

# VOICES FROM LOCKDOWN:

A chance for change

INTERIM FINDINGS REPORT  
AUGUST 2020



With thanks to



The Pilgrim Trust



## About Agenda

Agenda, the alliance for women and girls at risk, is working to build a society where women and girls are able to live their lives free from inequality, poverty and violence. We campaign for women and girls facing abuse, poverty, poor mental health, addiction and homelessness to get the support and protection they need.

## Contents

Executive Summary	3
Introduction	21
1. The impact of COVID 19 and lockdown	24
1.1 Increase in demand and complexity	24
1.2 The impact of COVID 19 and lockdown spotlights on those at risk	27
2. Hidden need and barriers to support	34
3. Challenges in delivering support	39
4. Funding and sustainability	44
5. Innovations and positive learning	47
Conclusions and recommendations	55

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We currently face a fork in the road for our progress as a nation. COVID-19 has highlighted and exacerbated existing inequalities and the gap is widening on a daily basis. **But there is still time to act to prevent this situation worsening.**

Vital organisations supporting some of the most marginalised and disadvantaged women and girls face a perfect storm as lockdown eases, there is a risk of thousands of the most marginalised women and girls being left without support. With emergency funding ending and a surge in demand for their services, many organisations supporting women and girls are worried about how they will meet demand in the coming months.

The first three months of lockdown created more challenges in the lives of women and girls already experiencing multiple and intersecting disadvantages and made it more difficult for them to get help. Our research tells us that the scale of the problem is likely to be hugely underestimated and the organisations we spoke to expect a surge in demand as restrictions ease. Hidden and increasing demand, unsustainable funding and the stress facing staff working in these conditions means the future of a whole sector providing vital services hangs in the balance. **But there is still a chance to prevent that.**

The 'new normal' has meant doing things differently and our research highlights that this sector, those delivering services to the women and girls most in need, has stepped

## WOMEN AND GIRLS FACING MULTIPLE DISADVANTAGE

Women and girls facing multiple disadvantage experience a combination of complex and overlapping problems including homelessness, violence and abuse, substance misuse, mental ill health, poverty and contact with the criminal justice system.

For many women and girls, their experiences of disadvantage are often underpinned by a history of extensive violence and abuse. Women are ten times as likely as men to have experienced physical and sexual abuse during their lives, with one in 20 women affected. Of this group of women, more than half have a common mental health condition, one in three have attempted suicide, nearly half are in the lowest income bracket, a quarter have been homeless and a third have an alcohol problem.

up to the challenge – innovated, created and made sure they are at the heart of sustaining their communities.

In the next phase of our response to this crisis, the women's voluntary and community sector must play a key role as part of the UK's COVID-19 recovery strategy, drawing on the remarkable resilience, adaptability and innovation of these organisations.

# 1. THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 AND LOCKDOWN

## Key findings

Vital organisations supporting some of the most disadvantaged women and girls face a perfect storm as lockdown eases, leaving thousands at risk and without support

### 1.1 Increase in demand and complexity

The evidence from the research highlights two concerning trends; firstly, that more women and girls are in need of support; and secondly, that their needs are increasingly more complex and urgent.

As lockdown eases, these findings point to a perfect storm, where hidden and increasing demand, an increase in women and girls facing the most complex problems, and unsustainable funding combine. This is likely to be particularly concentrated for the quarter of organisations who did not think they could ride out this difficult time. **The risk of losing these grassroots, specialist, community organisations is sizeable**, with the thousands of women who rely on these organisations and are likely to need them even more in future, at risk of being left without support.

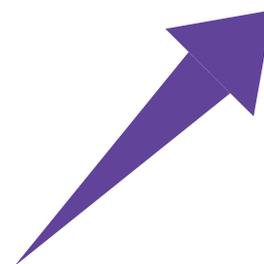
All organisations that had seen an increase in need were women-focused, many providing support programmes to children as well.

A third of these were young people's organisations, most focused on girls and young women.

## Demand



In the survey of organisations supporting women and girls facing multiple disadvantage, **63 per cent** stated that the demand for their services had increased.



Small organisations supporting less than 100 women per month prior to lockdown were most likely to have seen the **greatest increase in demand**.



By far the largest group of organisations that had seen an increase in demand were **those that provide support to women and girls experiencing domestic abuse**.

## Multiple and complex needs



**89 per cent of organisations** reported that the needs of the women they support have increased.

Where organisations commented on the impact of COVID-19 on the levels of support needed, of the 89 per cent who responded, 36 per cent named an increase in mental health needs and 26 per cent stated domestic abuse as a reason behind an increase of needs, this figure included online abuse. Even organisations that had not seen an increase in referral numbers had, instead, seen women with more complex needs, exacerbated by domestic abuse, isolation, anxiety and poverty.

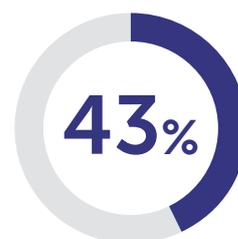


Women and girls being referred to services during lockdown have had higher levels of need, with **more urgent and complex cases**.

## Meeting the needs of women and girls



**44 per cent** of services reduced, closed or suspended service provision.



**43 per cent of services** during lockdown increased frequency or range of service provision, or both.

Most of the organisations that closed or suspended some of their services fell into one or more of the following categories:

- Housing
- Mental health support
- Services for women in the criminal justice system
- Those supporting women experiencing domestic abuse

**A quarter of respondents said they were not confident that they will be able to meet future demand for their services. Those respondents were most likely to be small organisations**, supporting less than 25 women per month, with an income of less than £50,000.

These organisations represent **vital services supporting some of the most marginalised and disadvantaged women and girls**. Organisations supporting refugee women and girls, working with children and young people, delivering specialist mental health support and providing domestic abuse support reported the lowest levels of confidence that they will be able to respond to an increased demand.

## 1.2 Spotlights on those at risk

### Domestic abuse and violence against women and girls

Limitations on women and girls' freedom have increased their vulnerability to violence and abuse, cutting them off from the people and places they would normally turn to for help. Our respondents highlighted the fact that necessary measures in lockdown, such as staying at home and having little contact outside your household, had increased violence and abuse in the home, economic abuse, coercion and control and homophobia from family members for some women and girls. Stalking was also highlighted as something that had been enabled by the conditions of lockdown.

Our survey highlighted that domestic abuse organisations were amongst those most likely to have reported an increase in demand for their support. These organisations have responded by providing women and girls with increased opportunities to access support programmes during lockdown.

### Girls and young women

The closure of schools, some forms of alternative education and youth centres has meant girls and young women have been increasingly at risk as the professionals that normally ensure their wellbeing are no longer able to support them. One known risk is that some girls will be trapped at home in abusive families or relationships. Girls and young women have been at increased risk of all forms of gender-based violence, abuse and exploitation and exposed to risks such as criminal activities being carried out by family members in the same home.

The suspension of the assessment duties in the Care Act has left many girls normally considered in need of care and support in high-risk situations. Further concerns raised with Agenda about girls' safety and wellbeing during lockdown include: an 'increased intensity' in cases of so-called honour-based abuse; an increase in referrals of girls at risk of child sexual exploitation; and girls who have been reported missing, do so for longer periods of time than before lockdown.

Serious case reviews make clear that overlooking the needs of girls in these types of situations has previously led to devastating consequences.



## **Mental health**

Both service providers and the women interviewed highlighted the severe impact of lockdown on women and girls' mental health, particularly increased isolation, loneliness, stress, anxiety, depression, self-harm and suicidal thoughts.

Concerns have been raised in particular about girls and young women and Black, Asian and Minoritised Ethnic (BAME) women as groups at high risk of poor mental health. The day-to-day activities used by women to improve their mental health, for example walking, socialising or attending peer support groups, have often been lost. This, combined with the sadly inevitable trauma and grief caused by the pandemic and the barriers women and girls have faced to accessing support, have led organisations to predict a dramatic surge in demand for mental health support as lockdown eases.

## **Poverty, destitution and homelessness**

The economic impacts of the pandemic have compounded pre-existing inequalities, with women, particularly young women, already more at risk of destitution than men and young men. Respondents reported significant challenges for the women they work with in accessing food and essentials, and food banks were not able to meet the increased demand. Services report refugee, asylum-seeking and migrant women as those hardest hit by increased poverty.

## **Women involved in prostitution and sex work**

Several services reported that destitution is driving some women in to 'survival sex'. They noted cases of women who sold sex in the past and have now felt forced to return to selling sex and others becoming involved for the first time. A decline in the number of 'clients' and closure of indoor establishments have led to a steep reduction in the income of women involved in sex work, putting them at risk of poverty and destitution. In areas without sufficient support in place, women involved in selling sex, particularly women involved in street sex work, have faced potential homelessness, problematic substance use and poverty as a result of the lockdown.

## 2. HIDDEN NEED AND BARRIERS TO SUPPORT

New barriers have emerged during lockdown, they include:

- **the closure and suspension of support organisations;**
- **moving programme delivery online and;**
- **women not wanting to 'be a burden' on services**

**These barriers are likely to have concealed hidden demand and led to an underestimation of the true impact the lockdown has had on the most vulnerable women and girls.**

Closure of the spaces where women access support has led to an under-reporting of need. **Evidence indicates that, as lockdown eases, there will be a surge in demand for support services.**

Wider research conducted by Agenda has shown the disproportionate impact COVID-19 has had on the already scarce number of specialist services led 'by and for' the communities they serve, such as Black, Asian and Minoritised Ethnic women and girls. Such organisations are tailored to meet the specific needs of their communities. Without them, **the most vulnerable women and girls face further marginalisation.**

Findings from the survey showed that not all women and girls have access to technology, felt comfortable or had enough confidence to use telephone or internet-based support. Women and girls living with perpetrators of violence and abuse and those living in overcrowded housing often did not have

access to a private and safe space to be in contact with organisations providing lifeline support.

### Hidden demand

These new barriers, compounding those already facing women and girls with multiple disadvantage, are likely to have concealed real levels of demand and need for services during lockdown.

Across most interviews, services highlighted a common concern that referrals since the start of lockdown do not give an accurate picture of the real levels of need and a prediction that this will lead to an increase in need in the autumn, as lockdown eases. Women often access services within school and working hours – away from their children and/or the perpetrators of abuse they live with. With schools being closed and women being locked down with perpetrators, they have lost vital opportunities to access support.

"[the service] expects to see an increase in women seeking support around mental health issues and [...] feel many [women] are currently just getting on with things, and when children return to school they may then have time to consider the impact of what they have been through during lockdown"

## 3. CHALLENGES IN DELIVERING SUPPORT TO THE MOST VULNERABLE WOMEN AND GIRLS

The survey and in-depth interviews highlighted the various challenges women's voluntary and community sector organisations have faced in delivering services during the pandemic.

### **Safeguarding**

Many organisations expressed their concern that remote working and reduced programme delivery during lockdown had presented significant safeguarding concerns for women and girls at risk.

### **Multiagency working**

Some organisations also reported that women and girls have been put at further risk by a breakdown in multi-agency working, as

well as poor communication from central and local government about changes in policy and direction during the crisis. Some respondents did, however, report better collaboration with statutory services, commissioners and partners in the sector during this period.

### **Impact on staff**

Increased demand, reduced capacity and managing experiences of vicarious trauma whilst working from home has had a negative impact on some members of staff working in women's specialist organisations. Insights from the survey show that professionals are concerned that staff are overstretched and are not receiving the normal support or supervision.



## 4. FUNDING AND SUSTAINABILITY

During the first months of lockdown, services supporting women and girls facing multiple disadvantage reported a drop in income. 33 per cent identified funding as the biggest challenge facing their service in three months' time.

Nearly half, 46 per cent, of organisations reported that their financial position during the lockdown had worsened. Of those organisations that saw their financial position worsen, 30 per cent were small providers, supporting less than 25 women a month, with an income of less than £50,000.

### Accessing emergency funding

Access to emergency funding for organisations in our study has been varied. Respondants were more likely to apply for, and be successful, in bids for emergency funding from trusts and foundations, compared with applications to central and local government funding. Smaller organisations earning less than £100,000 were least likely to have accessed any emergency funding from government, trusts and foundations or other forms of emergency funding.

By far the main barrier to accessing funding was a lack of capacity to write bids. This barrier was particularly widespread in organisations with an income of less than £50,000. Services that reported having furloughed staff in particular were not able to allocate adequate resources to fundraising. In the survey, many services reported that the emergency public funding process had been disorganised and had short deadlines, making accessing the funds difficult. Small organisations were particularly affected.

