there had been no consideration for how women at risk of domestic abuse would be protected, and it was not until 29th March 2020 that Home Secretary Priti Patel made it clear people experiencing domestic abuse could leave their homes to find help.

Our research found that restrictive lockdown measures played into the hands of people who abuse through tactics of control, surveillance and coercion. The lockdown did not cause the abuse but exacerbated the conditions in which survivors found themselves. The measures granted perpetrators greater freedom to act without scrutiny or consequence. *'The Coronavirus did not bring about our problems'* said a survivor, '*what Corona did was locked us in a house together for a long period of time whereby his aggressive nature and his controlling nature just had room and wings to fly and do whatever he wants.*'

The lockdown measures created a disturbing pattern. The week before the first lockdown, Solace saw a 49% rise in calls to their Pan-London Advice Line. This contrasted massively with the situation once lockdown was in occurrence where it was quieter; *'after lockdown started the calls went way down, we were much, much quieter than we normally are.'* The levels of calls were still difficult for services to support though and services were still missing calls due to the volume of women who needed support. Following this, total enquires to the pan-London Ascent and Advice Plus hubs coordinated by the Solace and the Women and Girls Network increased by 62%; from 1,536 in April 2020 to 2,484 in June 2020. The resulting impact was that Solace found they had to deal with much more complex cases, because, '*a lot of people are calling us at a later stage than they maybe would'.*

TRYING TO GET HELP

Health providers are often the first point of contact for women experiencing violence, however, almost immediately, the coronavirus pandemic saw the contraction of routine health services across the UK. This amplified barriers to screening and service provision for domestic abuse.

Stigma plays a part in the underreporting of domestic abuse to the police but so do racism and survivors' lack of trust in the police. One survivor explained that the police, *'were so hostile'*, making her feel that *'"she's just another troublesome black woman"'*. In fact, her experience with the police meant that she felt she could not trust them at all. She explained that, *'I feel like you didn't protect me when I needed you to protect me, you gave him more power instead.'*

In contrast, the survivors interviewed for this research were overwhelmingly positive about the support they received from the women's sector. One of them sobbed as she pleaded: *'Please never stop. You're needed.'* Indeed, it is clear that specialist women's organisations, working together with statutory services are able to ensure women's and children's safety. However, the whole sector faces massive challenges with resourcing and support from statutory agencies in both the long-term and short term, which have only been exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic.

STRUCTURES

There was frustration from those working in the women's sector that in order to get more financial resources during the lockdown, *'we had to fight really for it'*. Although the sector was grateful for this additional funding when it did come, it was frustrating that it lacked strategic forethought. The UK's women's sector is severely underfunded, and commissioning is short-term, unnecessarily competitive and often reactive. The sector survives hand to mouth, and the current pandemic is exacerbating their already precarious position. New waves of funding are welcomed but can be no more than a sticking plaster on a sector that needs concerted, strategic, and sufficient resources. In a situation where services are struggling to meet survivors' basic emergency needs with the provision they have, vital, yet more expensive and specialist therapeutic support is in short supply. Many of the women we interviewed mentioned the fact that they have no recourse to public funds. As staff explained, having insecure immigration status and no recourse to public funds makes it *'even harder to even access the support services.'*

Ultimately, the way to stop violence against women and children is by ensuring that abuse is not perpetrated in the first place. However, given that only 1% of perpetrators receive an intervention to address their behaviour, not enough is being done to stop them from repeating patterns of abuse. Behaviour change takes time, skilled facilitators and the best evidence of what approaches work yet this investment is necessary to stop the abuse and for a sustained change to society.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Covid-19 pandemic has shaken society's foundations and revealed its strengths and fragilities. While it is tempting to see the current crisis of domestic violence simply as a symptom of the pandemic, in reality, it is scourge that has devastated lives for far too long, and needs concerted resources and determination to end. Any longer-term pandemic preparedness needs to include a strategic approach to prevent violence against women and children. Domestic violence prevention should be integrated into disaster risk reduction as well as pandemic preparedness. There should be a gender, race and ethnicity and age lens applied, and women and children should be included in the decision-making process.

Recommendation 1: In collaboration with the VAWG sector, the Government should ensure that its upcoming VAWG strategy provides long-term sustainable funding to prevent VAWG, provide adequate support services and work in partnership with sector specialists. We would continue to recommend that the strategy is inclusive of domestic abuse rather than a separate strategy.

Having to leave their home as a result of domestic abuse has a significant effect on survivors and their families. Instead, where it would be in the best interests of the survivor to stay in their accommodation, this should be the aim of assistance.

Recommendation 2: The Government should set out measures which would enable victim-survivors to choose to stay in their homes. At a minimum, every local authority should provide a sanctuary scheme which is open for all survivors. These should be operated by independent specialist VAWG agencies and in conjunction with wider community support and safety measures.

Recommendation 3: Where survivors need to leave for their own safety or because the tenancy agreement, lease or mortgage is jointly or wholly in the perpetrators' name, ensure they have the recourse to proper accommodation.

Recommendation 4: All boroughs should put in place cross-departmental strategies to ensure a clear pathway for women threatened with homelessness/ made homeless due to VAWG. This should ensure safety from the point of crisis through to long-term, safe and suitable accommodation.

Sufficient attention has not been given to the fact that understanding and responding appropriately to domestic abuse is complex and requires a highly skilled workforce.

Recommendation 5: Have a multi-agency, trauma-informed strategic approach across local authorities, which includes funding for appropriate training, support and multi-agency working.

A significant number of survivors we interviewed had no recourse to public funds. Whilst the destitute domestic violence concession is available to support survivors' escape from an abusive situation, it is not sufficient; it relies on the victim-survivor having to navigate the process and find new accommodation within a tight timeframe.

Recommendation 5: The Domestic Abuse Bill should be amended to provide for migrant women and ensure that local authorities guarantee that all women receive appropriate housing, regardless of their immigration status.

Recommendation 6: Abolish the no recourse to public funds rule for migrants experiencing domestic violence to end the triple threat of reporting, detention and deportation which prevent migrant women/women with insecure immigration status from seeking the support they need. Expand the route to secure immigration status for all migrants experiencing domestic violence (not just for those on a spousal visa). Ensure that appropriate guidance and information is available in a variety of languages so survivors can understand their rights.

In our research, survivors and staff reported police responses to be domestic abuse to be problematic and un-appreciative of the complex nature of intimate partner abuse.

Recommendation 7: The police should review their protocols and practices when supporting women of colour and those without English as a first language in order to ensure responses to domestic abuse are sophisticated and in-line with anti-racist and anti-sexist approaches.

1. Introduction

Domestic abuse is a deep-rooted problem that attracted greater recognition during the first national lockdown than perhaps ever before. It is a gendered phenomenon, predominantly perpetrated by men against women, and like all forms of violence against women, is both a cause and consequence of gender inequality. Globally, one in three women have experienced domestic abuse in their lifetime, and more than a third of femicides are committed by an intimate partner (Devries et al., 2013; Stockl et al., 2013). In the UK, an estimated 1.6 million women a year experience domestic abuse (ONS, 2019), and over the last decade, a woman is killed by a man approximately every three days (Smith, n.d.).

The coronavirus pandemic, gripping the UK in March 2020, was double-edged for the women's sector. Lockdown measures had devastating effects for survivors as the Government issued 'stay at home' orders that created unprecedented conditions for perpetrators to isolate, control and abuse their victims. Domestic abuse, however, received more media attention than ever before, leading to greater public and political recognition of survivors' experiences and a deepened compassion for survivors at the horror of being locked in with an abuser.

With knowledge of what the lockdown measures would mean for victims and survivors of violence against women and girls (VAWG), organisations such as Solace had to react quickly and decisively to adapt their working conditions, whilst still supporting the women and children using their services. As the pandemic hit, Imkaan, a women's organisation dedicated to addressing violence against Black and minoritised women and girls, recognised the VAWG sector was dealing with 'two pandemics': The threat of violence against women and girls as declared by the World Health Organisation in 2013, was compounded by the Coronavirus (COVID-19) declared by the World Health Organisation in 2020 (Imkaan, 2020).

The sector was also clear that the danger was disproportionately worse for women who are additionally disadvantaged by other structural inequalities, including their race or ethnicity, and/or their immigration status. As Imkaan notes, 'no one is immune to coronavirus', yet it, 'exacerbates existing racialised inequalities. For any woman and girl with protected characteristics, the two pandemics increase her risks at multiple interlocking levels' (Imkaan, 2020). Multiple inequalities were also exacerbated by disabled women during the pandemic.

When the lockdown measures were announced, Justice Studio, a female-led, compassionate consultancy organisation, offered pro-bono research to Solace, a leading violence against women service provider in London. This resulted in a decision by the two organisations to publish research to ensure that the voices of the women facing domestic abuse during the coronavirus pandemic could be heard. The University of Greenwich provided additional support to the research.

This report is the pioneering result of that collaboration.

1.1. Domestic Abuse

The term 'domestic abuse,' includes a range of abusive behaviours. It can happen to anyone of any background, and can include emotional and psychological abuse, physical and sexual abuse, torture and ultimately murder. There is a pattern of abuse often carried out as part of a coercively controlling relationship. Domestic abuse takes place by partners, ex-partners, or family members.

