

# Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Strategy 2021-2024 Call for Evidence



Written evidence submitted by The Salvation Army

February 2021

## Introduction

The Salvation Army is a Christian church and registered charity, which has been fighting against social inequality and transforming lives for over 150 years. We help those who are in need, including people working within the sex industry in the UK and around the world.

One example, is The Salvation Army support for sex workers and former sex workers in Central and North London through the Faith House Project. This initiative runs English lessons, drop-ins and outreach sessions designed with a focus on holistic safety to empower these individuals to improve their wellbeing. As a result of this support, Faith House has seen people grow in self-esteem and self-agency, enable them to access the medical, housing and benefit support they need, and when exiting help find alternative employment.

The Salvation Army also works with women who have faced domestic abuse. The Link Café is a safe space where women who have left abusive partners can find someone to journey with them through complex systems and be linked to services in the local community. Operating in the London boroughs of Sutton and Merton, The Link Café provides practical and emotional support with no judgement.

## Executive Summary

As part of The Salvation Army's submission to this call for evidence, we wish to provide information to enable the Home Office to improve its understanding of the extent to which current legislation and services are being used to support Sex Workers, who are often subjected to violent crimes. We are also providing evidence concerning current legislation and services surrounding victims of domestic abuse. For the purpose of clarity, violence against Sex Workers and violence occurred during domestic abuse will be discussed separately. However, it must be noted that these issues often overlap.

We have provided case studies to demonstrate best practice in working collaboratively with statutory agencies, such as the police and NHS local health teams. We strongly call for an increase in multi-agency working to ensure that women and girls who have suffered violence are better able to access the support they need from different statutory and non-statutory services simultaneously. We also present a case study to demonstrate the nature of domestic abuse and the work The Salvation Army does to support those who suffer because of it. These will reveal the scale and impact of violence against women and girls, before providing examples and methods of best practice to tackle these issues.

## **Violence Against Sex Workers**

### **Impact of COVID-19**

This Call for Evidence is taking place during the COVID – 19 pandemic, the effects of which have been felt globally and will be long lasting in England and Wales. Throughout the pandemic it has been clear that the already vulnerable have been at greater risk to harm as the virus has exacerbated existing social conditions. Generally speaking, there has been an increase in demand for the services available to women and girls experiencing violence. This trend has been witnessed across the UK, with increased cases of sexual and domestic violence reported.<sup>1</sup>

The Faith House Project has been operational throughout the pandemic, having been deemed a critical service by the Chief Inspector of Police for the area. Continued outreach work has seen first-hand the severe negative impact of COVID-19 on female sex workers who are involved in ‘On Street Prostitution’. Through this work, Faith House has heard from many women that levels of criminal violence, acts of assault and robbery, have risen to the point where they are seen as normal and are no longer reported to the police and relevant authorities.

The economic ramifications of the pandemic have also forced many women to return to On Street Prostitution. In the past year Faith House has seen an increase in the number of women deciding to enter sex work due to circumstance, with issues such as poverty and substance abuse seen as driving factors. This observation by The Salvation Army’s outreach team is corroborated by reports from other organisations working within the field.<sup>2</sup> The number of women returning to sex work, alongside the growing levels of violence towards them, means that more women are placed at risk of suffering harm.

At the same time, many services have had to alter access procedures in response to the pandemic, meaning that many sex workers are missing out on essential support. For example, some housing and health groups had to stop their drop-in service so that the provision offered can only be accessed via an appointment. Although unavoidable due to the public health concerns presented by COVID-19, reduced access has meant that some of the sex workers known to Faith House, who are also Class A substance users, have been unable to engage in the normal way. This has meant that some of the progress they had made via the service prior to the pandemic has stalled or in some cases reversed.

### **What are the Repercussions of Discriminating Against Female Sex Workers?**

Through its Faith House Project, The Salvation Army offers outreach that provides consistent, non-judgmental and integral outreach. As a result of this approach, we have been able to effectively build trusting relationships with people working in ‘On Street Prostitution’, which in turn can reduce the risk and impact of harm.

There is however a very present issue of the stigmatisation and stereotyping of female sex workers. Sex workers are often seen as ‘deviant’, and their lives demonised within public understanding. This issue is also present in professional understanding. Representations of female sex workers are homogenised by using blaming and stigmatising language. This obscures individual lives and causes

---

<sup>1</sup> UN Women – *COVID-19 and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls*

<sup>2</sup> Changing Lives – *Nowhere to Turn: Sexual Violence among women selling sex and experiencing sexual exploitation during COVID-19*. (October 2020)

damage to health and well-being.<sup>3</sup> As will be seen in the following paragraphs, Faith House witnesses this discrimination first hand, often seeing the ‘othering’ of sex workers in public and private forums.