There were two further challenges that organisations experienced in terms of crisis funding: the short-term nature of funding and lack of core costs funding. Organisations saw three- or six-months crisis funding as unsustainable and resource intensive. Given that most crisis funding did not cover core costs, this was seen as a sticking plaster rather than a sustainable solution to help meet demand.



# 46%

of organisations reported that their financial position had worsened during the lockdown

## 5. INNOVATIONS AND POSITIVE LEARNINGS

Despite the challenges of lockdown, many of the changes to service delivery have been positive. Organisations in the women's voluntary and community sector adapted quickly and creatively to continue to meet the needs of the women and girls they support. Nearly half of organisations, 44 per cent, moved some services online and almost a third, 29 per cent, increased the range of support programmes they offered in the first months of lockdown.

Equally, women and girls have shown their incredible adaptability and willingness to embrace new ways of engaging with support programmes. For some women and girls, lockdown has created a window of opportunity to access support and make positive changes in their life.



29%

of organisations increased the range of support programmes they offered in the first months of lockdown

### Collaboration within the sector

A key trend that emerged from the survey and interviews was increased collaborative working within the sector. The majority of organisations we heard from saw an increase in multi-agency working with other voluntary organisations and some with local statutory agencies. This positive experience was not uniform, however, and some found that collaboration had reduced, particularly with criminal justice agencies and hospitals.

### New and improved ways to include and listen to small and rural organisations

Organisations felt that the increased accessibility created by moving professional and sector meetings online had facilitated information-sharing and built a more inclusive community within the women's voluntary and community sector. Online working meant that organisations, particularly those that are small and based remotely, were able to join area-wide or national meetings, something that had not previously been possible due to travel time and costs.

Respondents said this has raised the profile and increased awareness of their work, helped to build new referral pathways and opened up conversations with government and commissioning bodies.

Looking forward, organisations in the women's voluntary and community were motivated to continue these new ways of working and build on the collaborative approaches that had developed during lockdown.

## Digital innovation and accessibility

The importance of face to face work and emotionally and psychologically safe environments remains an essential element of support in the women's voluntary and community sector. The sector is moving into new ways of working and learning to utilise technology to improve value for money and reach.

Before lockdown, some organisations had been planning to introduce digital support services, which lockdown and emergency funding gave them impetus to kick-start. For example, some organisations introduced live chat online that has been widely taken up. Others, particularly those supporting young women, increased their presence on social media, used Instagram video sharing to share positive content, and enabled young women to create peer support opportunities to talk about the issues they are most concerned about. Moving services online, and expanding the range and frequency of support programmes, has required immense creativity around how to continue to engage women and girls in a meaningful way.

Online support programmes were reported to be more accessible for women with childcare responsibilities. The added layer of flexibility that digital and phone support provides makes it easier for women with children to access. These changes have also helped staff and the women and girls taking up the support to improve their digital skills.

These positive outcomes led 80 per cent of organisations to report that they anticipated retaining changes after lockdown eased. Of this group, 91 per cent anticipate these changes will include offering a blend of face-to-face and online services and giving staff more flexibility to work remotely in future.

## A 'window of opportunity' for the women and girls sector

For some women and girls, the disruption to their routine caused by lockdown has presented an opportunity to engage with support programmes. For example, an organisation supporting women involved in street-based sex work, suggested that some women are saying "this is an amazing opportunity; because I can't work, I'm going to get out."

One professional reflected that some of the women and girls they work with are actually thriving and feel for the first time they are not having to "jump through the hoops" of statutory services, especially probation and social services.

"This is an amazing opportunity; because I can't work, I'm going to get out."

woman involved in street-based sex work

## Researching the impact of lockdown on women and girls

This report focuses on the first three months of lockdown in the UK, from the beginning of lockdown, 23rd March 2020, until the end of June 2020. It identifies the needs and experiences of the most marginalised women and girls in the UK and the voluntary and community organisations that support them.

It provides insights collected from Agenda's online survey of 72 organisations working with women and girls at risk. These are combined with eight in-depth interviews with professionals from those organisations and interviews with the women and girls who use those support programmes whilst facing multiple disadvantages, interviewees we have identified as experts by experience.

Our research highlights the challenges faced by this specialist sector, as well as important learnings and innovations being developed. The report makes recommendations to ensure the most vulnerable women and girls are not left behind in the next stage of COVID-19 planning, and the innovative solutions being developed by the women's voluntary and community sector are capitalised on in the country's rebuilding.

## Methodology

We analysed data collected in June through an online survey of 72 geographically representative voluntary sector organisations providing support to women across a number of areas of need. Please see annex A for further details. The data was analysed using Tableau and R software.

Eight semi structured interviews with organisations and three with experts by experience were conducted over the phone or a digital video-calling platform. Interviews with organisations focused on four core themes:

- changes in client needs,
- changes to programme delivery
- financial situation and
- collaboration and future outlook.

Interviews with women were organised in three core themes:

- experience of the beginning of the lockdown,
- experiences and changes during the lockdown,
- access to support and future outlook.

Qualitative data was coded through NVivo software to develop themes and where possible match them with the themes developed from the survey responses. This research was complemented by additional desk based research of reports and evidence to support these research findings.

Agenda also held a round table discussion - 'Women on the Frontline' - with members in April to explore the emerging challenges they faced and had ongoing discussions with organisations as the crisis unfolded. Such submissions have also been included where they contribute to the depth of understanding in this report.

This interim report is the first of two reports. Agenda's Voices from Lockdown research will continue over the coming months to track the impact the crisis has had on both the specialist sector working with women and girls facing multiple disadvantage, as well as women and girls with lived experience of these issues.

## Acknowledgements

Agenda would like to thank Marija Antanaviciute, Lucy Russell and the women and organisations who kindly shared their experiences and expertise to make this research possible. We would particularly like to thank the following organisations: A Way Out, Safety for Sisters, The Angelou Centre, Beyond the Streets, Getaway Girls, Hibiscus, My Sister's Place and Lancashire Women, Nelson Trust, Changing Lives, Trevi House, Brighton Women's Centre, Leeds Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Forum, members of the Clink's women's networking forum, all organisations that completed the survey as well as those who took part in the April seminar.



## Introduction

Britain faces a fork in the road for our progress as a nation. COVID-19 has highlighted and exacerbated existing inequalities<sup>1</sup> and the gap is widening on a daily basis, but there is still time to act. Vital organisations in the women's voluntary and community sector supporting some of the most marginalised and disadvantaged women and girls face a perfect storm as lockdown eases, which could leave thousands of women at risk and without support. With emergency funding ending and a surge in demand, many organisations supporting women and girls are worried about how they will meet demand in the coming months.

With lockdown creating more challenges in women and girls' lives, and making it more difficult for them to get help, the scale of the problem is likely to be hugely underestimated. Our research tells us that organisations expect a surge in demand as restrictions ease. We are at a tipping point where a whole sector risks collapse, but there is still a chance to stop that. We must innovate and rebuild, and the women's voluntary sector can play a vital role in this.

The 'new normal' has meant doing things differently and our research highlights that this sector, those delivering support to the women and girls most in need, has stepped up to the challenge,

innovated, created and made sure they are at the heart of rebuilding communities as part of the UK's COVID-19 recovery strategy.

## Women and girls facing multiple disadvantage

Women and girls facing multiple disadvantage experience a combination of complex and overlapping problems including homelessness, violence and abuse, substance misuse, mental ill health, poverty and contact with the criminal justice system.

For many women and girls, their experiences of disadvantage are often underpinned by a history of extensive violence and abuse. Agenda research shows that women are ten times as likely as men to have experienced extensive physical and sexual abuse during their lives, with one in 20 women affected.<sup>2</sup> That's 1.2 million women in England alone.

Without support, the legacy of that trauma can lead women and girls to develop mental health problems, turn to drugs or alcohol to cope, or internalise their distress, for example through self-harming. Of those women who have experienced abuse, more than half have a common mental health condition, one in three have attempted suicide,

nearly half are in the lowest income tertile, a quarter have been homeless and a third have an alcohol problem.<sup>3</sup> Despite assumptions that these challenges are more likely to be faced by men, women make up 70 per cent of people experiencing homelessness, substance misuse, poor mental health and interpersonal violence and abuse simultaneously.<sup>4</sup>

## Women and girls facing multiple disadvantage

### Alison's Story

When Alison was placed in care aged 13, she struggled with her mental health: "My mum chose her boyfriend over me basically. I think because I thought no one loved me, I ended up self-harming. It was just taking the pain away from me."

Alison became pregnant aged 16 and traumatically lost her baby shortly before her 18th birthday. "So I think that just affected me, I got into bad relationships. [...] One day he proper battered me, he had a knife, he was slashing me. I had to run out in my dressing gown and shoes. I ran into town and that's how I became homeless".

Alison started to use alcohol to cope with the trauma she had experienced: "I started drinking really bad, because it just blocked everything out. I ended up turning into an alcoholic basically and I tried to kill myself."

Her unmet mental health needs led her to become in contact with the criminal justice system: "I ended up getting into trouble and being on warrants and all

that. I was an angry person, I fought a lot because I was angry against the world. I think it is harder for women, we're scared and we're ashamed."

"[...] It was like, where's the aftercare team now? They were nowhere to be seen. I got lost in the system really."

Despite these issues being connected, there is currently insufficient support available to women and girls that allows them to address all these intersecting issues at once. Organisations, such as those working to address homelessness or addiction, tend to be dominated by men and do not have the expertise or capacity to respond to the specific issues women and girls face. Previous research carried out by AVA and Agenda found that of 173 local areas in England and Wales, only nineteen had access to support for women facing multiple disadvantage which could address substance use, criminal justice contact, mental-ill health and homelessness in a holistic way.<sup>5</sup>

## Barriers to support and discrimination

### Gemma's Story

I moved to Hove about seven years ago because of domestic violence, and I've just kind of come into another form of abuse. I had 'n\*\*\*\*\* go home' written on the walls of my block. I had my neighbour's friends throwing stuff at my door."

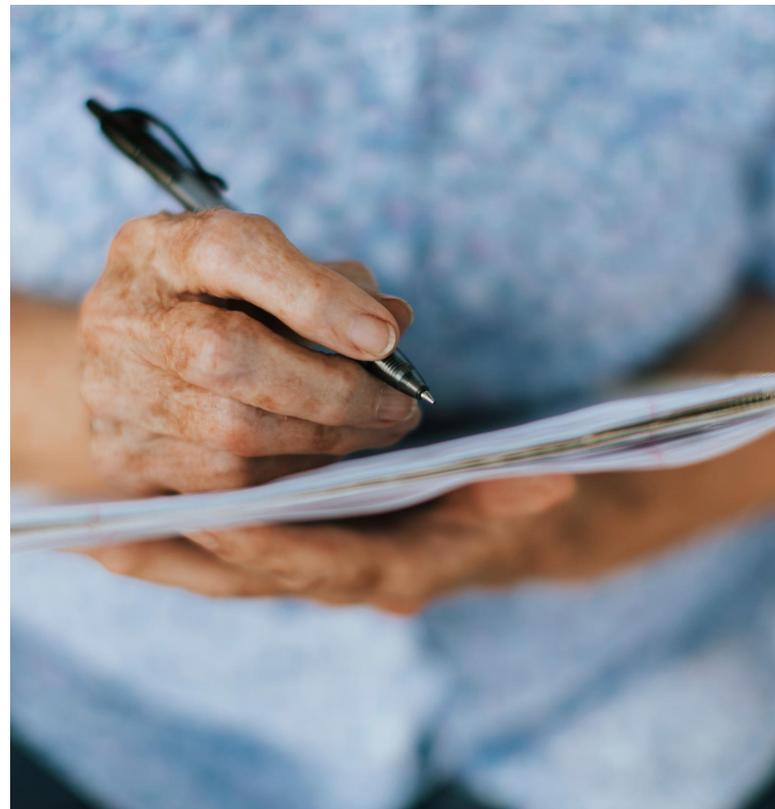
"I suffer from anxiety and depression. I was in my doctor's surgery one day and I saw this poster on the wall, 'Wellbeing'. I called up and made a referral myself."

"I was on the waiting list for the CBT. So, that was a long waiting list! [...] Later, the Wellbeing service offered me a counselling service, but it's about a year's wait. [...]"