As well as physical violence, domestic abuse can involve a wide range of abusive and controlling behaviour, including threats, harassment, sexual violence, financial and economic abuse and emotional abuse. An abuser's behaviour can vary, from brutal violence to degrading small actions intended to undermine and humiliate their victim. Those living with domestic abuse are often left feeling isolated and exhausted. Domestic abuse also includes so-called 'honour' based violence, perpetrated in the name of protecting perceived cultural or religious beliefs (Solace, 2021).

In practice, if a person feels afraid of someone in their life who is supposed to care for and/or about them, it may be that they are experiencing domestic abuse (SafeLives, 2018, p. 3).

1.1.1. Legislative context

On 29 December 2015, the offence of 'coercive and controlling behaviour in an intimate or family relationship' came into force in England and Wales and on 1st April 2019, legislation that criminalised psychological domestic abuse and coercive and controlling behaviour came into force through the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act. However, until domestic abuse is made a criminal offence in the forthcoming England and Wales Domestic Abuse Bill, it is acknowledged only as an "aggravating factor" in a range of other offences including criminal damage, public order and sexual offences (coercive control is an offence in its own right) (Gibbs, 2018, p. 10; GovUK, 2020).

The Home Office published its last cross-Government strategy for Ending Violence Against Women and Girls (2016-2020) in March 2016. Its priorities for that period were: reducing the number of women and girls who experience violence, and increasing the focus on early intervention and prevention. The strategy also highlighted the importance of engagement with children at the earliest opportunity, and effective partnership working between services. Recognising abuse against men and boys, the Government supplemented its strategy with a position statement on male victims of crimes in March 2019.

Other key legislation that relates to domestic abuse includes:

- the Children Act 1989 and the Adoption and Children Act 2002. This legislation places a duty on local authorities to provide services to Children in Need and to investigate where they are informed that a child is suffering or is likely to suffer significant harm. Section 120 of the Adoption and Children Act extends the legal definition of harming children to include harm suffered by seeing or hearing ill treatment of others, including in the home.
- the Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act 2004, which extends provisions to combat domestic violence and creates a new offence of 'causing or allowing the death of a child or vulnerable adult'.

- the Protection of Freedom's Act 2012 makes stalking and linked to this, harassment, an offence.

At the time of this report publication, the Domestic Abuse Bill is going through the UK Parliament, and is awaiting its second reading in the House of Lords.

1.2. Methodology

This research took place from April to November 2020 in London, with field work carried out predominately during June and July 2020. Justice Studio interviewed Solace staff spanning a variety of roles from frontline to management, as well as women in the emergency hostel accommodation provided by the COVID-19 Crisis Project. This project, supported by MOPAC and the Julia and Hans Rausing Trust, is a partnership, led by Solace, with support to women with no recourse to public funds coordinated by Southall Black Sisters, and support provided by specialist VAWG organisations. The research design was approved by the University of Greenwich Research Ethics Committee.

Justice Studio co-designed the research tools with staff at Solace. Interview topic guides included open-ended questions, and were designed to ensure no harm. For women in hostel accommodation, complete anonymity was given and the research team did not collect participants' full names or other identifying information unless necessary for safeguarding purposes. Justice Studio also conducted a rapid review of relevant academic literature and recent research from the sector.

In total, 23 in-depth qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted. Of these, 10 were with Solace staff, half (five) of whom worked in service delivery and case management on the ground during the lockdown. Staff were interviewed via telephone or video conferencing platform during June and July 2020. Justice Studio researchers conducted telephone and in-person interviews with 13 women in emergency hostel accommodation during July 2020. One interview was completed via a messaging app, another was completed via phone with a language interpreter. Benefits of participation included a £15 voucher for the supermarket Tesco, provided by Solace.

1.2.1. Profile: Women in emergency accommodation

Of the 13 women interviewed in the emergency hostel accommodation, ten indicated they were from countries outside the UK, while one was raised in the UK by immigrant parents but was undocumented and reported "no status" in the UK at the time of our interview. The vast majority (11) mentioned immigration or visa status as part of their journey. Five of the women told us that they had no recourse to public funds (NRPF). Women's regions of origin included Western and Eastern Europe, sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and East Asia. One UK-born woman self-referenced her ethnicity (Black) as a critical detail in recounting her story.

While these women in many ways reflect the diversity of Solace's service users across London, the majority of services commissioned by public bodies are restricted from supporting women with no recourse to public funds. Southall Black Sisters specialises in supporting women with insecure migration status, and provided support and advocacy services for these women in the emergency hostel. The women interviewed

in this study, therefore, reflect the experiences many survivors during lockdown, however, are not a representative sample.

Women had been living at the emergency hostel for two to five weeks at the time of interview. Most of the women interviewed had children living with them in their hostel room. Their children ranged in age from new-born (three weeks) to university students.

2. “He just saw me as an object.” Contextualising coercion

Despite the fact that anyone can be a victim of domestic abuse, the majority of perpetrators are men, and the majority of victims are women. As such, it is important to acknowledge and question the structural domination of men (patriarchy) and how this perpetrates and excuses the systematic subjugation of women.

Some women are more at risk than others. When additional disadvantages such as poverty, racism, or insecure immigration status are factored in, women who experience these additional intersectional discriminations face even greater barriers to escaping abuse. As one survivor explained:

> ‘When I arrived in the UK, he [her husband] really changed… he was more controlling, more manipulating… It really made me very, very upset and I couldn’t understand what’s happening at the time. And, yes, and I was – I couldn’t do anything because my visa was related to my husband and he was my sponsor’ (Interviewee H09).

As a London-based organisation, a high proportion of Solace’s service users are Black, Asian or from another minority ethnic background. Solace often works in partnership with other specialist VAWG services including Black and minoritised women led organisations to ensure women receive culturally specific support (Interviewee S04; Solace, 2019a).

2.1. Coercive Control

Perpetrators of domestic abuse do not necessarily use physical violence every day, and some never use it at all. In many cases, abuse consists of coercive control, a pattern of abuse that can sometimes be so small as to be difficult to detect. Yet combined, it has the effect of taking away victims’ autonomy and independence (Downes, Kelly, & Westmarland, 2019).

Tactics of control take the form of the micro-regulation of everyday life. This can include controlling:

> When and what a partner can eat and drink, how they dress and style their hair, how they undertake household tasks, who they can spend time with, how they act around their family and friends, what they watch on television, how they drive, where they can go, what they can talk about, when and where they can sleep, how and when they have sex and how they can spend their free time (Downes, Kelly, & Westmarland, 2019).

Victim-survivors may find themselves making numerous micro-accommodations to keep the peace, or soothe their partner's anxiety, including providing access to their private email, mobile phone or staying home to demonstrate their loyalty (Downes, Kelly, & Westmarland, 2019). As one survivor told us: 'to be honest, I didn't know the meaning of abusing… I thought, you know, it was normal if your husband [was] just controlling you constantly' (Interviewee H09). She interpreted his behaviour as a demonstration that he cared about her.

Coercive control can be reinforced traditional ideas of gender roles. Stark (2007) who defined the gendered nature of coercive control, argues that such tactics are effective in the context of heterosexual relationships precisely because they take place within an environment of gender inequality, which serves to normalise male control, making abuse difficult to see and name (Downes, Kelly, & Westmarland, 2019). Male perpetrators' justifications for their methods of control are often linked to beliefs in 'traditional masculinity' such as 'investments in being a protector, a provider and a father who was the legitimate head of the household or family', and male perpetrators are more likely to have strong traditional views about acceptable male and female roles (Downes, Kelly, & Westmarland, 2019).

2.2. Tactics

Perpetrators can present very well to the outside world. As one survivor said, 'people automatically think, "It's not that bad." Yeah, 'cos he's a family man and stuff like that, "It's not that bad" (Interviewee H10). However, she realised that 'once I would question and stand up for myself, that's when it's; "you're the witch, you're the evil person." So, I realised that's the pattern' (Interviewee H10).

'Gaslighting', the term made popular by the Hollywood film of the same name, is a form of psychological abuse whereby perpetrators undermine and disorient victims; discredit them and make them doubt their own experiences and memories. As one survivor told us, 'he always tried to say it was me', who was at fault, yet, 'I knew it was not me, the fault, everything' (Interviewee H07).

Isolation tactics include refusing to look after the children if the victim wants to leave for work or other reasons, moving her to a remote place, and gradually distancing her from her support networks such as family and friends. Perpetrators can use direct mechanisms, to prevent their partners from going out, including 'refusing to do childcare, threatening to leave with the children, causing an argument, or commandeering car keys' (Downes, Kelly, & Westmarland, 2019).

As one Solace staff member explained, 'one of the major risk factors on a domestic abuse risk assessment is isolation.' Having, 'been controlled', and often with abusive family backgrounds, the women who present to Solace, 'tend to be more reserved, more anxious about socialising… they're happy as anything not going anywhere, not seeing anyone because that's what they're kind of used to' (Interviewee S02).