During the past year the discrimination against female sex workers has grown. As the wider community has developed greater anxieties due to COVID-19, frustration is often vented towards sex workers. Stigmatisation and ‘othering’ separates sex workers from society and detaches them from essential community support. As a result, they will be seen as easy targets for frustration and physical violence.

For example, representatives of Faith House were present during a multiagency strategy meeting in which a council member was heard to say, “The residents and them”. ‘Them’ being used to refer to those female sex workers in On Street Prostitution. Alarmingly, some of those identified as ‘them’ were residents within the borough and, therefore, entitled to support and understanding from their elected representatives. This example highlights the discrimination observable within organisations with authority. This ‘othering’ helps to enable violence and discriminatory actions against vulnerable groups.

The current Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) strategy has helped ensure that local authorities are reminded of their obligations to vulnerable communities. We believe that this must be continued within the next strategy and must be combined with efforts to reduce stigmatisation of sex workers.

#### **What Methods of Practice Best Enable Local Response Programmes to Successfully Respond to these Harms?**

Faith House has been running an outreach provision to individuals working in the sex industry in and around Kings Cross since 1953. Our experience allows us to offer a model of best practice. One which enables and empowers the women we work with to make decisions that improve their own lives. We continue to have and on-street and off-street outreach service in this area and now in other parts of North London. We recognise, and stress, the need for both practical and pastoral services. An example of this is that we offer English classes, which improves their ability to make informed choices, and if considering existing have more options for alternative employment

Faith House recognises that the key to providing successful responses to issues of vulnerability and marginalisation is the building of trusting relationships between agencies and stakeholders. Respectful multi-agency collaboration allows for the expertise of practitioners to be utilised without the overstretching of resources and capabilities of any one service; and for our service users to always receive expert quality care. For instance, we regularly participate in joint outreach with a local NHS test and treat team and have trusted partnerships within the areas of sexual health and drug and alcohol support and other outreach providers. This alongside, the trusting relationships we have built over time with service users enables these statutory bodies to successfully carry out their work, and our service users access the services they deserve and have the right to.

Faith House participates in national, local and London focused multi-agency working groups alongside statutory and non-statutory bodies. Regular communication and work with other agencies ensure good practice and allows for beneficial knowledge sharing across organisations. These forums allow for concerns to be raised and the subsequent coordination of solutions and programmes. Faith House has also been recognised through these forums as a measured voice of the service users they

---

<sup>3</sup> Putnis, N & Burr, J. – *Evidence or Stereotype? Health Inequalities and representations of sex workers in health publications in England*. (March, 2019)

support and this has led to us being able to be asked to attend critical incident meetings and sought out to offer opinions on potential new initiatives that statutory groups are exploring.

We would encourage both statutory and non-statutory bodies to engage in respectful collaborative action, ensuring voices and opinions are received and heard from stakeholders with different areas of experience and expertise. The new VAWG Strategy must place an emphasis on creating conditions that enable and encourage multi-agency work. This can be achieved by ensuring that statutory agencies, such as the Police and local authorities, do not automatically consider sex work as an enforcement matter. But are aware of how to signpost women to specialist services, like Faith House, which can offer appropriate support. This will improve relations between statutory bodies and sex worker communities and demonstrate to the public a need to support and work with the most vulnerable in society.

**What are the difficulties for those facing harm in accessing services (for example, the justice system, healthcare, housing)? What needs to change?**

There is a clear lack of trust between sex workers working in On Street Prostitution and the police. Many violent crimes committed against the service users of Faith House go unreported due to lack of faith in local police forces. Instead of seeking protection from violence, many sex workers fear prosecution. This means that, access to justice systems are blocked by a lack of understanding in law enforcement bodies. We encourage recent discourse, which has emphasised the need for ‘discrimination against sex workers’ to be added to the hate crime definitions. We would also advocate for policing communities to ensure that part of the training of all new and current officers include the National Policing Guidance on Policing Sex Work to ensure that they themselves do not fall into the trap of ‘othering’ sex workers.

Our experience working and listening to sex workers has informed our view that enabling sex workers to build trusting relationships with the Police is a key route to addressing and preventing harms associated with sex.