Being 'signposted' can be horrible because they just give you a bunch of leaflets. If you have poor mental health and have learning difficulties, you may not be able to understand all the information."

"And a lot of these services that you try to get in contact with have some form of automated system. If you are feeling really anxious or low mood or whatever, you just want to hear a real person. You've got to go through all this stuff, and if you're not able to focus on one thing you end up – I ended up giving up."

Support programmes designed to address these issues individually, such as mental health programmes being disconnected from the criminal justice system, can even make bad situations worse, with women and girls not listened to, blamed or treated as a problem, turned away because their needs are considered too complex or retraumatised through practices such as restraint. If they are not given access to gender- and trauma-informed services, the problems women and girls experiencing multiple disadvantage face often become more complex, leaving them exposed to further traumatic events.



# 1. THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 AND LOCKDOWN

The pandemic and ensuing lockdown to control the spread of COVID-19, has exacerbated and laid bare the inequalities experienced by women and girls facing multiple disadvantage.<sup>6</sup> The crisis has not only intensified the problems women and girls have faced, and their resulting need to access support, but has also created new barriers to accessing vital support across the country – leading to organisations anticipating an increase in severe need in the months to come.

## Women reaching crisis

### Hannah's Story

“I have a history of abuse which led to problems with my mental health even when I was growing up. I developed anorexia in my late teens alongside depression, anxiety and what was later recognised as Emotionally Unstable Personality Disorder (EUPD). Over the past 11 years, I have been hospitalised on several occasions for my mental health, including one long-term admission where I was sectioned and detained under the Mental Health Act for my safety.”

Most support programmes, such as women’s centres and specialist services run ‘by and for’<sup>7</sup> the communities they serve, have been suspended or moved online during lockdown. Smaller organisations, already on the edge due to chronic underfunding, are facing existential threats, leaving many women without essential local support. However, as this report demonstrates, the sector supporting women and girls facing multiple disadvantage has adapted with remarkable flexibility and innovation. Their contribution to their community and wider public service infrastructure must be made central to a response that includes the women’s voluntary community sector as a core partner in all national and community responses.

## 1.1 Increase in demand and complexity

The evidence from the research highlights two concerning trends; firstly, it tells us that there are more women in need of support and secondly we can see that their needs are increasingly more complex and urgent.

## Demand

In the survey of organisations supporting women and girls with multiple disadvantage, 63 per cent stated that the demand for their support programmes had increased.

Small organisations supporting less than 100 women per month prior to lockdown were most likely to have seen the greatest increase in demand. All organisations that had seen an increase in need were women-focused, many providing support programmes to children as well. A third of these were young people's organisations, offering a range of support programmes such as mental health and housing. By far the largest group of organisations that had seen an increase in demand were those that provided support to women and girls experiencing domestic abuse.

## Multiple and complex needs

Referrals to the organisations we spoke to have been of women and girls with higher levels of need and with more complex cases that have had to be dealt with urgently. Organisations reflected that they had seen far fewer preventative or "early help" cases. The overwhelming majority of organisations, 89 per cent, reported that the needs of the women they support have increased.

Sixty nine per cent of organisations reported that the level of their support needs had increased a lot. Where organisations commented on the impact of COVID-19 on the levels of support needed, of the 89 per cent who responded, 36 per cent named an increase in mental health needs and 26 per cent stated domestic abuse as a reason behind an increase of needs. This figure included online abuse.

Even organisations that have not seen an increase in referral numbers had, instead, seen women with more complex needs, exacerbated by domestic abuse, isolation, anxiety and poverty.

## Meeting the needs of women and girls

To meet this increased demand over a quarter of organisations, 26 per cent, increased their service provision, for example, increasing the frequency they check-in with women and girls and more telephone support and group sessions.



**43%**

of organisations increased frequency or range of service provision, or both

In addition, 29 per cent of services increased the range of services provided, for example introducing online chat services for the first time. Overall, 43 percent of providers increased frequency of range of service provision, or both. Unfortunately, not all organisations were able to respond to increased demand. 44 per cent of services reduced, closed or suspended service provision. Most of the organisations that closed or suspended some of their services fell into one or more of the following categories:

- Housing and mental health support
- Specialist services for women in criminal justice system
- Those supporting women experiencing domestic abuse

The main service-user group that was particularly impacted was girls and young women, as well as women with multiple complex needs.

Not all organisations have been able to respond to increased demand. 74 per cent of services said they were either 'very confident' or 'somewhat confident' that they have been able to meet the demand for services during the lockdown.

A quarter of respondents said they were not confident that they will be able to meet future demands during lockdown.

These respondents were most likely to be small organisations, supporting less than 25 women per month, with an income of less than £50,000. Those organisations represent vital services supporting some of the most marginalised and disadvantaged women and girls. Organisations supporting refugee women, children and young people, providing specialist mental health and domestic abuse support reported the lowest levels of confidence that they would be able to respond to an increase in demand.

As lockdown eases, these findings point to the conditions for a perfect storm, where hidden and increasing demand, complex needs and unsustainable funding combine and become concentrated for the quarter of organisations in the sector that do not think they can ride out this difficult time. The risk of losing the smallest, community orientated part of the women's voluntary and community sector is sizeable. Thousands of women could be left at risk and without support.

**44%**

of services reduced, closed or suspended service provision.

## 1.2 THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 AND LOCKDOWN: Spotlights on those at risk

### **Spotlight on domestic and sexual abuse and violence against women and girls.**

Lockdown measures have exacerbated the abuse experienced by many women and girls. Our members reported in the survey that emergency measures restricting freedom of movement have put women and girls at greater risk by isolating them with the perpetrators of abuse and limiting their ability to safely access support. As well as the increased risk of violence, women and girls faced an increased risk of emotional abuse and/or coercion and control,<sup>8</sup> as well as other forms of abuse such as homophobic abuse from family members.<sup>9</sup>

Wider evidence from the violence against women and girls sector has highlighted shocking rates of increased domestic and sexual abuse since lockdown began in March.<sup>10</sup> At time of publishing, at least 30 women and girls have been reported to have been killed in suspected domestic homicides.<sup>11</sup>

In our survey, domestic abuse organisations were amongst those most likely to have faced an increase in demand for their support. They have responded by providing women and girls with increased opportunities to access services during lockdown.

Professional respondents described examples where perpetrators had manipulated women and girls' fears about contracting the virus in order to limit ability to access safety. Other examples highlighted to us were that lockdown restrictions facilitated stalking, as perpetrators who do not live with their victims knew where their victim was at all times. Similarly, necessary lockdown measures such as limiting social contact, not going to work and self-isolating at home amplified the economic abuse experienced by women, particularly for women at risk of losing already precarious work and women from communities where men customarily have complete control over household income.<sup>12</sup>

Services have also reported extremely concerning increases in sexual violence, much of which has gone unreported.

"I have experienced abuse and if I had to live with that person now, I would be in a permanent state of fight or flight, I may be suicidal. His rages would have been triggered by even more insignificant things and I would be doing everything to keep him happy."

- A woman with experience of domestic abuse

“In the 17 years of running the programme I have never experienced the outpouring of fear & distress from the women in the group that is being experienced now. Neither have I seen the continuous and continual numbers nor at the rate that women are referring themselves to our groups before.”

Service for women experiencing domestic abuse

## Spotlight on girls and young women

The closure of schools and youth centres has meant girls and young women have been increasingly at risk as the professionals that normally ensure their wellbeing are no longer able to spot safeguarding risks, or refer them to services. One known risk is that some girls will be trapped at home in abusive families or relationships. With limited ability to contact support, girls and young women, are at increased risk of all forms of gender based violence, abuse and exploitation and exposure to risk such as criminal activities by family members.

The suspension of the assessment duties in the Care Act<sup>13</sup> leaves many girls normally considered in need of care and support in high-risk situations. For young women experiencing the care system, turning 18 is already a time recognised as one in which they face a ‘cliff edge’ in support.

The current suspension of the duty to assess the needs of young adults as they turn 18 and transition to adult services - is of particular concern for young women already at risk. This may mean missed opportunities to identify risks and prevent poor outcomes.<sup>14</sup>

Specific risks around criminal activity were reported where children were placed in unregulated accommodation and may not know who to approach with problems, or in out-of-area placements where young women faced pre-existing challenges maintaining contact with family and friends.<sup>15</sup>

Further concerns were raised at a roundtable meeting hosted by Agenda in April 2020. Frontline women and girls’ organisations highlighted an ‘increased intensity’ in cases of so-called ‘honour’-based abuse during lockdown.<sup>16</sup> In the survey, one service provider reported there has been an increase of referrals of girls at risk of child sexual exploitation and girls who are reported missing, often meaning they are at very high risk of child sexual exploitation, do so for longer periods of time than before lockdown. Serious case reviews from child sexual exploitation incidents make clear that overlooking the needs of girls in these types of situations leads to devastating consequences.

“Where we are concerned that young women are living in overcrowded housing or where we have concerns about them being overheard, we are encouraging them to go for “walks” with their Young Women’s Worker. Speaking to them during their hour outside can provide a safe chance to communicate. [...] We continue to explore safety planning with young women [for example], if they turn up to a session wearing a certain colour, then this means that they aren’t safe to talk.”

A service-provider working with girls and young women reflects on how they have responded to the increased risk of abuse

## Spotlight on mental health

Both service-providers and women interviewed highlighted the severe impact of lockdown on their mental health, in particular describing concerns about increased isolation, loneliness, stress, anxiety, depression, self-harm and suicidal thoughts. At a time when women and girls require additional emotional support around loss, bereavement and trauma, many services have had to close or reduce support services.

Women and girls are already more likely to experience common mental health problems like anxiety and depression than men and boys, and young women are the most at risk group of experiencing poor mental health.<sup>17 18 19</sup> A handful of services in touch with Agenda reported a greater increase in rates of self-harm and suicide attempts amongst girls and young women than amongst adult women in the first month of lockdown.<sup>20</sup> Self-harm has also been identified as a particular risk for younger women by specialist services working with Black, Asian and ‘Minority Ethnic’ (BAME) women and girls.<sup>21</sup>

Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic (BAME) women are at particular risk of poor mental health: 29% Black women, 24% Asian women and 29% mixed-race women has a common mental health problem, compared to 21% White British women, and 16% ‘White other’ women.<sup>22</sup> One research study revealed that during the first month of the COVID-19 pandemic a higher frequency of abuse<sup>23</sup>, self-harm and thoughts of suicide/self-harm were reported among women, Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic (BAME) communities amongst other groups particularly at risk. <sup>24 25</sup>

During lockdown, BAME women and girls have experienced the cumulative impact of both the lockdown and the collective trauma of racism brought to the fore following the events that triggered an upsurge of the Black Lives Matter movement.

“It is a positive time in terms of change, but at the same time, it just brings back a lot of stuff around trauma and racism. And all those micro-aggressions that happen, that they have let go in their lives”.<sup>26</sup>

- An organisation working with black women and girls

Girlguiding findings reveal over half of girls aged 15 to 18 feel lockdown has had a negative impact on their mental health – amidst high levels of worry, stress and loneliness.<sup>27</sup> Agenda research has previously shown that poverty also has an impact on the mental health of girls and young women, with young women living in the most deprived households five times more likely to self-harm than those in the least.<sup>28 29</sup> While the links between poor housing and mental health are well-known, these have been particularly detrimental during the lockdown.

The pandemic has also reduced women and girls’ ability engage in activities that are positive for their mental health, our survey showed. Lockdown has hindered women and girls’ ability to socialise and access support through their peers and peer support groups.<sup>30</sup> It has forced women to change their routine, which may have been a source of stability in their lives, disrupting existing coping mechanisms. For many women, going outside is necessary to ensure safety and wellbeing, and for some, it is a part of their therapy.



“When lockdown started, it made me feel really sad and alone, I used to go to support groups regularly and see friends and lockdown totally stopped that for me, instantly fell into a black hole and felt alone and I lost my coping mechanism. My biggest challenge was probably not talking to anyone. Not getting a chance to speak to people in real life. I was supposed to start volunteering and do a course in becoming a support worker for women in [domestic violence] situations, I do hope to still do this but it’s been stopped due to lockdown.”