Of course, threats of, and actual violence are also used. As one survivor said, 'when you've lived with someone for years you can sense it coming' (Interviewee H02). Another explained the threats, 'he even categorically told me many times that if I leave he's going to come after me, that I will need an army to guard me because no-one was going to stop him coming for me' (Interviewee H11).

Violent perpetrators often have mental health needs, which can present another barrier to leaving. A 2018 study by the charity SafeLives found that, 95% of high-harm perpetrators of abuse are men, and there is growing evidence that those who pose a risk to others also pose a risk to themselves (SafeLives, 2018, p. 17). This was evident in one of descriptions given by a survivor who said, 'I'm a sucker for a struggle story. Anyone that needs help, I don't care who you are, I'm there to help.' Her empathy for him kept her there. She reasoned, 'So 'cos I know his background' she said that she thought; 'I don't want to leave and then something happens to him and I have to live with the guilt, because all of a sudden he's depressed and can't take it. So, I've always thought of him before I thought of myself' (Interviewee H10).

2.3. Children

Children can be exposed to domestic abuse in three main ways:

- Being the subject of intimate partner violence. For children under 16, this is considered child abuse rather than domestic abuse.
- Being the subject of (or being directly involved in) child abuse, principally in their own homes.
- Witnessing domestic abuse between other family members, principally in their own homes. (Fair, 2018, p. 1).

Children can also be manipulated into inadvertently colluding with abuse from a young age. One survivor explained to us how her abusive partner realised that he could get his own son to be 'his cheerleader', in order to get him on 'to be on his side'. So that when he was being abusive, or telling her to leave, he could also get his four-year-old son to mimic him. She explained, He would tell me, "Go away and don't come back," and then he would tell my son to tell me the same thing. He'd be saying, "Go away mum, go away mum."

It was clear that the abuse was not only rooted in misogyny but that the perpetrator was also teaching his son harmful masculine behaviours. The survivor recounted how a few days before she left she was driving in the car with her partner and son and 'there were some ladies on a bike', and:

> 'He was driving, then he decided to drive slowly and was saying, "Hello love," like trying to get their attention - the ladies on the bike… he wound down the glass - both his side and my side - and was now leaning out and he was telling my son to lean out and say, "Hey, love," and call their attention. I'm like: "What are you doing? I'm stopping you." He said, "No, I'm teaching him to show him that there are a lot of women in the world, that he doesn't have to stick with one that one day will put him through so much. So he needs to know that he has options." I'm like, "A four-year-old, you are teaching a four-year-old to catcall women outside?"

> And he was saying, "Yeah, I'm teaching him." I said, "No, you're not teaching my son this." And then that was the moment I knew that I need to take my son far away from this man' (Interviewee H11).

Estimates for the extent of children's exposure to domestic abuse vary. The Office of the Children's Commissioner estimates the prevalence of childhood exposure to domestic violence and abuse at 26.7% of all children in England aged 0 to 5 (1.1 million), and that 25.3% of children in England aged 6 to 15 (1.6 million) live with an adult who has ever experienced domestic violence or abuse. However, as this abuse is predominantly hidden, it is impossible to be sure how widespread it really is. Acceptance of domestic abuse is pervasive enough among young men that when surveyed, 49% of boys aged 13 – 14 thought that hitting a partner would be 'okay' in at least one of twelve scenarios they were presented with (SafeLives, 2018, p. 17).

2.4. Leaving

Women's ability to leave abusive partners is complex and many seek help a number of times before fleeing an abusive partner (Women's Aid, 2020, p.1). Women may stay with abusive partners for a host of reasons, ranging from emotional attachment, psychological distress, financial dependence, or fear that separation will increase harm to their personal physical safety or the safety of their children (Hall, Walters, & Basile, 2012; St Vil et al., 2017; Ciurria, 2018; Peterman, Potts, O'Donnell, Thompson, Shah, Oertelt-Prigione, & van Gelder, 2020; Rajah & Osborn, 2020).

When the perpetrator of abuse shares a home with his victim-survivor, the onus should be on the perpetrator to leave, rather than the victim and her children. Yet there is often economic inequality, with control of the finances and property in the perpetrator's hands.

In this context, many women are left with no choice but to leave their family home in order to try to stop the abuse. There are many barriers for women contemplating leaving. Solace's previous research into the housing needs of survivors found that fear of homelessness was one reason keeping women in dangerous situations (Solace, 2019b). This is backed up by this study, one survivor explaining: 'I discussed leaving with one of my family, but I was scared of homelessness.' Leaving would mean leaving, 'the comfort of your own place with kids' (Interviewee H13).

These fears are justified, 30% of women seeking shelter are turned away six or more times from Local Authority housing departments (Solace, 2019b). The most marginalised women face the greatest barriers accessing refuge accommodation. In their search for refuge provision, intersecting structural barriers and inequalities impact on women's ability to access appropriate safety and protection (Women's Aid, 2020, p. 7). Women's Aid's No Woman Turned Away project identified that the five most common barriers for women seeking a refuge space are mental health support needs (41%); ties to their local area (39%); disabilities (including mental health disabilities) (28%); having no recourse to public funds (NRPF) (25%) which means women are not eligible for standard refuge support; and fleeing with four or more children (12%). Many women had more than one support need (Women's Aid, 2020, p. 7). Solace staff state

that, ‘for every refuge space that we advertise we get between ten and fifteen referrals’ (Interviewee H13).

Despite the barriers, for some, it can be a desperate decision made whenever the chance presents itself. ‘I just left the house; it was a spur of the moment something’, one survivor explained;

> ‘At that moment I just decided yes, this is the time. I’m not staying anymore. I’m not staying another night in this house. In fact, when I was calling the storage and asking them if they can give me a storage that day, they told me no, that they were closing, that they didn’t have [availability today], and I was begging them. I said, “I can’t do it tomorrow, I need to do it today ‘cos I feel like if I wait ‘til tomorrow I may not get to do it.” So, I was begging them’ (Interviewee H11).

Even once the difficult decision to leave has been made, leaving is a precarious and dangerous act. A significant proportion of severe or fatal intimate partner violence occurs at the point of leaving. The most up to date research shows that 41% of women in England, Wales and Northern Ireland killed by their male partner or former partner in 2018 had been killed after taking steps to separate from them. Over a quarter were killed within the first month of separation and 24 were killed within the first year (Long, et al., 2020). Leaving can be so risky that many cannot even tell their children that they are leaving, until they reach safety. As women recounted, ‘I didn't tell them until we got here. It was a shock for them’ (Interviewee H02).

3. “He used it.” Covid-19 Lockdown.

The first Covid-19 lockdown in the UK began in March 2020 and domestic abuse charities were dismayed that there appeared to have been no consideration for how women experiencing or at risk of domestic abuse would be protected, despite growing evidence from countries that went into lockdown prior to the UK.

The Government slogan ‘stay at home, stay safe’ implies you will be safe at home. Yet in setting down these rules, restricting how often people can leave the house and who people can and can’t see, the Government unwittingly embodied the way a perpetrator will sanction certain behaviours and disallow others from their victim. Research with Solace staff and service users found that restrictive measures played into the hands of people who abuse through tactics of control, surveillance and coercion. As outlined below, the lockdown measures unintentionally granted people who abuse greater freedom to act without scrutiny or consequence (Bradbury-Jones, 2020).

3.1. Government Measures

On 24th March 2020, the UK Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, announced a package of measures to attempt to halt the spread of the novel coronavirus (Covid-19). The new Government guidance stated that people should only leave their home for one of four reasons:

- Shopping for basic necessities such as food and medicine. Shopping trips should be as infrequent as possible.
- One form of exercise a day such as a run, walk, or cycle. This should be done alone or only with people you live with.
- Any medical need, or to provide care or to help a vulnerable person. This includes moving children under the age of 18 between their parents' homes, where applicable. Key workers or those with children identified as vulnerable can continue to take their children to school.
- Travelling to and from work, but only where this is absolutely necessary and cannot be done from home.
- People were told to minimise the amount of time spent out of their homes and stay two metres (6ft) away from people they do not live with.

In instigating these rules, the Government failed to recognise that home is not always a safe place to live. For adults and children living in situations of domestic and family abuse, home is often the space where physical, psychological and sexual abuse occurs. The instruction to “stay at home”, therefore, had major implications for those living with someone who was abusive or controlling (Bradbury-Jones, 2020).

It was not until 29th March 2020 that Home Secretary Priti Patel MP made it clear that people experiencing domestic abuse could leave their homes to find help (Oppenheim,

2020). One Solace staff member expressed frustration at the lack of the Government guidance early on. She said, 'before the Government said it's okay to leave your home, if you are fleeing from domestic abuse, I think women were reluctant to do so, even though they were unsafe at their home environment. And they were afraid that they were going to be fined or get arrested if the police see them on the street' (Interviewee S06). Once the Home Office and Prime Minister said that victims can leave during the lockdown, 'they sent a really strong message, which is great' (Interviewee S01).

On 2nd May 2020, the Government announced a welcome £76million package which included funding for survivors of VAWG and rough sleepers.