Faith House has witnessed a clear disconnect in written statutory guidance and the execution of essential services. Many women deciding to undertake sex work are classed as homeless, and their occupation places them in a heightened state of vulnerability. This is recognised by many of the local homelessness strategies put in place by various London councils. However, we have heard many first-hand testimonies of vulnerable homeless women not being granted priority access to housing and even cases of homeless outreach teams failing to establish contact. There needs to be greater understanding amongst relevant government bodies of their statutory obligations and non-statutory obligations towards sex workers.

COVID – 19 has caused disruption in the availability of health services to many sex workers. Many drop-in sessions are no longer available to operate, and an appointment-based system is in effect due to safety concerns. Due to the chaotic nature of the lifestyle some sex workers are unable to attend regular appointments and progress has been hampered.

The trusted relationships that Faith House has with their service users enables us to empower the women to have confidence and courage to attend appointments. It is from this base, that multi agency working alongside organisations such as local NHS services, have countered some of the harm shown above.

This evidence shows the need for a system which offers flexible outreach services, based on where they are. This would allow services to reach those unable to attend regular appointments at set locations, ensuring that all of those needing support will receive it with dignity, regardless of circumstance.

### Conclusions

This submission has shown the violence faced by sex workers in on street prostitution is a common occurrence, exacerbated by negative public perceptions. The 'othering' of sex workers facilitates frustration and violent acts. A concerted effort must be made to reduce the stigma surrounding those working within the sex industry, and The Salvation Army would suggest considering a public information campaign, as part of the new VAWG Strategy. This would ensure that all relevant stakeholders, including the public and statutory bodies, see the person and not a negative label.

Removing the stigma surrounding sex workers will also encourage the view that sex work is not automatically an enforcement matter for statutory bodies. This will assist with building more positive relationships between statutory bodies and sex worker communities. This will lead to better and more frequent signposting to specialist services, which will allow women to gain the practical and pastoral support they need. This signposting will facilitate a flexible system that provides a multiagency approach to tackling issues of violence towards sex workers.

## Domestic Abuse

### Impact of COVID-19

The COVID pandemic has had a complex impact on women who have been, or are, with an abusive partner. For those living with abusive partners, abuse has increased in severity and frequency.<sup>4</sup> Anecdotal evidence gathered by The Salvation Army corroborates this finding. In addition, we have also seen a lack over what constitutes 'non-essential travel' and whether councils have been open to support victims of abuse. An example of how this has increased the barriers faced by victims of domestic abuse can be found in the case study below.

#### Case Study: Sara's Story

Sara has four children ranging from five months to ten years old. She has been living with her husband for 12 years and has been experiencing coercive control throughout this time. When lockdown occurred in March 2020, her husband's behaviour became increasingly violent resulting in him finally being arrested in December. Within this time, Sara had tried to contact local agencies for help and advice, but because they are only being offered remotely, she found it hard to find the opportunity to call when she wouldn't be overheard. She was unaware that she could contact them via email. Sara also shared that she was unclear as to whether she could leave the family home, as they are both signed tenants and from previous experience thought she would be seen as making herself 'intentionally homeless' and therefore not entitled to help. Once she had reported her husband to the police and his subsequent arrest, the police provided information that she has been able to use to source additional support, including our service.

Sara's story shows the need for increased public information campaigns about the services available to those experiencing domestic abuse. It needs to be made clear that there are options for people to take in order to secure their safety in the face of abuse and violence.

There has been some benefit for those who are no longer living with the perpetrator. Women we work with have verbalised an increased sense of safety due to the inability to follow usual patterns of life, their children being with them all the time and restricted travel. Remote court hearings have also ensured that victims of abuse are not required to be in the same space as their perpetrator.

### What Methods of Practice Best Enable Local Response Programmes to Successfully Respond to the Harms of Domestic Abuse?

The Link Café provides a welcoming safe space for victims of domestic abuse to meet, whilst being mentored and directed towards various Domestic Abuse professionals and government bodies. Support provided at The Link Café focuses on non-judgemental listening, encouraging self-belief and building self-esteem. The Link Café uses a unique approach of peer and voluntary support and commits to working with women for the long term, ensuring that ongoing difficulties are met with support. Testament to our methods of practice is that not one of the women visiting The Link Café has returned to their perpetrator or a new abusive partner.

We advocate for national strategies, such as the new VAWG Strategy to include pastoral and practical care for victims of domestic abuse. This allows for emotional needs and difficulties to be

---

<sup>4</sup> Women's Aid – *A Perfect Storm: The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on domestic abuse survivors and the services supporting them* (2020)

met, meaning women are less likely to return to abusive partners. Practical services offered are more effective if a victim accepts that they are worthy of support.