- Rebecca, a young woman who has survived sexual violence, reflects on her deteriorating mental health during lockdown

As a result of reduced services and long waiting lists for urgent support, services reported in the survey that they anticipate a significant surge in serious mental health cases as lockdown measures eased.<sup>31</sup>

"For me, being instructed to stay at home and told that you can't see anyone has taken away the purpose in my life and disrupted my entire routine. This feels a lot like being sectioned. The time I spent detained in the hospital was a particularly traumatic time for me and being reminded of it has caused increased flashbacks and negative thoughts and feelings. Due to reduced support, I now generally have to ride these out myself. Sometimes I have been able to do this positively but at other [times], I have returned to my maladaptive coping strategies."

– Hannah, a woman who has struggled with her mental health since she was young, reflects on feeling isolated during lockdown

## Spotlight on poverty, destitution and homelessness

The data from the survey and interviews highlighted how many women and girls have been pushed into poverty and destitution due to disrupted, already

precarious incomes, and lack of safe accommodation during the pandemic. The economic impacts of the pandemic have compounded pre-existing inequalities, with women – particularly young women,<sup>32</sup> already more at risk of destitution than men and young men.<sup>33</sup> Women make up a majority of statutorily homeless households in the UK.<sup>34</sup>

Increased hardship has forced some women to seek out payday loans<sup>35</sup> and has made them more vulnerable to financial exploitation, our survey found. Services across all specialisms noted an increase in demand for food packages and vouchers, clothing, sanitary and hygiene products. Services reported significant challenges for women they work with in accessing food and essentials, with food banks not able to meet the increased demand in the initial months of lockdown.<sup>36</sup>

Migrant women, asylum-seeking women and refugee women and their children are at particular risk of destitution, as many of have No Recourse To Public Funds (NRPF)<sup>37</sup>, no right to work and the limited support they can get, for example food vouchers, cannot be used to buy other essentials.<sup>38</sup> Many live in extremely unsafe conditions.

“Many women who have lost their usual source of income are ineligible for benefits (for example students and women with NRPF) and around London, the benefit cap impacts harshly on many who can claim. Women are not eating as they struggle to feed their children and are falling into debt. The high cost of living means that, without a very significant uplift in the minimum wage, this debt is unlikely to be payable in the future. Women and girls [...] are in poor quality accommodation (mostly people who have arrived in UK within the past 10 years) are living with shocking levels of hazard and illegal evictions continue, unchecked, as already-overstretched local government officers have not been operating as usual during 'lockdown'. In short, conditions we might think of as 'Nineteenth Century' are not uncommon in Twenty-First Century London”

- An advice and advocacy charity in the London region

This puts many women and girls, and particularly women and girls with NRPF, at risk of homelessness.<sup>39</sup> The lockdown has further exposed gaps in temporary accommodation provision and homelessness shelters across the country, particularly for migrant and asylum-seeking women<sup>40</sup> with No Recourse To Public Funds, women fleeing domestic abuse and women with complex needs, such as mental health needs or substance dependency.<sup>41</sup>

We already know that being homeless or in unsecure accommodation puts women and girls at greater risk of exploitation and abuse. The pandemic has exacerbated these risks. The mixed emergency accommodation made available at the start of lockdown to people who were rough sleeping, such as mixed hotels and hostels, were often inappropriate and unsafe for women, and do not take into account women's specific requirements. Research has shown that male-dominated accommodation is not safe for homeless women who are likely to have experienced male violence.<sup>42</sup> As a result, many women are likely to be among the 'hidden homeless', sleeping out of sight for safety and avoiding male-dominated accommodation where they are at risk of sexual violence, or remaining at risk in abusive relationships or exploitative situations just to keep a roof over their heads.<sup>43</sup>

“I have serious health conditions that mean it would be particularly dangerous for me to catch the virus. For a week during lockdown, I slept on buses. I went from one side of London to the other, because it was free to travel on the bus then. I would like the government to respect us, let us be safe and treat us with dignity as human beings.”

- Lo Lo, an asylum-seeking woman who was hidden homeless in London during lockdown

as quoted in Hear Us, a report by Women for Refugee Women

## Spotlight on women involved in prostitution and sex work

The lockdown has put women in sex work particularly at risk of poverty and destitution. Services report that the decline in the number of ‘clients’ and closure of indoor establishments have led to a steep reduction in women’s income and other means of survival have become unviable, such as begging or shoplifting. At the same time, some services report that destitution is driving some women in to ‘survival sex’, with some forced to return to selling sex, and others becoming involved for the first time.<sup>44</sup>



“We have seen a significant increase in the vulnerability of women sex-working [...] due to an increase in the price of drugs, lack of opportunity to fund their addiction through reduction in punters, increase of sexual violence because some dangerous perpetrators recognise this vulnerability and the reduction in support. For example, one woman who would usually beg for money decided to turn to sex working due to lack of passers by. She was raped.”

- Organisation working with women involved in sex work

In areas where there is not sufficient support in place, women previously involved in selling sex, particularly women involved in street sex work, face potential homelessness, destitution and problematic substance use as a result of the lockdown.<sup>45</sup>

## 2. Hidden need and barriers to support

From our work across the sector, conducted prior to lockdown, we know that women and girls experiencing multiple disadvantage face many barriers to accessing the support they need. AVA and Agenda's Breaking Down the Barriers<sup>46</sup> report, found that too often, women are bounced between or even turned away from services. Mothers are particularly let down, with the fear of losing their children preventing them from accessing help

The evidence in section one tells us that women and girls are not only experiencing a greater Intensity and complexity of need, but are also facing new barriers to support as a result of the pandemic.

These new barriers are likely to conceal the scale of the problems facing women and girls, and lead to an underestimation of the true impact the lockdown has had on the most vulnerable women and girls. In particular, closure of the spaces where women get support and are able to self-refer, such as women's centres, has led to a decline in self-referrals by women and referrals from other agencies. Such evidence indicates that, as lockdown eases, women will start to feel more able to ask for help, leading to an increase in need for support that not all services are confident they can meet.<sup>47</sup>

### Closure and suspension of services

The survey found that 38% of services had to reduce their provision. The principal reasons cited were shortage of staff, funding or inability to transfer services to online provision.

Most organisations that closed or suspended some of their services provide housing or mental health support as well as specialist services for women in criminal justice system and experiencing domestic violence.

"It's more difficult to join the online zoom calls, and because there's a 40 minute timer there's a limited amount of time to talk. I used to go to them twice a week and victim support once a week and [see] someone from complex needs every week too. So lockdown has stopped me from using a lot of services, [...] It's hard to get seen with victim support and my employment coach because there's so much demand and they can't provide 1 to 1 support at the moment."

-Rebecca, a young woman who has survived sexual violence

Wider research<sup>48</sup> has shown the disproportionate impact COVID-19 has had on the already scarce<sup>49</sup> number of specialist services led 'by and for' the communities they serve, including has services led by and for Black, Asian and Minoritised Ethnic women, women with disabilities, migrant and refugee women and LGBTIQ women. Such organisations are tailored to meet the specific needs of their communities. Without them, the most vulnerable women and girls face further marginalisation. For example, research conducted in April found that close to 90 per cent of 137 BAME-led organisations who responded to the survey were at risk of closing permanently within months.

Prior to lockdown, evidence told us that many women and girls from minoritised communities do not feel comfortable or are not able to access support from statutory services or mainstream women's services, which often do not have the specialism, capacity or cultural understanding to meet their needs.<sup>50 51</sup> Evidence collected during lockdown reinforces this.<sup>52</sup>

## Moving services online

While some services have stopped altogether, others have moved online. The survey found that 86 per cent of organisations reported changing their services in response to the lockdown. For a majority, 76 per cent, this change meant moving some or all services online.

While this allowed some services to boost engagement with certain groups of women and girls (explored more in the fifth section of this report), other services have found this has led to the most disadvantaged women and girls not being able to access support.

For example, not all women cannot afford mobile data to join online counselling and peer-support meetings.<sup>53</sup> Some women and girls do not have any WiFi connectivity in their home, or the necessary digital skills to be able to access online services. Women with disabilities are disproportionately likely to face barriers to being digitally included, with not all online services designed to meet all service-users' needs, including women and girls who are dependent on assistive technology to access digital services.<sup>54</sup>

"A significant challenge for young women is that a number of services are not running as usual. [...] We are concerned that there is a barrier for young women who don't have access to Wi-Fi/ data in accessing their network and support services, which means that they aren't able to be involved in decisions regarding their care. This also leaves them isolated from their families and peers."

- Organisation working with girls at risk of the criminal justice system

"Digital inequality is a massive barrier that we have found in women accessing support. A quarter of service-users don't have access to a phone [...] Women also don't have access to training without smartphones as they can't access zoom or virtual training webinars. Funding to allow women to have access to phones and WiFi would be very welcome."

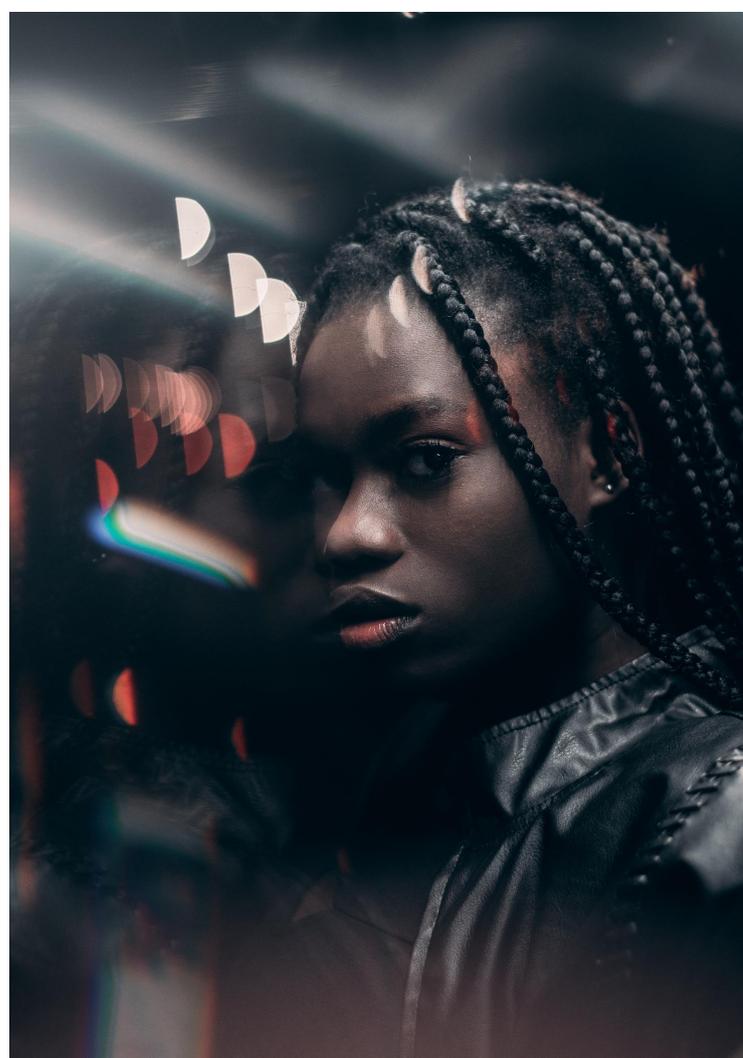
- Organisation working with Black and minoritised ethnic women and girls

Findings from the survey showed that not all women and girls felt comfortable or safe using telephone services or internet-based support. Women and girls living with perpetrators of violence and abuse and those living in overcrowded housing<sup>55</sup> often did not have access to a private and safe space to be in contact with services.<sup>56</sup>

"And it's really tricky to support women in [a domestic abuse] situation. Because essentially you can't tell her "come and see me", there will be a safe space for us to talk about your issue without your perpetrator being next to you."

- Organisation working with women in contact with the criminal justice system

Women and girls who speak little or no English are also less likely to be able to access online support and advice. Translation and interpretation services that had been available in community settings have not been as readily available during online interactions.



## Case study: Language barriers as new barriers

Hibiscus Initiatives (Hibiscus) is a voluntary sector organisation working to support and empower vulnerable Foreign Nationals (FNs), Black, Minority, Ethnic and Refugees (BMER) - primarily women - who are affected by the criminal justice system and immigration restrictions.

In an interview conducted as part of this research, Hibiscus highlighted language barriers as a new barrier to reaching service-users that has emerged since the start of lockdown.

“Language support is a big [barrier]. Because even though our staff speak certain languages, we’re all working on our separate projects. So sometimes it’s difficult to arrange the calls and things like that.”

“Hibiscus has been hit because we don’t necessarily have the funding for interpretive services. We would always rely on staff who speak certain languages, or we would rely on the volunteers coming in person and then translate. That avenue was closed for us.”