3.2. Lockdown: Excusing Control

The coronavirus stay-at-home measures did not cause the abuse, as one woman said, 'my life with kids was already a lockdown' (Interviewee H13), but it was reported to have worsened it. As a Solace staff member explained, domestic abuse, 'is happening all of the time, and Coronavirus [has] made the material conditions a lot worse and a lot harder, but it's not caused domestic violence, it's not caused this problem. Women are always having to make these incredibly difficult choices' (Interviewee S03). Further, 'for the people who were really being very intensely controlled at home by their partners or their perpetrators,' one staff member explained, 'the lockdown didn't change very much for those people'. Because they were already 'the ones that were in really extreme situations' (Interviewee S10).

Nevertheless, for the majority of survivors interviewed in this study, the Covid-19 stay-at-home measures were an exacerbating factor in the abuse they were experiencing. The lockdown situation created a boiling point where the abuse was heightened, with little room for escape. More time alone together, less opportunity for respite, more stress, and a new tool to use against the victim were all consequences of the lockdown. One survivor said that, with the lockdown 'he [the perpetrator] used the situation…he got like more power, you know, towards me'. She went on to say that during the lockdown, 'he probably thought that, "okay, now I can abuse [the] woman physically and she can't do anything." So what I'm going to say - during the lockdown I think [was a] very hard time for women; for vulnerable women like me' (Interviewee H09). Another said:

> 'My husband put me out in the beginning of April, and I – I remember, I saw in the news, in the beginning of April, that domestic abuse increased 100 percent more because of the pandemic. And I started crying because I never ever in my life thought I was one of them…You were completely vulnerable. You feel like, wow, nothing's open for you, and you are completely unprotected, you know' (Interviewee H07).

'The Coronavirus did not bring about our problems: our problems have always been there, we've had them for years,' said another survivor. 'What Corona did was locked us in a house together for a long period of time whereby his aggressive nature and his controlling nature just had room and wings to fly and do whatever he wants' (Interviewee H11). The national quarantine increased survivors' day-to-day exposure

to their perpetrators. As another survivor said, 'it really easy for him because I was stuck in there' (Interviewee H02).

Quarantining and other social distancing measures limiting physical mobility made it even more difficult to create necessary space in the relationship and mitigate immediate risk of violence (Peterman et al., 2020). The first UK lockdown required those who could work from home to work from home. This measure, as one survivor explained, was incredibly difficult because, 'being able to go out to work was my escape from the environment.' She had been living 'isolated in the bedroom' and would 'just stay in the bedroom to avoid him,' she explained, 'that was how I lived'. So, when, 'I had to work from home. That was very, very difficult. So, it got so difficult I had to tell work that I don't mind coming [in]' (Interviewee H02). Another woman also survived by barricading herself in her room. She said: 'He was off work so… he was just in the house, and I was just dreading it… I just used to run away and stay in my room, and just – in my little corner, just to avoid any conflict and stuff… I dreaded it' (Interviewee H10).

With increasing numbers of people losing their jobs and being furloughed, as well as the fear of being at risk of catching the virus, the situation heighted stress for all. For many perpetrators, the outlet for this stress was their victim. 'It has nowhere to go but to you. Their aggression has nowhere to go but come back to you… you have a punching-bag right at home,' one survivor grimly recounted. 'They're not going to the gym, they're not going to work – nothing - so essentially they will use whoever is there at home as their punching-bag' (Interviewee H11). Controlling behaviours and further acts of violence are responses by perpetrators who feel a loss of control due to quarantine (Peterman et al., 2020). Another survivor said how the lockdown, made him 'worse - more nervous, more aggressive than usual' (Interviewee H03).

Fears around the virus created an enabling environment for coercive and controlling behaviours for some perpetrators. Perpetrators may use misinformation or scare tactics to control or blame their victims; they may also withhold necessary safety items such as hand sanitizers, soap, disinfectant or protective masks (Peterman et al., 2020). One woman experienced this form of control. When the Covid-19 pandemic began, her perpetrator insisted on her isolating in her room for a week after being outside of the house for 'mere minutes.' Later, he 'assaulted me to get me out of the kitchen because he didn't want me to be around the food that he'd just cooked… I told him how scared I was, he didn't care, you know. He just saw me as an object' (Interviewee H01).

For too many survivors, 'the lockdown just aggravated', the abuse, and 'it just turned what was a bad situation into a worse possible case scenario that you can imagine' (Interviewee H11). This woman explained that the abuse got worse because 'with the lockdown he was home a lot and the abuse was just too much… I couldn't sleep, I couldn't eat, I was having nightmares, and then I started having some pains in the middle of the night…I was just looking for a way out' (Interviewee H11).

The stay-at-home measures included the closure of schools and nurseries, increasing the likelihood of children being at home, and more exposed to the abuse. As one survivor recounted, there was, 'nowhere to run. So, it affected them, especially my youngest, - my four-year-old. You know kids, they absorb energy so much. She was just so angry, shouting all the time' (Interview, Respondent H10). Another survivor

echoed the problem: 'the Coronavirus just exposed everything. [Our son] was in the middle of it. Before my ex would wait until he's sleeping… He used to do it occasionally when he's awake, but not often. But when the Coronavirus hit there was just no control anymore. He was at me every time, all the time, whether [our son] was there or not' (Interviewee H11).

During the interviews, the researchers were conscious that participants were survivors: those who got away. Yet, so many women's stories are not told here because they are still living through it, or worse, did not survive it. Nevertheless, for some, the lockdown was the catalyst that helped them to escape'. As one woman said, 'lockdown – in a way it's a blessing in disguise, because it pushed me – it really pushed me. It made me – it backed me in a corner, you know. It made me realise, "do you want this for the rest of your life?" … And I sat in my room in the corner, like, "no, I don't want this." I don't care how scared I am, I don't want this I've got to go through. And it's not for me, it's for those kids' (Interviewee H10).

4. Trying to get help

Domestic abuse is underreported for many reasons including shame and stigma (Peterman et al., 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic further problematised getting help for abuse.

4.1. Healthcare during a pandemic

Health providers are often the first point of contact for women experiencing violence as they are seen as trusted sources of help and information (Peterman et al., 2020). However, even in non-emergency settings, health care providers have noted a number of barriers to effectively identifying and supporting victims of domestic abuse, including lack of time, and knowledge and discomfort in discussing sensitive issues (Peterman et al., 2020).

Recognising the role that health staff play in identifying domestic abuse, in March 2017, the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) published an online domestic abuse resource for health professionals to improve awareness. It advised health staff on how they can support and respond to people experiencing domestic abuse, and dependent children in their households, when disclosures of abuse are made. Specialist VAWG organisations including Solace ran training for frontline staff including GPs. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence also published its Quality Standard for Domestic Abuse in March 2016.

However, almost immediately, the coronavirus pandemic saw the contraction of routine health services across the UK. This amplified barriers to disclosure and service provision for domestic abuse (Peterman et al., 2020, p. 14). As a Solace staff member explained, 'GPs [general practitioners] are not making referrals… they're not seeing a patient; they're only doing a consultation over the phone… so they can't actually have

that kind of meaningful conversation about domestic violence' (Interview, Respondent S01). Women may also be less willing to seek help, particularly for health care, because of perceived risks of contracting viruses (Peterman et al., 2020, p. 14).

Further barriers for women who have uncertain immigration status may also deter them from seeking support from statutory services such as healthcare because of the fear of data sharing practices between the health sector and the Home Office (Imkaan, 2020, p. 7).

4.2. 'They were so hostile': The Police

Only one in five people experiencing abuse ever calls the police (SafeLives, 2018, p. 14). As one survivor told us, 'I never called the police on him because I always feared the repercussion. You know, like where we come from, you'll get cases where police don't really help as much as they should have, and then you end up in a worser situation for going to seek help' (Interviewee H10). Historically, victims have struggled to get the police to deal with domestic abuse allegations and the police inspectorate is still critical of officers for dismissing complaints too often (Gibbs, 2018, p. 5).

When the police are called to a domestic abuse incident, they have a number of options for response. It is in their hands whether or not to record the incident. Then, they may record and do nothing more (taking 'no further action' or NFA), or they can initiate a response. They can use an 'out of court disposal' (diversion), or pursue a criminal prosecution. They can also use civil orders. Nevertheless, Police guidance, Government policy, and the inspectorate all favour prosecution of the perpetrator (Gibbs, 2018, p. 5).

'I got really scared and called the police,' recounted a Black survivor. She explained that the person on the other end of the line, said, '"just stay in there for as long as it is safe. If it's not safe you can go" (Interviewee H02). She took his advice, and decided to leave the flat, encountering the police arriving as she got to the entrance to her building. She explained that she had started to cry but the police ignored her. Bringing her back to her apartment they proceeded to side with her perpetrator. She said, 'what the police said that day that made me feel like: this is one set of people of the Government, of the system, that I feel should have my back. Well, if they are treating me like this, then where do I stand? They told him that day that he has a right to lock me out of the flat' (Interviewee H02).

Not only siding with the perpetrator against the survivor, the police focused their energy on allowing the perpetrator to stay in the flat, expecting the survivor and her children leave. The police said to the survivor, 'that I need to go and find somewhere to stay that evening. And I was like, "who will take me, with three children, in the middle of this? Everyone is scared. Besides, I haven't got anyone"' (Interviewee H02).