Most of the work carried out by The Salvation Army relating to domestic abuse is done in partnership with other agencies. Again, we believe that multi-agency working allows for experience and expertise to be sourced from several stakeholders. For instance, we have a representative on both the local Violence against Women and Girls practitioner group and strategy board. These positions allow us to participate in knowledge sharing and enables us to signpost women who come to us towards necessary services. Through these forums, we have worked hard to build relationships with local law firms, counsellors and other service providers in order to offer women a range of different services and advice and guidance.

The Salvation Army has increased its domestic abuse awareness training for employees and church leaders. This training highlights the need to refer to, and work with, more specialist agencies. The training has increased the network which can identify domestic abuse and act to protect victims. Church Leaders are trusted within communities and victims may be more likely to confide in them than in external agencies. We would therefore advocate for faith groups to be included in strategies for building awareness of domestic abuse and encourage domestic abuse training for congregational leaders of all faiths.

### **What are the difficulties for those facing harm in accessing services (for example, the justice system, healthcare, housing)? What needs to change?**

We have anecdotal evidence showing us that greater information is needed for domestic abuse victims to allow people to access legal advice, including how to best access Family Courts. To remedy this gap in knowledge, The Link Café has linked with local law firms which can provide necessary information to victims of domestic abuse. As it is the Link Café that refers victims to the law firms, the relationship is more likely to be trusted and acted upon. We argue that there is a need for greater availability of legal information relating to domestic abuse and what steps can be taken to access the justice system. This would include clarification on issues such as legal aid, in order to ensure cost is not a prohibitive factor in accessing justice.

We also see a lack of understanding about housing rights and access among victims of domestic abuse. As Sara's case study exemplified, many women are fearful of being without support when leaving domestic abuse situations. Some, as Sara had, have suffered negative experiences with local authorities before, which makes them less likely to make contact in the future. We believe it is essential for all members of statutory bodies, such as local councils, to participate in thorough training regarding the rights of domestic abuse victims. It is also necessary for domestic abuse victims to be classed in the highest priority group within re-housing schemes.

We work with victims of abuse who are unable to access relevant therapeutic services. Many of the women who attend The Link Café project face difficulties in receiving necessary support for traumatic emotional and mental health difficulties. This is an issue found throughout The Salvation Army's network of support for victims of domestic abuse. It is reported that victims of domestic abuse are three times as likely to possess depressive disorders, four times more likely to have anxiety disorders, and seven times more likely to have post-traumatic disorder.<sup>5</sup> We, therefore, advocate for greater access to mental health support for victims of domestic abuse. A system of

---

<sup>5</sup> Oram, Dr S. Khalifeh, H. Howard, L.M. – *Violence Against Women and Mental Health* (2016)

financial and practical support must also be offered in order to guarantee access to essential specialised care.

Many domestic abuse victims require high levels of practical assistance, as they often rely on low incomes or benefits. Low incomes can hinder progress in rebuilding lives and reaching a position of self-sustainability. Services working with victims of domestic abuse must be aware of this potential issue and continue to offer long term holistic support. The success showed by The Link Café in ensuring that 0% of service users return to abusive partners, demonstrates the ability to support those on low financial incomes. However, we argue that government financial support for domestic abuse victims must be greater, enabling them to live independently and build self-reliance.

### **Conclusions**

The threat of domestic abuse is ever-present in England and Wales. Unfortunately, this threat has been growing due to COVID-19. This submission has demonstrated the worsening effects of domestic abuse for those already with abusive partners and presented a case study which demonstrates the difficult situations faced by many.

The success of The Link Café's model offers a method of best practice to those agencies looking to support victims of domestic abuse. By offering long term support, services can encourage victims to approach other specialised agencies to gain essential help. This in turn ensures that victims do not return to abusive situations.

We believe that greater work is needed to inform people about their options and support networks when leaving domestic abuse. This would include an improved public information campaign about the scale of domestic abuse and a training campaign within statutory bodies to ensure consistent practice. We advocate for the new VAWG strategy to involve trusted figures within communities, such as faith leaders, to raise awareness of domestic abuse. It would also be beneficial for these leaders to take part in domestic abuse training. Such training has been undertaken by some Salvation Army faith leaders and has resulted in a much greater awareness among our networks.

Finally, we argue that greater financial support must be given for victims of domestic abuse. This would allow for them to maintain levels of independence which is vital in ensuring they do not become dependent on returning to abusive partners.