## ‘Not wanting to a be a burden’

Insights from the survey and interviews with experts by experience reveal that a barrier for women and girls accessing services during the pandemic is their fear they will be a burden on services, compounded by stigma that doing so is ‘selfish’ at a time when everyone was being encouraged to ‘play their part’ to save lives by staying at home.

In an extremely concerning example, one service-provider reported in the survey that women and girls who were self-harming were not accessing physical health care for self-harm due to feelings of guilt about being a burden on health services, and not feeling welcome or being told they could not attend mental health services due to change in provision.[55]

## Saima’s experience of lockdown

Saima is a woman who has previous experience of homelessness, sexual violence and domestic violence. She has been suffering with PTSD and has a number of medical concerns that required her to shield during the lockdown.

Being stuck in the house and having to rely on other people to bring her food and shopping, brought back her eating disorder.

"I'm not someone who likes to ask," says Saima, admitting that there were times during the lockdown when she was out of food and essentials because she did not want to ask for help. "I am anxious about asking for help if and when I need it as I know many, many people are struggling right now also and I don't want to be a burden on anyone."

Saima's housing situation was a source of additional stress: her bedroom had a leak through the roof and has had mice infestation for nearly a year. These issues were not solved by the housing association up until few months into the lockdown. "And when I phone them up, they're going, 'you're selfish... we're all in this together, and you're being really selfish, and you need to go away and sort it out yourself'," – Shakila said referring to her experience with the landlord. She did not have spare money to sort out the issues herself and had to resort to the housing ombudsmen. This took many calls and letters during the lockdown before her housing issues were looked at, causing her additional stress and anxiety.

Feelings of being a burden, and feelings of shame and guilt are leading to a further deterioration in women and girls' mental health during lockdown, services reported.

"I feel guilty that I am not doing something to help with the 'war effort'. However, whilst I would love to do something useful like volunteer, right now my anxiety levels are so high that I struggle to leave the house to do my essential food shop."

-Hannah, a woman with experience of abuse and poor mental health.

## Hidden demand

These new barriers, compounding those already facing women and girls with multiple disadvantage, are likely to have concealed real levels of demand and need for services during lockdown.

Across most interviews, services highlighted a common concern that referrals since the start of lockdown do not give an accurate picture of the real levels of need and a prediction that this will lead to an increase in need in the autumn, as lockdown eases. Women often access services within school and working hours – away from their children and/or perpetrators of abuse they are living with. With schools closed, and women locked down with perpetrators, they have lost vital opportunities to access support.

Once lockdown has eased, many services anticipated having to respond to a wave of women and girls coming forward for support, with problems that have become more serious during lockdown. For example, one organisation said “[the service] expects to see an increase in women seeking support around mental health issues and [...] feel many [women] are currently just getting on with things, and when children return to school they may then have time to consider the impact of what they have been through during lockdown.

“We don't know yet what the impact has been on women, and beyond those that have been able to contact us and talk to us.”

– Organisation supporting women experiencing domestic violence

76%

of services have been forced to move all or some of their services online

### 3. Challenges in delivering support to the most vulnerable women and girls

The survey and in-depth interviews highlighted the various challenges organisations working with the most vulnerable women and girls have faced with delivering services during the pandemic. The key concerns related to safeguarding and engagement, collaboration and communication with statutory services and other agencies, the impact of remote working on staff and uncertainty about the future.

#### Safeguarding and outreach

With 76% of services forced to move all or some of their services online, and 38% of services having to close or suspend some services, many organisations expressed concern that remote working and reduced services during lockdown presented significant safeguarding concerns for women and girls. Lockdown has meant many services have had to close or suspend drop-in centres and outreach work, meaning many women and girls who do not yet have contact with services are left to ‘fly under the radar’.

A key challenge has been the difficulty of doing welfare checks and outreach during lockdown, and maintaining contact with women and girls remotely.

“Dealing with the request over the phone is much more difficult than it is in person, because you don’t necessarily know where the person is, you don’t see how they are, how they’re feeling.”

- A service-provider supporting women and girls in contact with or at risk of the criminal justice system

In addition, the emergency suspension of the Care Act has meant those normally assessed as needing support from local authorities have not received essential lifelines, and further assessments have not taken place, leaving women and girls at further risk.<sup>58</sup>

“Young women are also reporting that they often feel safer out of the house. This is because the harm that they are experiencing is occurring in their home or because they are concerned that other people know where they live and that being there would therefore make them a target for abuse/ harm. We are concerned at the number of young women who are not being seen regularly by anybody and are living with a perpetrator or a person of concern.”

- A service-provider working with young women and girls at risk from at risk of violence, exploitation, and abuse

While not all services have had to close or suspend outreach services, others report that outreach to new and existing service-users has been much harder under lockdown.

“No face-to-face sessions means women have to ensure they have a safe space to talk without being overheard on Zoom or the telephone. It’s more difficult now as lockdown means [women’s] families/ children/ partner are home. It is becoming harder to reach women.”

- A service-provider supporting women with their mental health and wellbeing

## Multi-agency working

Women and girls were also reported to have been put at further risk by a breakdown in multi-agency working and poor communication from central and local government to local organisations about key policy developments. Experiences have been varied, however, with some services reporting far better collaboration with statutory services, commissioners and partners in the sector during the crisis.

## Spotlight on the criminal justice sector

Insights from the survey and roundtable Agenda hosted have shown that voluntary organisations working in the criminal justice sector have

“experienced a breakdown in multi-agency working and communication with statutory services and government. Emergency measures have not been developed or implemented with sufficient consultation with local services who should have been key to their design and delivery. The planned early release and usual releases of women from prisons has been a key example. Services reported in the roundtable not knowing when or where women were being released from custody, putting them at greater risk of homelessness, substance misuse, destitution and abuse by perpetrators.

This evidence is supported by findings from a survey by Clinks of voluntary organisations working in the criminal justice sector.<sup>59</sup>

This found that service-providers had found supporting people being released from prison became significantly more challenging during lockdown, with organisations raising concerns about people being released without their basic needs being met, for example being given a mobile phone to be contactable. Several service-providers reported not having been able to make contact with people prior to release to support them with the transition.

“Within prisons there is lots of confusion. Women are being told they’re going to be released [from prison], but then they are not being released. It is having an impact on [women’s] wellbeing.”

-Organisation working with women in contact with the criminal justice system

This challenge was also reported by other organisations working with women and girls facing multiple disadvantage.

“Working with statutory bodies has been challenging due to changes in their service delivery model, for example reduced mental health services and a move to online and specifically changes to protocols and procedures (social services) such as child protection and children taken into care which is having a particularly negative impact on women.”

- Organisation working with women and girls who have experienced trauma

“We have not been able to offer housing rights sessions/ training/ meetings with renters and, as meetings with Council committees and officers have been postponed, a very significant strand of work has been delayed.”

- An information and advocacy organisation working with women who are vulnerable to harm in the private rented sector

“Communication between services continues to be a challenge and not being given current information; for example a woman was discharged from hospital last week and her link worker was not made aware until two days later.”

-Organisation working with women and girls who face multiple disadvantage

Imkaan’s (2020) survey during lockdown of organisations led by and for Black and minoritised women found that service-users of services that are not already commissioned by local authorities are particularly disadvantaged by a lack of communication from local and central government.

“Food banks were set up by [local authorities] but we were not informed - only the commissioned services were, we have been told by someone else that housing is having a weekly panel but we are not seen as a priority as we are not a commissioned service.”

-Organisation in a BAME specialist women’s organisation

As quoted in Dual Pandemics: The Impact of the Two Pandemics: VAWG and COVID-19 on Black and Minoritised Women and Girls

## Impact on staff

Increased demand, reduced capacity and working from home have had a negative impact on some members of staff working in women’s specialist organisations. Insights from the survey show that service-providers are concerned that staff are overstretched and not receiving the support they normally would.

The additional pressure from increase in demand has been compounded by staff shortages, with many staff ill and/or furloughed. Combined with the extra workload of adjusting services, reviewing policies and safeguarding procedures in response to changed delivery, many organisations reported in the survey that there has led to reduced delivery capacity in real terms.

“Our helpline has gone from four times a week to three times a week, as we cannot meet capacity for four times a week.”

-A domestic abuse and mental health support provider

“The demands, the need is there - but the delivery, the capacity, has definitely dropped”.

-Organisation supporting women trapped in street sex work

In the survey, service-providers reported that delivering services remotely, online and over the phone takes longer on average, particularly where taking statements or gathering evidence is involved.

“Group work is now being done on a one-to-one basis meaning that it takes longer, more staff hours, more resources and costs more. Doing remote Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARACs) and Front Door Hub meetings meaning it takes longer for professionals to share.”

-Organisation supporting women trapped in street sex work<sup>60</sup>

Increased workloads, having to juggle competing demands whilst working remotely, added personal stress about health and home schooling, and lack of peer support have negatively impacted on staff wellbeing. Many staff and peer support workers in women’s organisations are also carers, mothers and often victims/survivors of abuse in their own right. Insights from the survey show support workers commonly found it challenging to deliver support to vulnerable women in a home environment, where there is no separation between work and home life. This could lead to further experiences of vicarious trauma, with limited opportunities to manage or process this safely, for example through clinical supervision.

“How do you hang up that phone at 5 or 5.30pm and then go downstairs and make your tea? It’s just not comfortable, it’s not okay that [staff are] not able to switch off, not able to put the work down at 5-5:30, which they normally would.”

-Organisation supporting women with experience of domestic abuse

“The lack of separation from work and home and the trauma that [staff] carry, I would say is the biggest issue. So there’s a really big concern over wellbeing; the stress levels have gone up, because the structures that we had that were sufficient, are no longer there when [staff are] working from their home, and a lot can’t handle it”

-A service-provider supporting women supporting women who at risk of sexual exploitation.

## 4. FUNDING AND SUSTAINABILITY

“During the first months of lockdown, services supporting women and girls facing multiple disadvantage reported a drop in income. We asked organisations what they thought would be the biggest challenge facing their service in six months’ time. Thirty three per cent identified funding. The survey showed that a majority of services (67%) that reported not being confident about their long-term sustainability had an annual income of less than £1 million.

Nearly half (46%) of organisations reported that their financial position during lockdown had worsened. Of those organisations that saw their financial position worsen, 30 per cent were small providers, supporting less than 25 women a month, with an income of less than £50,000. This was most frequently reported by services supporting refugee and migrant communities, and those supporting girls and young women. Services supporting young people in contact with or at risk of the criminal justice system also reported that they felt in danger of failing to maintain financial sustainability

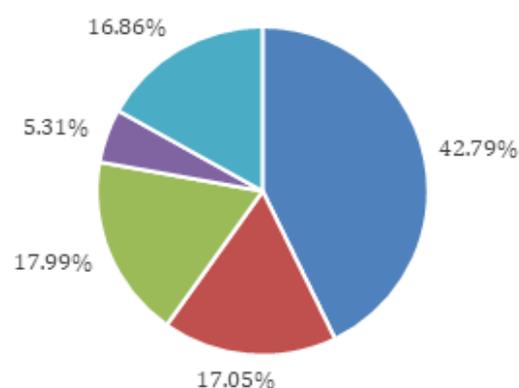


### Accessing emergency funding

Access to emergency funding for organisations in our study has been varied. Those working with women and girls facing multiple disadvantage were more likely to apply for, and be successful, in bids for emergency funding from trusts and foundations, compared with applications to central and local government funding. Smaller organisations earning less than £100,000 were least likely to have accessed any emergency funding from government, trusts and foundations and other forms of emergency funding.

Only 34 per cent of organisations that applied for emergency funding from central and local government were successful, with just over half of successful applicants having received the money by June 2020.

### Accessing government's funding



- My organisation has applied for this type of funding
- My organisation has received money from this type of funding
- My organisation is planning to apply for this type of funding
- My organisation's bid for this type of funding has not been successful
- My organisation's bid has been successful, but has not yet received the money

Only 45 per cent of organisations that applied for central government funding were successful, and of that group, just over half had received the money by June 2020. The success rate was slightly higher for those who applied to local government funding pots, with 61 per cent of those who applied for local authority emergency funding having been successful. Local authorities were also quicker in getting the money to the organisation, with 88 per cent having received the money by June 2020. The majority of those who received local authority funding, medium-sized organisations with income between £100,000-£1,000,000.