Because the perpetrator had told the police that she had an auntie, the police proceeded to force her to ring her relative. She explained the indignity;

> 'The police made me ring her that day. I rung her for like three, four times in front of the police. She did not answer. So, they said they were

> going to drive me to her house. But I said, "My children are in there, I don't want to leave without my children… I would rather go back in there and the worst that would happen is him killing me. I would rather do that than walk away from my children. If I walk away from here now, I don't know what happen to even to myself, 'cos this is my whole life about to crash in front of me. I have endured about twelve, fifteen years of abuse because of these children and you are making me leave without them." So, they told me that if I go back there and he's locked the door from inside, because there's a catcher, that if I break that door, if he calls the police on me, that they will arrest me. Like, they do that. I kept telling them, "I must have some rights to that house. I have lived there, too." They said, "He has a right to lock you out" (Interviewee H02).

'They were so hostile,' she explained, 'they made me feel that "she's just another troublesome black woman". That's how I felt. I was the one that called you in distress but you turned it around and made me feel like *I* was the troublemaker just because – how do you prove that someone is torturing you?' (Interviewee H02). Her experience with the police meant that, 'I cannot trust them. 'Cos I feel like you didn't protect me when I needed you to protect me, you gave him more power instead' (Interviewee H02). The relative that the police insisted she call for refuge still had not returned her call to date.

Another woman's encounter with the police was part of a tactic used by her perpetrator to blame her for the abuse, something that requires specialist training to understand and appropriately respond to. She recounted how the day began: 'I went to work, I came back, I gave him £100 to help to pay the bills. The same night, the same evening, he called the police three times. It was not one time. He called three times to make sure the police came.' Despite arriving to a quiet house, with the woman in bed and only the perpetrator up, angry, and in the living room, the police arrested the survivor. She recounts;

> 'I was in bed, you know. It was half past ten, and I'm – you know, and they take me. They take me to a place, to a jail, the middle of the night. What ridiculous – the attitude – the police attitude just was ridiculous… He [the perpetrator] was in the lounge. Everything quiet, it was nearly eleven o'clock… [yet instead] they take me, you know. I was [gasping] because I was so – this has never happened with me. They believed what he said. They never saw the evidence. You know, this is what – I was completely shocked' (Interviewee H07).

She explained that the perpetrator knew exactly the right words to say to get the police to believe that it was her that was the perpetrator rather than him, stating that she would 'assault' him, 'he used this word and, - bang - I was there like a criminal.' Her frustration with the police was clear; 'I think you have to be more psychological to see this situation… only his anger, and they believe him; said, "No, it's better to take her to protect him." In this Covid? No, this is not protect at all' (Interviewee H07). Her understandable conclusion was that, 'the Government, the police, they don't care, don't respect, don't see' (Interviewee H07).

Other survivors reiterated that perpetrators know and understand how to use the system to their favour. For example, they may deliberately not use violence in front of

the police, knowing that if they did they would be arrested. One said, 'he 100 per cent knows what he is doing. It is calculated. He knows. How do you prove this?' (Interviewee H02).

Although the Government have pledged investment in police training on coercive control and to extend the rollout of the Domestic Abuse Matters police change programme, developed by the charity SafeLives and the College of Policing, they 'recognise that there is further work to do in transforming the police response to domestic abuse' (GovUK, 2019). During the lockdown, there were confusing messages from the Government about how the police should respond to domestic abuse call outs, which also led to variation in practice' (Interviewee S06).

For one staff member, it was clear that racist attitudes within the police was a fundamental problem for the safety of women of colour facing domestic abuse. She explained:

> 'It never seems to be black women who have positive experiences of the police. There's very often a sense of aggression, … if the client kind of isn't engaging with the process, … – I hear that as kind of code for, "She doesn't trust us." And there's just all sorts of complications and no understanding of why somebody might not actually want to engage with the police. And nothing is done to mitigate that or make it easier. There's a lot of victim blaming that seems to happen in that moment' (Interviewee S10).

That the police cannot be automatically trusted to respond in a non-harmful way in domestic abuse situations, puts a strain in the women's sector. As one staff member said, 'the barrier is often not really being able to tell people what will happen', if they decide to leave their perpetrators. 'You know, you want to kind of be able to reassure people, and say that …, if you decide to leave or you decide to take this option, this is exactly how it's going to work, you know; the police will support you, and it's just not really possible to do that', she says, because, 'I can't predict what the police are going to do, really. I can't predict how they will respond to any kind of call-out to a property' (Interviewee S10).

Every area in England commissions IDVAs to work with high-risk women, and most spend one or two days based in police stations. However, they have little capacity beyond limited support for women through the criminal justice process, if the police pursue prosecution and the survivor wants to provide evidence, who make up a minority of survivors.

4.3. Calls for help

Solace saw a 49% rise in calls to their London Advice Line the week before the lockdown measures were imposed. In the same week, the charity Refuge reported that calls to the UK Domestic Violence Helpline increased by 25% and, there was a 150% increase in visits to the Refuge website (Bradbury-Jones, 2020). The Metropolitan Police were answering roughly 100 domestic abuse calls per day, and

there were over 4,000 domestic abuse arrests in London in the 6 weeks from 9th March – 24th April 2020, a 24% increase compared to the previous year.

The official figures offered only a glimpse into the reality of the situation, yet a pattern quickly emerged. One Solace staff member explained that, 'I think we noticed, the week before lockdown we got loads, loads more calls. The calls to the advice line went up massively' (Interviewee S03). However, this contrasted strongly with the situation once lockdown had begun. It was quieter; 'after lockdown started the calls went way down, we were much, much quieter than we normally are.' It was clear that this was 'because women are unable to call if their abuser is at home, that wouldn't be safe. So that was quite scary because it was super quiet' (Interviewee S03).

What happened during this unnervingly quiet period of lockdown was that Solace received an increase in email referrals. As one staff member recounted, they had 'much more emails than we normally would have. And I know that some of the team support women only via email because they can't call.' This 'made it a lot slower because we can't do a lot of things that we used to do.' In addition, there was a rise in the number of third party referrals.

Other staff members confirmed that during lockdown, there was a vast increase in referrals from statutory agencies like social services and mental health services, the police, children and adults social care, education, and multi-agency risk assessment conferences (MARAC), as well as, 'family members calling, worried about their loved ones or their relatives or friends, who couldn't call themselves because of the lock down and being stuck with their perpetrator, twenty-four seven' (Interviewee S06).

The next dramatic shift in calls were as the lockdown eased during the week beginning 11th May 2020. There was increase in calls from 289 in May 2019 to 397 in May 2020, 'really quite a big increase' (Interviewee S04). Indeed, another staff member said that, 'our advice line has hit the record of calls' in the first week of the 'stay alert' lockdown easing announcement. This announcement was made on Sunday 10th May, and 'that Sunday until the next Sunday we had received so many calls. Probably triple the amount of the calls that it would receive normally in a week' (Interviewee S06). It was clear that, 'lockdown has accelerated abuse', as well as survivors having 'not been able to call for so long' Interviewee S03).

Once the lockdown started to ease, the calls that Solace received were from survivors who were in more extreme situations than is typical, and closer to breaking point. As one staff member said, they were 'getting a lot more calls at that much later end, where it's like, "I have to leave, I'm in danger, I have left and I have nothing." So, I think there are more women in more desperate situations' (Interviewee S03). That week, Solace had a lot more emergency accommodation calls or people declaring homelessness. For example, women called saying, 'they have no money and they have left. They don't have anything with them and some of them had their benefits suspended… and that meant they were left with literally nothing when… it felt like the whole country's going to shut down and there's going to be nothing available' (Interviewee S06).

5. VAWG Structures

5.1. 'Please don't Stop': Women's Sector

When we asked the survivors what advice they could offer the women's sector, including Solace, one of them sobbed as she pleaded: 'Please never stop. Please never stop. You're needed. You are needed more than you think, more than you think… the only advice would be there needs to be more organisations like Solace' (Interviewee H10).

The survivors interviewed for this research were overwhelmingly positive about the support they received from the women's sector. As one survivor said, 'the lady that I spoke to at first, the professional that I had the first contact, she was excellent… She was very professional, and she helped me out in different phases. She said, "Listen, he's going to become more aggressive now that you're pregnant," and sure enough he was. So, my advice is for them to have professionals that would understand the phases, each phase of the situation that the woman's going through' (Interviewee H12). Another survivor said;

> 'My caseworker is from Southall Black Sisters organisation. She was the one that found this accommodation for me... And it was actually supposed to be social services and the local authority that were supposed to find me somewhere, you know. I guess they kind of let me down in a sense when I really needed to get out. They just didn't find it quick enough. As soon as I told my caseworker what was happening, she said, "You know what, don't worry." … We made the move. It was so close, but we made the move. We left… And it was just – I can't describe it. [Sobs] Yeah, it was such a relief. It was such a relief, you know. It was like, oh my gosh, I'm really out of there, you know. I've been in the relationship for sixteen years since I was sixteen...' (Interviewee H02).