By way of comparison, 54 per cent of organisations that applied for emergency funding from trusts and foundations were successful, with 75 per cent receiving the money by June 2020. When calculated to include local authority funding, funding from trusts and foundations still accounted for almost half (46 per cent) of the money that successfully reached organisations by June 2020, suggesting that charitable trusts, rather than government funding, have been a financial lifeline for services supporting women and girls. Organisations also reported running successful emergency appeals and receiving donations from corporate donors or local trusts.

By far the main barrier to accessing funding was a lack of capacity to write bids. This barrier was particularly widespread in organisations with an income of less than £50,000, across multiple specialist services.<sup>64</sup> Those services that had to furlough staff were not able to allocate adequate resources to fundraising. In the survey, many services reported that the emergency public funding process has been disorganised, and short deadlines made accessing the funds difficult, lacking a

dedicated member of staff to work on fundraising, while already overstretched delivery staff did not have any capacity for writing bids.

“Whilst we have been successful in accessing funds the deadlines have been very short and we have had to draw on all of our resources to write bids including using freelance bid writers who we have worked with previously. I cannot imagine how a smaller organisation could realistically cope with the speed required to apply for funding. We have used our partnership model to secure funding and include our smaller partners.”

-Organisation supporting women and girls

“We have spent a huge amount of time bidding in competitive processes and very little funds have come down, and those that have been very late and not well coordinated. It is interesting to me that businesses were able to access a quick grant with ease very early on. Are charities considered less trust worthy than businesses?”

- Organisation supporting women and girls affected by affected by domestic abuse and violence

## Case Study: Uncertain future for specialist 'by and for' services

The Angelou Centre is a black-led women's community organisation providing specialist support to black and minoritised women and girls. In an interview conducted as part of this research, the Angelou Centre expressed their concerns over lack of long-term funding and high demand.

"We have had a lot of covid response funding, but only short term, e.g. 6 months. We're really trying to think about how to continue to be sustainable as the funding landscape will be different."

There were two further challenges that organisations experienced in terms of crisis funding: the short-term nature of funding and lack of core costs funding. Organisations saw three - or six - months crisis funding as unsustainable and resource intensive in terms of writing bids, particularly small organisations. Given that most crisis funding did not cover core costs, this was seen as a sticking plaster rather than a sustainable solution to help meet demand. In addition, with funders focusing on crisis funding, a lot of long-term funding streams have been hold. As a result, those whose contracts or funding periods end at the end of 2020 or the beginning of 2021 anticipate struggling to find funding for their core activities and costs thereafter.

"Our current funding ends in 2021 and the current situation makes me uncertain about how the funding landscape will look in six months' time, beyond emergency funding."

-A service-provider supporting women affected by the criminal justice system and multiple disadvantage

## 5. Innovations and positive learnings

Our research found that many of the changes to service delivery and access made in response to the lockdown have been seen to be positive. For example, in Section 1.2 we heard from a staff member working with girls at risk who had, during the strictest stage of lockdown, agreed with the girls that their allocated daily exercise was done with a youth worker to check in and risk assess their situation as necessary. This work included safety plans with the girls, encouraging them to communicate whether they were safe to talk or not based on what they wore that day.

### Adapting and responding to the crisis

Services have adapted quickly and creatively to continue to meet the needs of the women and girls they support. The survey shows that 80% of service-providers anticipate retaining some of the changes they have implemented since lockdown began, even after lockdown measures are eased. Nearly half of services, 44 per cent, moved some services online, and 40 per cent moved to other activities. Almost a third 29 per cent increased the range of services they offered in the first months of lockdown.

Equally, women and girls have shown their incredible adaptability and willingness to embrace new ways of engaging with services. For some women and girls, lockdown has created a window of opportunity to access support and make positive changes in their life.

### Case study: Services squeezed but immensely resilient

The Nelson Trust works to ensure that people with alcohol and substance misuse problems are given the best possible opportunity for a healthy and fulfilling life by providing them with professional treatment, support and resettlement programmes in a gender-responsive and trauma-informed way.

“The financial implications will present on many fronts. We know economic uncertainty and distress leads to an increase in the types of challenges our clients face. A reduction in or the disappearance altogether of some of these funds make it impossible for organisations like ours to offer the same rewards to staff who continued to deliver services throughout the lockdown.”

“Staff continued with assertive outreach to street sex workers, helped domestic abuse victims navigate a route to safety and delivered food and essential medication to individuals who had to shield.

They helped fill the void created by those organisations which reduced and closed cases and in some instances closed down altogether, for example by taking referrals from the police of women experiencing distressing mental health episodes.”

“Without support, the future could hold a further squeeze on the voluntary sector with more and more organisations spending more time and energy on surviving rather than delivering support and services with purpose. When organisations are solely focused on their own survival it means less time for partnership work, less time for reflection on impact, less knowledge to inform innovation and ultimately less support for those who need it.”

## Collaboration within the sector

While the experiences of the women’s voluntary and community sector were not uniform, a key trend that emerged from the survey and interviews was the increased collaborative working within the sector. Although collaboration with statutory partners reduced in areas, particularly in the criminal justice system and hospitals, the majority of organisations saw an increase in multi-agency working with other voluntary organisations and some with local statutory agencies

The increased accessibility created by moving meetings online has facilitated information-sharing and building an inclusive community within the women’s voluntary sector.

Organisations, particularly those that are small and based remotely, were able to join area-wide sector meetings, something that was impossible before due to travel time and costs.

“One of the barriers that we had before was about connecting, and we’ve just proved that Zoom, in a regional sense, has been hugely useful.”

– A senior member of staff reflected on a regional network of organisations supporting women

“We have definitely seen a much more open, honest communication, a huge amount of shared learning across the sector, just in terms of how some of the infrastructure organisations have opened up a lot of their resources and their learning.”

– Organisation supporting women experiencing domestic violence

## Case Study: Working together to build understanding

The Angelou Centre is a black-led women's community organisation providing specialist support to black and minoritised women and girls. In an interview conducted as part of this research, The Angelou Centre shared the ways in which their organisation has been collaboratively working with other specialist black women's organisations to share expertise, support one another and adapt to the fast changing ways of working.

"We have been working really closely with the black feminist sector throughout the pandemic via different means, sharing practice, policy etc. on the demand they are under and understanding how they are doing things, capacity building as there's been a massive increase in police calling for support and advice to work with black minoritised women. I feel hopeful about the future of specialist organisations due to collaborative working between organisations and efforts of capacity building."

As set out earlier in this report, respondents' experiences of statutory partnerships during the first months of lockdown were mixed. While some services reported reduced collaboration, others reflected that formal engagement

with local statutory agencies had increased and that there were new opportunities to take part in strategic national meetings. A general theme across responses was that the move to meeting online meant more people and services can take part, whereas previously there were transport, location and other physical barriers. This has the potential to have a significant impact on rural organisations in particular.

The joined up working was also credited as a response to a crisis working mode that some of the women in need of support required. Feedback told us that taking part in such meetings has raised the profile and increased awareness of women's voluntary and community organisations, helped to build new referral pathways and opened up conversations with government for some. Some organisations reported having had better opportunities to become connected to commissioners than they were before. Multi-agency working to deal with complex cases was highlighted particularly as becoming easier.

"We are suddenly in great demand to inform public health responses and connecting with groups we have not been able access before at commissioning level."

- A service-provider supporting women and girls affected by self-harm, trauma and abuse

“During the lockdown period we increased contact with a range of professionals and ensured key worker links in relevant agencies such as the homelessness outreach service, the City Council, drug & alcohol/ probation/housing providers/ Job Centre/ mental health and Adult Social Care.”

–Organisation supporting women experiencing domestic violence

“We have generally found that there has been better joined up working, with other agencies being easier to communicate with. An example is one person we support has a partner who is abusive to her; he was coming out of prison in May and has an indefinite restraining order but is aware of her address and it has been a long process to get to a stage where she may be moved. Whilst this has been difficult, it has been felt that the safety planning process has been much smoother than when services were working face-to-face prior to COVID-19.”

–Organisation supporting women facing multiple disadvantage

This level of collaborative multi-agency work was something that many organisations have been working towards for a long time, prior to lockdown. Across the specialisms, organisations were clear that they wanted to maintain the progress and momentum and continue the new ways of working and collaborative approaches that have developed during lockdown. However, respondents recognised that someone needs to drive that partnership work before it starts to dwindle.

“It is important that the energy around collaboration that has been sparked through the Covid-19 crisis is sustained and attention to addressing societal inequalities continues. It is essential that positive practice around system change is carried forward and embedded.”

- Organisation working with people facing multiple disadvantage

## Digital innovation and accessibility

Many organisations have received emergency funding to increase their digital capability and resources that will transform delivery in the long-term. Before lockdown, some organisations had been planning the introduction of digital services and this period gave impetus and funding to kick-start digital support services. For example, some services have introduced live chat services online that have been widely taken up. Others, particularly those supporting young women, increased their presence on social media, used the Instagram video sharing to share good stories and enabled young women to create socialising opportunities, such as podcasts, to talk about the issues that most concerned them.

“We have created and launched a online live chat for the first time, this has taken off immediately and is being used widely. We are thinking of innovative ways of delivering support.”

- A service-provider supporting women experiencing domestic abuse and others forms of violence against women and girls

The sector’s digital innovation is particularly impressive given the range of support they offer to women and girls. Moving services online, expanding service offers, and increasing the frequency of services has required immense creativity around how to continue to engage service-users in a meaningful way.

“Online services have to be more than a cut and paste of previous services, we cannot rely just on Zoom. It required more creative methods of engagement.”

- Organisation supporting women experiencing isolation due caring responsibilities

While the lockdown has highlighted the importance of face-to-face services and work done by community centres, for some service-users remote service provision removed previously existing barriers. Digital and telephone services have allowed services to reach out to some service-users that they were not able to reach before, and also expand their service offer beyond urban areas. Increased accessibility and reach of services are particularly beneficial for people with physical disabilities and social anxiety, who previously found it difficult to access support, particularly group meetings. Some of the service-users currently accessing online services previously could not afford to travel to centres to receive support, or did not have time to reach out to the services.

“Women who might not normally access service are more likely to engage, because they're not expected to come to the building, it doesn't have to be face to face”

- A service provider supporting women facing sexual exploitation

## Spotlight on drug and alcohol services

In the survey, a service-provider working with women with substance misuse problems highlighted the benefits of telephone assessments for getting women the support they need.

“Changes to drug services due to COVID-19 have led to positive outcomes for a number of women we work with; a large part of this is due to telephone assessments. Telephone assessments being carried out by substance use services have been very positive, helping to engage people who hadn’t been scripted before. One of our system change priorities is around women’s access to treatment services and we have highlighted a number of problems with this in the past, including waiting times, waiting rooms where men they do not feel comfortable with are also waiting, and restricted appointment times. Telephone assessments overcome all these issues. Four women we support have newly been scripted since COVID-19 and one woman has re-engaged with her script.” One woman accessing these services reflected: “There are less problems, I get to speak to the person I need to talk to quicker, before I would have to keep calling, waiting until I heard back from them”.

Online services are also more accessible for women with childcare responsibilities. A women’s centre noticed that prior to lockdown, some of their coaching and mentoring sessions were not accessible to women with small children. The added layer of flexibility that digital and phone services provide made it easier for women with childcare and busy schedules to access the coaching, at a time that is most convenient for them.

These changes have also helped staff and service-users to improve their digital skills.



Developing these skills is useful for helping women and girls to engage with other online services, such as healthcare and benefits.

Colette, an expert by experience, suggested that the lockdown provided an impetus not only to start using many other digital services but also to challenge her own mindset about it: "I've moved my GP, I've got an online health account, where I've never bothered with that in the past. And problem-solving, thinking outside the box a lot as well now, I've got stuck in the rut a lot with doing things. The lockdown, made me think - 'right, solution-focused, we're going to get around it."

- Colette, an expert by experience of homelessness, poor mental health and addiction

For some women and girls, the disruption to their routine caused by lockdown has presented an opportunity to engage with services. For example, one service-provider reported that the pandemic has opened up a window to engage women involved in survival sex with support services.<sup>62</sup>

Supporting women involved in street-based sex work suggested that some women are saying "this is an amazing opportunity because I can't work, I'm going to get out." The interviewee added "I've heard a couple of stories of women saying, 'I'm going to use this example of COVID to really get myself out now', which is really interesting."

One service-provider reflected that some of the women and girls they work with are actually thriving and feel for the first time they are not having to "jump through the hoops" of statutory services, especially probation and social services.

Of the 80% of services who anticipate retaining changes they have implemented during lockdown, 91% anticipate these changes will include offering a blend of face-to-face and online services and giving staff more flexibility to work remotely in future.

### 'Window of opportunity'

Lockdown has given some women and girls a window of opportunity to engage with community-based services and access vital support, and make positive changes in their lives.



## "Case study: From control to compassion

Changing Lives is a national charity helping people across the North and Midlands through challenging times such as experiences of homelessness, sexual exploitation, domestic abuse, recovery from addiction, long-term unemployment and contact with the criminal justice system. Changing Lives offers women and girls holistic support across all areas of their lives, through women-centred and gender specific services.

"At start of lockdown our concerns at Changing Lives focused on how people we support might cope. Isolation for people with no access to a phone or Wi-Fi is stark, as is food poverty. However, as we listened to women we work with it became clear that we cannot make assumptions and there is significant learning to be done."

"Overwhelmingly women said that, for the first time, they do not have to jump through multiple hoops to comply with the requirements of siloed services. No more running around to appointments, sitting in waiting rooms with past abusers, all on top of caring responsibilities. The relief at being

free from the fear of failing when the consequences can be, quite literally, devastating."

"Women now describe being phoned up by professionals and asked: "How are you; do you need a food parcel?"

"This represents such a significant shift. Professionals deeply listening to women's truths rather than judging from a place of power. There is potential for new relationships built from care and compassion rather than control and compliance. This must not be lost."

"For some women, engagement has increased due to a 'window of opportunity' [...] Some women really like accessing group and one to one support virtually or over the telephone."

-A service-provider supporting women in contact with the CJS and women experiencing multiple disadvantage

# CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Lockdown has particularly affected women and girls, with domestic violence rates soaring and mental health getting worse. At the same time it has become more difficult for them to get help.

For those from minoritised groups, including Black, Asian and Minoritised ethnic, LGBTQ and disabled women and girls, additional discrimination, inequality and barriers to appropriate support add layer upon layer of challenges.

Lockdown has been hard on everyone. The pandemic exposed inequalities that already existed in society and failings within the systems intended to act as a safety net and protect the most vulnerable. It has resulted in conditions that have worsened the mental health, wellbeing, support networks and economic conditions of many. And for women and girls already living with abuse and trauma and facing hardship and poor mental health, those problems have been magnified.

**Vital organisations supporting some of the most marginalised and disadvantaged women and girls face an uncertain future in terms of their funding and a shared concern about the sheer volume of predicted need that will emerge as lockdown eases.**

The impact on staff working in the sector has also been considerable. Many professionals are women themselves who have been managing their own caring responsibilities alongside supporting women and girls in some of the most challenging situations.

Yet these highly specialist organisations are agile, responsive and adaptable. Many are small, embedded in the communities they serve, and as such know the best solutions to the problems facing those they work with.

The women's voluntary and community sector, which has so much knowledge and expertise, has stepped up to the challenge and has a vital role to play in the wake of this crisis. To rebuild communities and the economy post lockdown, this sector needs to truly flourish and be at the centre of the rebuilding. These organisations must be respected, valued and invested in so that the women and girls they support are able to move on with their lives and fulfil their potential.

We welcome the government's plan to rebuild communities and the economy in its COVID-19 recovery strategy. **An effective and meaningful post-COVID-19 recovery will be local and services supporting women and girls should be at the heart of that.**

Agenda are calling for the following ambitions to be at the core of all further crisis planning and recovery decision making.

## Four core ambitions for recovery:

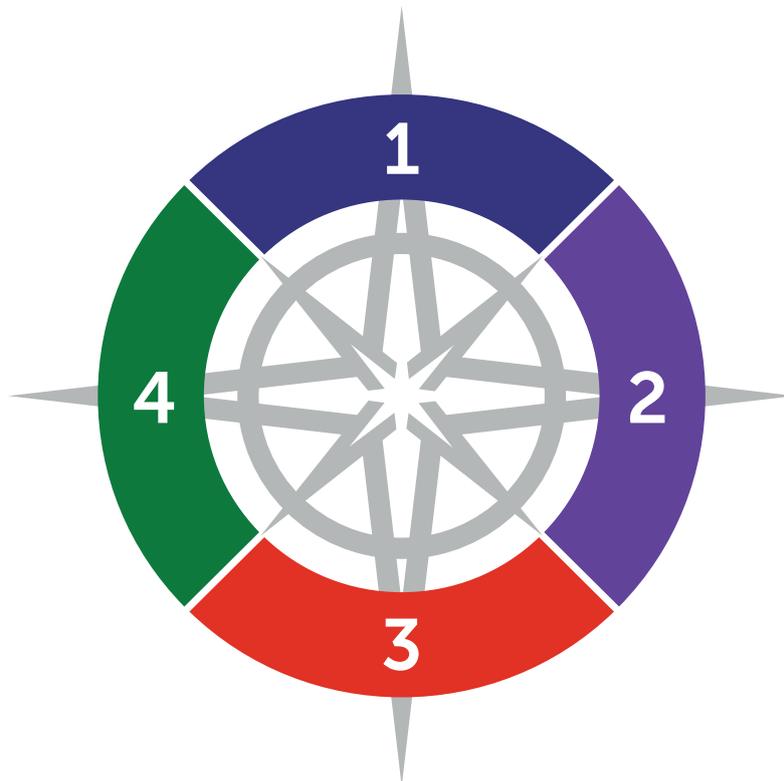
What policy makers, commissioners and funders can do to effectively rebuild their communities after lockdown

### Ensuring equality, insight and transparency:

How policy makers achieve effective commissioning and funding decisions

### Valuing expertise and growing innovation:

Harnessing the full potential of the women's voluntary and community sector



### Building respect, dignity and participation:

Learning from the crisis and removing the barriers to support services for women and girls

### Empowering local responses and driving collaboration:

What government, funders and commissioners need to do to rebuild communities

# 1



## Ensuring equality, insight and transparency:

How policy makers achieve effective commissioning and funding decisions

The hidden impacts of COVID-19 on the most marginalised women and girls are yet to be fully understood. As well as rebuilding, policy makers and funders will need to plan ahead for any future crisis. To ensure effective responses and to accurately anticipate the long-term impact and future needs of women and girls facing the greatest vulnerabilities four key areas need to be addressed.

### a. Funding and strategic priorities:

Central government must make a public commitment to address the social challenges facing women and girls caused by the crisis, further funding needs to be available beyond the current impending 'cliff edge'. This should be joined-up across government departments to enable women's specialist services, which can tackle a range of problems holistically, to access funding without having to compete for multiple complex pots. This will help government to address key strategic priorities, including diverting women away from the criminal justice system and reducing reoffending, tackling domestic abuse, ending rough sleeping and homelessness, reducing loneliness and improving mental health.

**b. Voice of women and girls:** The impact of the crisis on women and girls facing multiple disadvantage must be taken account of as part of the central government strategic response. It is

essential that planning and rebuilding at the highest level of government involves evidence from the Domestic Abuse Commissioner, Victims' Commissioner and the Children's Commissioner, as well as from front-line specialist services, infrastructure and advocacy organisations, and women with lived experience.

**c. Mental health:** In light of the serious and escalating mental health problems facing women, and in particular young women, as a result of the crisis, a national women and girls mental health strategy and funding pot must be urgently prioritised. This should be led by the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), with the full involvement of the Department for Education. This should incorporate both the role of adult and child and adolescent mental health services and recognise the critical role women and girls' services play in improving mental health and wellbeing. The strategy requires the full involvement of all DHSC arms-length bodies and should direct local areas to develop their own strategies and delivery plans to improve the mental health of women and girls.

**d. Data collection:** There needs to be a clear message and requirement, set out at a senior level in government, for data about the impact of COVID-19 to be disaggregated across all protected characteristics, in particular age, race and ethnicity. This should be directed

to all local and national government, arms-length bodies and researchers, to ensure public policy and funding priorities are made with an understanding of the differential and intersecting impact of the crisis. This data must be made publically available and accessibly presented, to allow voluntary sector organisations and advocacy groups to analyse it. Analysis must include data on

gender and violence and abuse, those in and being released from custody and detention, homelessness, unemployment, benefits claims, mental health problems, self-harm and suicide rates. This is an opportunity to identify those women with protected characteristics who fall through the nets of current services and to innovatively design swift and effective responses.

## 2

### **Building respect, dignity and participation:**

Learning from the crisis and removing the barriers to support services for women and girls.



Respect and dignity should be at the heart of public services' relationships with women and girls, trusting them as agents of positive change in their own lives, removing barriers to life-saving support and actively engaging them as equal decision-making partners.

**a. Resetting relationships with public services:** Innovative and effective changes created by the pandemic should be retained. These will enable public services to reset the relationship between their services and the women and girls who need them, basing their principles on trust, support and empowerment. There must be a pause on all benefit sanctions and conditionality which will only serve to further the disadvantages women face. Directions should be given to public service staff, such as in Job Centres and probation, to ensure they continue to actively reach out to women facing disadvantages and ensure they have the resources and support they need.

**b. Do not leave migrant and refugee women to struggle in poverty:** To ensure respect and dignity for all women, national government must end No Recourse to Public Funds conditions, provide financial support directly to women to prevent them from destitution and communicate clearly what help is available to ensure asylum-seeking migrant women can access life-saving support. Funding should be ring-fenced for specialist organisations supporting migrant and refugee women and wider women's services must be adequately funded to provide specialist support to ensure no woman is ever turned away because of language barriers or the additional needs she may have.

**c. Prioritising women and girls' participation and co-production:** Despite the challenging circumstances brought about by the crisis, we must not lose progress on the steps already taken towards involving women and girls in decision-making and generating

solutions to the challenges they face. Co-production work of this kind should be prioritised by government and other funding bodies to ensure it is built into new programmes and services. Voluntary sector infrastructure bodies, membership

organisations and think tanks should lead on collating and sharing learning and good practice from the innovation and creativity demonstrated by the women's voluntary and community sector through this time.

# 3

## **Empowering local responses and driving collaboration:**

What government, funders and commissioners need to do to rebuild communities.



The UK's post lockdown recovery and rebuilding strategy will be local and, if strategies are going to be effective, collaborative. Recovery strategies need to place the most marginalised women and girls, and the organisations supporting them, as equal partners in all national and community responses to reduce the burden on already stretched wider public services..

**a. Supporting local responses and rebuilding:** Funders and commissioners must take into account the reduced capacity of small local organisations to deliver services and apply for future funding during the crisis and adjust their targets and timelines accordingly. They should extend contracts that end in 2020 or the beginning of 2021, to give organisations dealing with capacity shortages much-needed "breathing space" to prepare bids. All short to medium term decisions around commissioning processes must ensure women's services are not disadvantaged by such changes.

**b. Economic inclusion:** Specialist voluntary sector women's and girls' services should be included as part of driving forward

plans to ensure economic prosperity and to level up regional opportunities beyond the crisis. This should be included in the Treasury's 'Plan for jobs', as well as regional plans delivered through local authorities and businesses to improve access and opportunities for skills and employment. These organisations are ideally placed to support women and girls into work and skills development opportunities, and should receive targeted funding to develop partnerships with employers and education and training providers to do so. This should have a particular focus on early intervention and supporting young women aged 16-24 to reduce the risk of long-term unemployment and future poverty.

**c. Give the women's voluntary and community sector an equal seat at the table:** The value of local voluntary women's sector leadership, intelligence and partnerships must be empowered and supported. Local authorities and statutory bodies should give the women and girls voluntary and community sector, and the infrastructure and advocacy organisations supporting them, an equal seat at local and national decision making

tables. These arrangements should be inclusive of smaller, non-commissioned organisations, and those delivering ‘by and for’ the communities they serve. This must be encouraged by central government and an expectation of equal partnerships of this kind should be

built into funding and commissioning arrangements. Learning from positive working relationships that have been built through this time should be shared and embedded by government’s arms length bodies and voluntary sector infrastructure and membership organisations.

# 4

## Valuing expertise and growing innovation:

Harnessing the full potential of the women’s voluntary and community sector.



The adaptability of specialist women and girls’ services and the ongoing contribution they make to their communities should be valued and maximised as part of rebuilding communities.

challenge for the sector. The next stage in government funding must include a ring-fenced fund for specialist ‘by and for’ services that support women and girls from minoritised communities. It also needs a clear understanding of how smaller, local organisations can access that funding.