Specialist women's voluntary community organisations are well placed to know what women and children need to be safe. Yet as set out above, the women's sector found themselves with two pandemics to fight in March 2020, on increasingly stretched budgets, with anxious staff in many cases working remotely, while the already complex nature of survivors' needs became even more so. Another VAWG agency, the Women's Resource Centre, reported that there were, 'challenges in reaching out to service users and making sure the services are accessible, especially in cases where service users are facing an immediate struggle for survival or do not have internet or necessary equipment'. Many organisations were engulfed in responding to the emergency with basic supplies such as food and other essentials alongside ensuring the safety of their service users' (Women's Resource Centre, 2020, p. 4).

Coupled with the rising number and complexity of cases, was the pressure place on the resourcing of the sector. As the Women's Resource Centre survey of 122 voluntary community sector organisations (VCSOs) highlights, the coronavirus pandemic

presented challenges for the UK women's sector in both the long- and short-term. The top priorities for the women's sector in the UK in these times are: Supporting service users; adapting to new ways of working and new systems; ensuring staff wellbeing; and ensuring organisational survival and sustainability (Women's Resource Centre, 2020, pp. 3-4).

The Women's Resource Centre reported that the majority of the women's sector moved their services online as a response to the coronavirus crisis. According to their survey 67% had all staff working from home, 17% with most staff working from home, just 3.6% stating that all or the majority of the staff are considered key workers and therefore trying to work as normal (Women's Resource Centre, 2020, p. 15). For Solace, some staff began to work from home, while others continued working in-person as key workers, particularly those working in the refuges.

Initially, it was a challenge to interpret the Government 'stay-at-home' measures. In applying it to a refuge setting one Solace staff member said, 'in terms of my household, if I contract Covid it's very clear, we shut down the household, nobody in, nobody out. But in terms of the refuges, we've got lots of different families in one building.' As a result, Solace were put in a position of interpreting rules and regulations in the context of survivor support services; as one staff member said, the Covid-19 lockdown 'put us in a difficult position because we are not meant to control - we are meant to support' (Interviewee S08).

With many services having to move online, there was a challenge for survivors who did not have access to digital or virtual technologies. For some, this would have been a result of control tactics used by an abusive partner, for others, it was simply because they cannot afford them (Bradbury-Jones, 2020). Indeed, as a staff member said, 'this whole digital divide needs looking at, because I think that has a massive impact' (Interviewee S07).

This was particularly the case for older survivors. As one staff member said, 'there are some [survivors] who are really in their 70s, and they need the kind of face-to-face interaction' (Interviewee S10). Another staff member told us of:

> 'a woman and she's in her 60s. She's fled. She's been 30 years, totally controlled, doesn't know how to use the phone. And you say to her "internet", she doesn't even know what it is. The doctor's receptionist is like, "Oh, yeah, just go online and fill in the online form and then you'll get a doctor's call-back." No, that isn't going to happen. This woman just needs to speak to someone and book an appointment. It's actually not okay. …This woman is having like a – you know, feeling suicidal, and still the advice was just to fill in and write on the thing how you're feeling. I mean, that's not okay in that circumstance' (Interviewee S02).

Another group of women who were more difficult to support during the early days of the pandemic were those for whom English is a second language. Because these women weren't 'able to access public messaging in the right way, Initially there was quite a lot of panic' (Interviewee S08).

Additionally, it was difficult to 'move survivors on'. Usually survivors would move on from refuge accommodation within six months. However, Solace had 'quite a few

women who've come to that six month point during the Covid pandemic', and it was not possible to move them on to new accommodation because they couldn't view the properties in person. Only virtual viewings were possible (Interviewee S09). In addition; 'people are very concerned about moving out into B&B accommodation.' Survivors were worried about where to move on and how to manage the children. As such, said a staff member, 'we've been hanging on to women for longer – a few days or so' (Interviewee S08).

5.1.1. Supporting children

As non-essential workers and people who were shielding began to work from home, support services for children and young people had to be cut back. Whilst some Hands on play sessions had to be paused until risk assessments could take place to established how to carry them out safely. As one staff member explained, for a period of the lockdown 'we had no play sessions going on in the refuge which we normally would' (Interviewee S05). Not being able to run the playgroups makes things, 'very hard because that was what was sort of like almost respite, that mum could have' (Interviewee S05).

There were some benefits for those working with children, however. One children's worker explained that, 'because of the virus we were doing these extra sessions and I've been doing a lot more one-to-one. I think that's one of the benefits, is that I've been able to see the children more. And sit with them more, and do sessions and talk about, not only – so we're able to talk about the virus and these are things that we can't control. And then talking about their feelings and people, and family breakdowns, that we can't control the situation. So we're trying to use it as a positive as much as I can' (Interviewee S05).

With children staying home from school, families where the mother had English as a second language were also struggling. As one staff member said, 'Some of our families are even more disadvantaged because mum's English is a second language. So, it's very difficult for her to look up schoolwork…there's lot of questions and she's not sure how to help her child' (Interviewee S05). It is even more difficult when the children are older, when 'they're being given like schoolwork for their fourteen, thirteen, fifteen-year-old children but they are having like great difficulty understanding' (Interviewee S09).

5.1.2. Sustainability of the sector

Emergency funding for the VAWG sector was slow to be announced and did not meet need. Although the sector was grateful for funding when it was finally announced, it lacked strategic forethought.

For staff, who noticed that the Government response to domestic violence, 'changed when these three women have been killed in the UK within a short period of time because of the lockdown', there was a frustration that 'do we have to wait for something to happen, do we have to wait for this crisis?' (Interviewee S02).

Nevertheless, there was gratitude for the funding and assistance that came from the local community. As one staff member said, 'in terms of donations and community support it's been absolutely fantastic, phenomenal… we got a whole massive set of [body wash] donations' (Interviewee S02). Regrettably, although, 'we are grateful for

our donors and for the support we have, but I don't think it's enough. It's not enough to meet the demand I think' (Interviewee S06).

The insecure nature of funding in the VAWG sector was particularly exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis. The survey by the Women's Resource Centre of 122 voluntary and community organisations (VCSOs), showed that organisations, 'expressed high levels of concern related to the funding of their organisation. Insecure funding was mentioned by many respondents as major challenges in keeping their organisation afloat' (Women's Resource Centre, 2020, p. 6). This was disproportionately the case for Black and minoritised women-led organisations (ibid). As reported by the Women's Resource centre, 'Black and minoritised women led organisations have significantly less confidence that their organisations will survive the COVID-19 crisis (ibid). This is unsurprising, as Imkaan reported, as 'Before COVID-19, the specialist Black and minoritised refuge sector already experienced decommissioning at disproportionate levels' (Imkaan, 2020, p. 5).

5.1.3. Commissioning of services

The UK's women's sector is severely underfunded and commissioning tends to be short-term, extremely competitive, and frequently weighted heavily on price vs quality scores. reactive. The sector survives hand to mouth, and the current pandemic is exacerbating an already precarious position. New waves of funding are welcome, but can be no more than a sticking plaster on a sector that needs long-term secure funding (Adisa et al., 2020).

In real terms, funding for domestic abuse has declined sharply in the last decade as national and local budget holders make savings to respond to central government cuts and meet shortfalls. There are some local authorities who are commissioning services in line with good practice but many are extending or renewing contracts at the same value, despite increases in costs for providers. Recent and forthcoming legislation and accompanying work by the Welsh, Scottish and UK Governments aims to keep increasing awareness of abuse, with an emphasis on it being 'everybody's business' including all statutory agencies, employers and wider civic society. This level of ambition and focus is very welcome, but is not matched by appropriate funding (SafeLives, 2018, p. 13).

Government commissioning of services in the violence against women and girls sector tends to be devolved to local authorities there is variation in provision across the country (Interviewee S02). This not only challenges long term collaboration between organisations but it also means there is not a clear picture about what is available.

Solace runs a range of different services, many of which are commissioned by a number of local authorities and, 'each local authority's support for domestic violence [services is] a bit different' (Interviewee S01). As one staff member said, 'depending what borough you're in, [it] depends on what support you receive… Every single borough operates in a different way and nationally that's just reflected. So there's no consistency at all. For survivors it kind of just depends where you live, you might get a good service, you might get one that's really over worked' (Interviewee S03).

5.2. Civil and Criminal law

5.2.1. Immigration

Section 115 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 states that a person will have 'no recourse to public funds' (NRPF) if they are 'subject to immigration control'. This means they have no entitlement to the majority of welfare benefits, including Universal Credit, housing benefit and a range of allowances. This is a key issue for all migrant survivors experiencing domestic abuse.

Local authorities have duties to support survivors under legislation that includes the National Assistance Act 1948, the Children Act 1989 and the Human Rights Act 1998. Consequently, boroughs are often left with the responsibility to provide for subsistence and accommodation needs that, under different circumstances, would be centrally funded. However, this is to a certain extent up to the Local Authority as they receive no additional funding for these costs.