### a. Valuing the women and girls sector:

Organisations supporting women and girls facing multiple disadvantage should be valued by local and national commissioners and funders for both effectively responding to ongoing social challenges in tried and tested ways, as well as constantly evolving to meet the adapting needs of those they work with. To take advantage of the learning developed through this crisis and embed positive changes, the sector needs investment to sustain and grow this innovation. Such investment requires flexible funding goals that are learning focused, allowing for creativity, success and the occasional failure along the way.

**c. Digital innovation:** Following the remarkable transition many organisations have made to providing online services during lockdown, funders and tech companies should consider how they could support the future of digital. We want to start a dialogue with the corporate sector about how small community organisations can work in partnership with them, ensuring their tech, knowledge and innovation benefits women and girls at risk. Funders should review their processes to enable organisations to apply for capital costs like equipment, where they are not currently able to support this type of cost. Welcome initial donations of digital equipment at the start of lockdown from businesses should transition to longer-term sustainable plans to ensure a growth in safe digital access and inclusion of women and girls.

**b. Long term core funding:** While crisis funding has been impactful and filled immediate need, it has not been accessible to all organisations and has not addressed a looming longer-term funding

## End notes

1. While these impacts have been widespread, they have not been equally distributed. Evidence shows the varying impacts on different groups or people with specific characteristics, including, but not limited to, BAME individuals, single parents, disabled people with disabilities, individuals, victims of domestic abuse and low income groups, many of whom have been disproportionately affected.

2. Agenda (2016) Hidden Hurt: Violence, Abuse, And Disadvantage In The Lives Of Women

3 Ibid.

4 Lankelly Chase (2020) Gender Matters: New conversations about severe & multiple disadvantage

5. AVA and Agenda, (2017), Mapping the Maze

6 Research has shown that women and girls from minoritised communities, who are further disadvantaged by the multiple forms of discrimination they experience, have been disproportionately impacted by Covid-19. For example, structural racism and socioeconomic inequalities produce the vulnerabilities that are imposed on women and girls from minoritised ethnic communities that become reflected in disproportionately high rates of infection and mortality (Imkaan, 2020).

7. Covid-19 were almost 3 times higher in this period for Black and minority ethnic women, and 2.4 times higher in Asian females - compared with 1.6 times in White females.

8. This term refers to specialist services that are designed and delivered by and for the users and communities they aim to serve. This can include, for example, services led by and for Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic (BAME) women, lesbian, bisexual, trans, intersex and queer (LBTIQ) women, women with disabilities and migrant women.

9. Coercive control describes a range or pattern of behaviours that enable a perpetrator to maintain or regain control of a partner, ex-partner or family member. It includes acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse that is used to by the perpetrator to harm, punish, or frighten their victim.

10. Findings from a survey by Galop to Better Understand How Covid-19 Lockdown Restrictions Impacted Relationships yet to be published.

11. Women's Aid (2020) found that of the survivors who reported being currently in an abusive relationship, 67% said that the abuse they experience had got worse since the outbreak of Covid-19.

12. The Independent (2020) Five women found dead in Doncaster: 'We don't want women's deaths to become normalised'

13. Agenda rountable with frontline services, Monday 27 April 2020.

14. Duties in the Care Act were suspended as part of the Government's emergency legislation in response to the outbreak of Covid-19. This includes a statutory duty on local authorities to carry out needs assessments on vulnerable children, and provide care and support to those identified as in need.

15. Child protection referrals have plummeted by more than 50% in some areas of England in the first months of lockdown.

16. The Children's Society (2020), The impact of COVID-19 on children and young people.

17. Agenda roundtable with frontline services, Monday 27 April 2020.

18. House of Commons Library (2020) Mental health statistics for England: prevalence, services and funding
19. Agenda and the Department for Health and Social Care (2018) Women's Mental Health Taskforce Final Report
20. NHS Digital (2014) Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey: Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing, England, 2014
20. Agenda roundtable with frontline services, Monday 27 April 2020.
21. Imkaan (2020) The Impact of the Dual Pandemics: Violence Against Women & Girls and COVID-19 on Black and Minoritised Women and Girls.
22. Race Disparity Audit (2018)
23. Defined in the research as "physical" and/or "psychological".
24. UCL (2020) Covid-19 Social Study
25. Iob, E., Steptoe, A., Fancourt, D. (2020) Abuse, self-harm and suicidal ideation in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic
26. Research by Women for Refugee Women has also brought to light the impact of the pandemic on asylum-seeking women's mental health, with 82% of women reporting that their mental health had worsened during the crisis, because of isolation and being cut off from support services.
27. Girlguiding (2020) Girlguiding research briefing: Early findings on the impact of Covid-19 on girls and young women
28. Agenda and the National Centre for Social Research (2020) Often Overlooked: Young women, poverty and self-harm
29. Agenda (2016) Joining the dots: The combined burden of violence, abuse and poverty in the lives of women
30. For more information on the value of women's peer support programmes, see the policy report of the Women Side by Side programme developed by Agenda and Mind.
31. This is in line with wider research conducted in the women's VSCE. Research by the Women's Resource Centre (2020a) found that 87% of service-providers identified women and girls' decline in mental health as their main concern over the next three to six months.
32. Young Women's Trust (2020) reports that more than 78 per cent of those who have lost their jobs since the crisis began are women and two thirds are aged between 18 and 34. Their research found that 32 per cent of young women surveyed were finding it hard to afford essentials like food.
33. Women's Budget Group (2020) set out research which shows women are the majority of people living in poverty and female-headed households are more likely to be poor. Young women are disproportionately likely to work in the sectors that have been hit hardest by the lockdown.
34. Agenda reported that in 2020 a majority (56%) of statutorily homeless households in England are women with dependent children or lone women.
35. A payday loan is a small, short-term unsecured loan with high interest rates.

36. Women's Budget Group et al (2020a) found that a quarter of BAME mothers reported that they were struggling to feed their children (23.7%), and a separate briefing (2020b) reported that during lockdown six in ten disabled women are struggling to access necessities from the shops (63%), compared with 46% of non-disabled men 52% of non-disabled women.

37. No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) refers to a visa condition that prevents most non-European Economic Area migrants from accessing most state-funded benefits, tax credits and housing assistance. These restrictions are inclusive of migrant women not on a spousal visa who are fleeing abuse, limiting their ability to access financial support, legal aid and safe accommodation. For more information on the temporary concessions made to some migrants living in the UK during lockdown, please see this parliamentary briefing: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8888/CBP-8888.pdf>

38. Women for Refugee Women (2020) report that 74% of the 155 asylum-seeking women surveyed said they were not always able to get enough food during the pandemic.

39. Leading into the COVID-19 pandemic, Women's Aid (2019) reported that 41% of women supported by the No Woman Turned Away project were BAME women, highlighting that BAME women faced additional barriers in accessing safe accommodation.

40. Research by Women for Refugee Women (2020) showed that a fifth of asylum-seeking women were homeless during lockdown, relying on temporary arrangements with community members, and moving from one house to another.

41. St Mungo's (2020) Policy briefing: Rough sleeping and single homelessness during the coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis

42. St Mungo's (2019) Women and rough sleeping: a critical review of current research and methodology

43. Research by Crisis (2006) found that 28% of homeless women have formed an unwanted sexual partnership to get a roof over their heads.

44. Changing Lives (2020) report an increase in the number of women selling sex on street, as well as those selling sex online.

45. MASH (Manchester Action on Street Health) (2020) report that 95% of women involved in street sex work has substance misuse problems.

46. Agenda and AVA (2019) Breaking Down the Barriers: Findings of the National Commission on Domestic and Sexual Violence and Multiple Disadvantage)

47. This is in line with ongoing research being carried out by Pro Bono Economics. In one survey (June 2020), almost three quarters of charities and voluntary organisations across the country (72 per cent) said they expected to see an increase in demand for their services over the next 6 months, compared to pre-crisis expectation.

48. Agenda (2020) gathered evidence from service-providers and the wider voluntary sector about the disproportionate impact on specialist 'by and for' services in the evidence submitted to the Women and Equalities Select Committee inquiry into the unequal impact of Covid-19 on people with protected characteristics.

49. For example, Imkaan (2020) report that one-third of specialist refuges for Black and minoritised women have been decommissioned since austerity measures were introduced, resulting in a reduction of 50% bed space capacity.

50. For example, Imkaan's 2018 report From Survival to Sustainability found BAME women and girls often report dissatisfaction with the responses from statutory services, and report an overwhelming preference for specialist, BAME-led women's services.

51. Agenda and AVA (2019) Breaking Down the Barriers: Findings of the National Commission on Domestic and Sexual Violence and Multiple Disadvantage

52. A survey by the LGBT Foundation (2020) found that 64% of survey respondents stated that they would rather be supported for their mental health by an LGBT specific organisation.

53. For example, Imkaan (2020) report that between 40-60% of women in some services had no safe access to phones, no credit, and no access to the Internet.

54. NHS Digital reports that people with a disability are 35% less likely to have the digital skills needed for everyday life in the UK.

55. Research has shown that BAME households are more likely to experience housing stress, such as overcrowding, poorer quality housing, and fuel poverty (Gulliver, 2020).

56. Research by SafeLives (2020) found that during lockdown 42% of domestic abuse service-providers were concerned about service-user safety whilst using phone or online services.

67. Research by the Institute of Labor Economics (2020) has shown that women are more concerned with spreading Covid-19 than men, scoring 8% higher than men on an indicator of being concerned about spreading Covid-19, and women are more concerned with getting Covid-19 than men, scoring 12% higher than men on an indicator of being concerned about getting Covid-19.

58. Duties in the Care Act were suspended as part of the Government's emergenc legislation in response to the outbreak of Covid-19. This includes a statutory duty on local authorities to carry out needs assessments on vulnerable children, and provide care and support to those identified as in need.

59. Clinks (2020) The impact of Covid-19 on the voluntary sector working in criminal justice

60. Front Door Hub meetings are made up of professionals with different areas of expertise who work together to assess, decide and coordinate how best to support children, young people and their families where there are safeguarding concerns.

61. Research by the Women's Resource Centre (2020b) found that almost half of Black and minoritised women led organisations (48%) had less time for fundraising compared with over a third of non-Black and minoritised women led organisations (37%).

62. Agenda roundtable with frontline services, Monday 27 April 2020.

## Other references

Agenda (2020) Written Evidence from Agenda for the Women and Equalities Select Committee Inquiry into Coronavirus and the impact on people with protected characteristics

Changing Lives (2020) COVID-19 Changing Lives Open Letter to the Home Secretary and Lord Chancellor

Crisis (2006) Homeless women: still be failed yet striving to survive

Gulliver, K. (2017) Forty Years of Struggle A Window on Race and Housing, Disadvantage and Exclusion

Imkaan (2020) The Impact of the Two Pandemics: VAWG and COVID-19 on Black and Minoritised Women and Girls

Institute of Labor Economics (2020) Gender Inequality in COVID-19 Times: Evidence from UK Prolific Participants

NHS, Digital (2020) Definition of digital inclusion

Pro Bono Economics (2020) Pro Bono Economics/Civil Society Media results: 02 & 03 June 2020

Public Health England (2020) Disparities in the risk and outcomes of COVID-19

SafeLives (2020) Domestic abuse frontline service COVID-19 survey results

LGBT Foundation (2020) Hidden figures: the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on LGBT communities in the UK

The Ubele Initiative (2020) Impact Of Covid-19 On The BAME Community And Voluntary Sector

Women's Aid Federation of England (2019) No Woman Turned Away

Women's Aid Federation of England (2020) The impact of Covid-19 on survivors: findings from Women's Aid's initial Survivor Survey

Women's Budget Group (2020) Crises Collide: Women and Covid-19

Women's Budget Group, LSE Department of Health Policy, Queen Mary University of London, The Fawcett Society (2020a) BAME women and Covid-19 – Research evidence

Women's Budget Group, LSE Department of Health Policy, Queen Mary University of London,  
The Fawcett Society (2020b) Disabled women and Covid-19 - Research evidence

Women's Resource Centre (2020a) The Crisis Of COVID-19 And UK Women's Charities Survey Responses And Findings

Women's Resource Centre (2020b) The Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis on the UK's Sector for Black and Minoritised Women

Young Women's Trust (2020) Ignored, Undervalued And Underpaid: The Impact Of Coronavirus On Young Women's Work, Finances And Wellbeing