On 1 April 2012, the UK Border Agency (UKBA) introduced the Destitution Domestic Violence Concession (DDVC). This allows a survivor of domestic abuse a concession to receive temporary leave to remain for three months, allowing them to apply for access to public funds (including universal credit and housing benefit). During this three month period the person should make a separate application for indefinite leave to remain under the Domestic Violence Rule. Only people on a partner visa are eligible for the DDVC, so some VAWG organisations warned that the DDVC could create a two-tier system meaning there was a hierarchy of support for women fleeing domestic violence (Imkaan, 2020, p. 5).

Five out of thirteen of the women we interviewed living in the Covid-19 Crisis Project accommodation mentioned having no recourse to public funds. Southall Black Sisters partnered with Solace to deliver the crisis project because they have the expertise and experience of supporting survivors in this situation. Having uncertain visa status had inhibited the women we spoke to from getting help in the first place. As one survivor explained:

> 'Although I was brought up in this country, I've always had a problem with immigration because I've always been under my mum's status, and dad's, but that's just a whole other issue. So, my time of being with him since I was sixteen up until my adult life, 2018, I've never had no status in the country. I couldn't work. I couldn't do nothing, so I solely relied on him for everything. Yeah, [he] control[ed] the finances – 'cos he was born here - he's British - everything was in his name. If I need anything, I will have to ask. If I need money, if it's over £50, I will have to tell him exactly what I'm doing with it because it's too much' (Interviewee H10).

Separated from her husband, one survivor had the impression that her visa was no longer valid; 'I'm illegal here today because on my visa I must depend on him'' (Interviewee H06). Nevertheless, for one survivor, being given the DDVC concession was a surprise and welcome life line:

> 'They were very helpful for me first of all. Because they gave me, you know, access to public funds because my husband left me. Actually, you

> know, my visa was related to my husband and he was my sponsor. And I worked, you know, just part time until this and then I lost my job… And when the domestic violence [happened] then I just play along [with him]… After [the] domestic violence they gave me… a visa for three months and funds. And I was really surprised, because I didn't expect something – such a nice thing from the Home Office! And, yeah this money, you know, I'm still receiving this money for my daily needs' (Interviewee H09).

With just a three-month window, at a time where all public services were extremely stretched, the likelihood of getting visa applications approved fast enough was slim. This was another source of anxiety for the women. Survivors were aware that Government agencies such as the Home Office were, 'short of staff as well. So they may delay the process of – of the visa itself, but I hope that this situation, especially with domestic abuse, they can process the visa faster' (Interviewee H08).

Nevertheless, as Solace staff explained, having uncertain immigration status and no recourse to public funds makes it 'even harder to even access the support services.' The fear was that, 'I think there is a lot more cases that are going maybe underground, - that are not coming forward, with their needs, - because of the fears about what the repercussions, or the consequences, are going to be if they seek support: Would they be reported to Home Office?, or would they be detained or deported? I think that creates a huge barrier' (Interviewee S06).

5.2.2. Family law

In 2012, the Ministry of Justice's Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act (LASPO) dramatically reduced legal aid for family law cases. Although civil legal aid was still available for people who have been trafficked and people who have experienced domestic violence, LASPO introduced stricter means testing. Legal aid was made available for private family law matters conditional on the applicant providing evidence of domestic violence.

Even if survivors are able to obtain legal aid, LASPO's restrictions mean that the perpetrator may be ineligible for legal aid, and choose to represent himself (as a litigant in person). Because in private family law proceedings litigants in person are able to cross-examine other parties in court, an alleged perpetrator of abuse can cross-examine their alleged victim. Although given a variety of measures to manage these cases, the judiciary has raised concerns that such practices may lead to questions about their impartiality, and access to these measures has been inadequate and inconsistent (Corbett & Summerfield, 2017).

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, court officials were advised to stay home. When the lockdown was imposed in the UK from 17th March 2020, family courts went on-line. Hearings had to take place remotely, via email, telephone, video or skype, unless in the requirements of fairness and justice a court-based hearing was required and it was safe to schedule on a case specific basis. Restrictions in court activity created delays in the issuance of court-ordered restraining orders, separation and divorce proceedings, and child custody hearings, including those that survivors rely on to facilitate distance perpetrators (Peterman et al., 2020, p. 16).

Survivors' access to legal solutions were, therefore, limited or stalled. For one staff member, the adaptation to virtual working nevertheless was an improvement: 'the good thing is what the Government's done about court cases, with the family courts, they've all got on the phone. Which is just as good, because in general it's anxiety, but it's even more anxiety physically going into the court and seeing the perpetrator. But being able to use the phone instead has been good, so that's been quite positive' (Interviewee S05). However, this was not the case for everyone. One Solace staff member explained the situations of a survivor who:

> 'the crisis has – it's just put everything back for her. It's just delayed the process of – she was going through courts. There was a Child Arrangements Order that was going to determine questions around the best situation for her child, who was at that point living with her ex-partner (the abusive person in this situation). So her child was living with him. And it was something that had already been going on for longer than she'd imagined it would be going on for. And the court hearing dates had been delayed and then delayed again. And then the lockdown introduced this huge delay to the process. And I think she felt – like her mental health deteriorated hugely. Not just because of what the situation was - in that she was kind of unhappy about her son living with him - but the fact that it was kind of going on and on and had been unresolved for so long…. They wanted to do a psychological assessment for the court, and she didn't want to do that online. She wanted a face-to-face appointment for that and that wasn't being offered' (Interviewee S10).

5.2.3. The criminal justice system

The number of perpetrators who are convicted with domestic abuse as an "aggravating factor" was 70,853 in 2017. Only 3% of all those convicted with the aggravating factor of domestic abuse completed a programme designed to address this offence (Gibbs, 2018, p. 10). And, in general, fewer than 1% of perpetrators of abuse get a specialist intervention to change (SafeLives, 2018, p. 18).

The Domestic Violence Protection Order (DVPO) was introduced in 2014 as a result of a review of international evidence of what works to protect domestic abuse victims. The DVPO offers a way of protecting victims using civil law. It is a restrictive order imposed on a perpetrator when police want to protect the victim but don't want to, or don't have the evidence to, prosecute. It's imposed by a criminal court on the balance of probabilities for 14-28 days and may prohibit the perpetrator from contacting the victim and/or going to the victim's home. The DVPO was piloted in three police force areas in 2011-12 and then rolled out throughout England and Wales yet has had slow uptake. It is to be renamed the domestic abuse protection order – DAPO, and have its current maximum time length (28 days) abolished so that the DAPO could be imposed for as long as requested (Gibbs, 2018, p. 18). The Domestic Abuse Bill provides that the breach of an order will be a criminal offence, subject to a maximum penalty of five years' imprisonment, an unlimited fine, or both. It will also be open to a court to punish a breach as a contempt of court, as an alternative to criminal proceedings (GovUK, 2018, p. 30).

Most victims' greatest desire is for the abuse to stop, and many would rather see their perpetrators get help than be locked up. Hoyle and Sanders interviewed victims of domestic violence in the Thames Valley area in the late 1990s, and reported that over

half of the victims interviewed wanted their perpetrators to be arrested, but most did not want them to be prosecuted. Instead, they wanted an arrest without any further criminal justice intervention to 'teach him a lesson' or to resolve the immediate situation temporarily" (Hoyle & Sanders, 2000). Similarly, one survivor we spoke to said, sometimes when she called the police, 'I know you won't make an arrest because he hasn't done anything criminal. But at least caution. Make him know that you cannot do that to someone' (Interviewee H02).

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1. Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic has shaken society's foundations and revealed its strengths and fragilities. While it is tempting to see the current crisis of domestic violence simply as a symptom of the pandemic, and to respond with a sticking plaster, in reality, it is scourge that has devastated lives for far too long, and needs concerted resources and determination to end. Ensuring that the lessons learned during this pandemic are taken forward as long-term strategic change will be key.

One thing the domestic abuse sector does not want to lose is the recognition and attention this long-standing issue has finally been given. Solace staff were encouraged by this responsiveness; as one reflected: 'one weird upside is that, you know, there's been like a real media focus and interest in the issue of domestic abuse, which I've never really seen before. So, I hope that remains' (Interviewee S03).

6.2. Recommendations

Any longer-term pandemic preparedness needs to include a strategic approach to preventing violence against women and children. Domestic violence prevention should be integrated into disaster risk reduction as well as pandemic preparedness. There should be a gender, race and ethnicity and age lens applied, and women and children should be included in the decision-making process (Peterman et al., 2020, p. 22).

More urgently, however, there needs to be a longer-term, coordinated and strategic approach to eradicating violence against women and children. The following recommendations build on this research, as well as best practice from practitioners in the violence against women and girls sector, to move towards a more targeted and genuinely strategic approach.

6.2.1. Long term sustainable funding

In 2010, the Coalition Government outlined its vision 'for a society in which no woman or girl has to live in fear of violence' which continued in violence against women and girls strategies up to 2020 (Home Office, 2011). The framework to achieve this vision was set out as:

- prevent such violence from happening by challenging the attitudes and behaviours which foster it and intervening early where possible to prevent it;
- provide adequate levels of support where violence does occur;
- work in partnership to obtain the best outcome for victims and their families; and

- take action to reduce the risk to women and girls who are victims of these crimes and ensure that perpetrators are brought to justice. (HM Government, 2010, p. 5).

In the 2018 white paper *Transforming the Response to Domestic Abuse*, this approach was reaffirmed. However, there are a number of limitations to this framework and its operation in practice. The greater decentralisation that it introduced, and the introduction of Police and Crime Commissioners, has led to greater disparity across the country; as a result, survivors do not know what support they might get.

In the same white paper, it was announced that the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) was carrying out a review of how domestic abuse services are locally commissioned and funded across England (GovUK, 2019). Reporting in October 2019, this review confirmed a new statutory duty would be introduced, to provide accommodation for domestic abuse survivors. It also introduced a requirement on Tier One authorities to convene a Domestic Abuse Local Partnership Board; this board is meant to, 'advise on conducting robust local needs assessments and developing strategies to support victims and their children within safe accommodation', as well as undertake a local needs assessment on support provided within safe accommodation every three years.

The Domestic Abuse Bill will bring in this new statutory duty for local authorities to deliver support to survivors of domestic abuse in accommodation-based services. Women's sector organisations are clear that this duty alone is not enough. To make it work, 'it must be backed by a sustainable funding commitment for women's refuges that have the expertise to meet the support needs of women and children, including expert services led 'by and for' BME women and other marginalised groups …including migrant women who too often face insurmountable barriers to accessing refuges and safe housing.' As well as the requirement that all survivors are treated as 'priority need' for housing, the bill must ban damaging local connection restrictions on women who need to cross local authority boundaries to access safety and remove 'residency requirements' for survivors who need a safe home in a new area (Women's Aid, 2020, p. 19).

Calls to review funding were met with the conclusion that, 'final decisions on funding will be made as part of the Spending Review in 2020, ahead of the new duty coming into force' (GovUK, 2019). The Treasury has allocated a total of £125 million for the new duty in 2021-22, which falls far short of the estimated cost of delivery calculated by Women's Aid Federation of England and, as it was only agreed for one year, it remains to be seen what the long-term funding commitment will be.

The Home Office is currently consulting on its next four-year VAWG strategy, which it plans to divorce from a domestic abuse strategy to be introduced later in 2021. The sector has consistently rejected the separation of domestic abuse from other forms of VAWG because women often experience multiple and connected forms, and because all forms of VAWG are cause and consequence of women's inequality and require a strategic and joined up response.

Recommendation 1: In collaboration with the VAWG sector, the Government should ensure that its upcoming VAWG strategy provides long-term sustainable funding to prevent VAWG, provide adequate support services and work in partnership with sector specialists. We would continue to recommend that the strategy is inclusive of domestic abuse rather than a separate strategy.

6.2.2. Survivors staying, perpetrators leaving

Having to leave their home as a result of domestic abuse has a significant effect on survivors and their families. Research conducted by Solace in 2016 and in 2019 shows that while many perpetrators remained in the family home, adult and child victims-survivors were forced to move between refuges, temporary accommodation and unsuitable housing (Solace, 2016, 2019b).

In line with the call to action for a perpetrator strategy published in January 2020 with over 70 signatories including Solace, our principle recommendation is that, where it would be in the best interests of the survivor to stay in their accommodation, this should be the aim of assistance: requiring the perpetrator to leave (Call to Action, 2020). We note agreement from the Home Secretary, who stated on April 11th 2020 that "perpetrators should be the ones who have to leave the family home, not the supposed loved ones who they torment and abuse."

The principles of this approach are:

1. It is safe and in the best interests of the adult and child victims-survivors
2. It is the victim-survivors choice to remain in their home
3. Adequate support is offered to the adult and child victims-survivors
4. There is an adequate and ongoing multi-agency response to the perpetrator to hold them to account, involving risk assessment and management, challenging their behaviour and offering support where it is safe to do so (Call to Action, 2020).

Recommendation 2: The Government should set out measures which would enable victim-survivors to choose to stay in their homes. At a minimum, every local authority should provide a sanctuary scheme which is open for all survivors. These should be operated by independent specialist VAWG agencies and in conjunction with wider community support and safety measures.

Where and when survivors would prefer to leave their home, or as it is necessary for their protection to leave their home, the approach to their housing needs should be long-term and strategic. Refuges should be an option but women should have the choice for more independent living. Local authorities must prioritise survivors in safe and suitable accommodation, with ongoing support delivered by specialist services (Women's Aid, 2020, p. 20). It is important that local authorities have a 'whole housing approach' which ensures access to a full suite of housing options, and availability of suitable move-on accommodation (Women's Aid, 2020, p. 20). Women should be ensured that they can access information on domestic abuse and emergency housing in multiple languages and formats.

Recommendation 3: Where survivors need to leave for their own safety or because the tenancy agreement, lease or mortgage is jointly or wholly in the perpetrators' name, ensure they have the recourse to proper accommodation.

Recommendation 4: All boroughs should put in place cross-departmental strategies to ensure a clear pathway for women threatened with homelessness/ made homeless due to VAWG. This should ensure safety from the point of crisis through to long-term, safe and suitable accommodation.

6.2.3. More strategic and trauma informed approach within local authorities

Sufficient attention has not been given to the fact that understanding and responding appropriately to domestic abuse is complex and requires a highly skilled workforce. As a staff member explained to us of domestic abuse:

> 'it's a pattern of behaviour and you need to know how to respond to that. I think if all public sector professionals were able to respond to domestic abuse in a trauma informed and sensible way, the need for our service and the pressure on our service, would be reduced greatly' (Interviewee S03).

Local authorities, in collaboration with Police and Crime Commissioners, must have a clear multi-agency strategy to prevent domestic abuse—from early intervention through to support. This should include robust measures of accountability and clear targets. As part of this, domestic abuse should be a key priority area for staff training and development and a strategic priority in terms of safeguarding the well-being of local communities.

Training for the police, health professionals and social workers in understanding and responding to domestic abuse is key. More resources need to be dedicated to this to ensure that all statutory services are fully equipped to be able to deal with all the scenarios. This training should be delivered in collaboration with specialist domestic abuse organisations (Women's Aid, 2020, p. 21).

Recommendation 5: Have a multi-agency, trauma-informed strategic approach across local authorities, which includes funding for appropriate training, support and multi-agency working.

6.2.4. No resource to public funds

A significant number of survivors we interviewed had no recourse to public funds. Some women with no recourse to public funds are able to access the destitute domestic violence concession, which provides eligible individuals with a period of three months' leave outside the immigration rules. During this three-month window, survivors can apply for access to public funds, which 'may help fund alternative accommodation away from their abuser. This period of leave enables individuals to reflect and make arrangements to regularise their status by applying for indefinite leave to remain if they wish' (GovUK, 2019, p. 23). Though asylum seekers are not

eligible for the destitute domestic violence concession, the Government also provides analogous support to this group if they are destitute.

Whilst the destitute domestic violence concession is available to support survivors' escape from an abusive situation, it is not sufficient; it relies on the victim-survivor having to navigate the application process and find new accommodation within a tight timeframe. The focus should instead be on assisting the survivor to stay and access the appropriate benefits. Benefits should be automatic, rather than requiring detailed administrative hurdles or conditionalities (Peterman et al., 2020, p. 20).

Guidance needs to be provided for women navigating statutory services and the legal system whose first language is not English. This could be as simple—as one staff member said—as a 'small kind of book' in their own language to explain what 'domestic violence [is] and how you can survive that': something that would sufficiently explain their rights and the resources available to them (Interviewee H09).

Although police policy is that victims-survivors must be treated as victims first and foremost, regardless of their immigration status, this is not always practiced (GovUK, 2019, pp. 23-24). It is necessary to take greater steps to separate immigration control from the public services that survivors seek help from, alongside safe and confidential reporting systems for those with an insecure status (Women's Aid, 2020, p. 21). In order to ensure this is the case, Guidance on separating immigration control from public services will be needed for local authorities and across health, education, criminal justice, housing and social care to ensure a consistent response (Imkaan, 2020, p. 17).

Recommendation 5: The Domestic Abuse Bill should be amended to provide for migrant women and ensure that local authorities guarantee that all women receive appropriate housing, regardless of their immigration status.

Recommendation 6: Abolish the no recourse to public funds rule for migrants experiencing domestic violence to end the triple threat of reporting, detention and deportation which prevent migrant women/women with insecure immigration status from seeking the support they need. Expand the route to secure immigration status for all migrants experiencing domestic violence (not just for those on a spousal visa). Ensure that appropriate guidance and information is available in a variety of languages so survivors can understand their rights.

6.2.5. Improve police response to domestic abuse

In our research, survivors and staff reported police responses to domestic abuse to be problematic and un-appreciative of the complex nature of intimate partner abuse. It is clear that the police require in-depth training in recognising, understanding and responding to domestic abuse urgently. Police and Crime Commissioners and the Metropolitan Police need to ensure that they have a clear strategy and action plan to ensure the police are performing in an anti-racist and anti-sexist way.

Recommendation 7: The police should review their protocols and practices when supporting women of colour and those without English as a first language in order to ensure responses to domestic abuse are sophisticated and in-line with anti-racist and anti-sexist approaches.

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