



For women and children.  
Against domestic violence.

# General Election Manifesto 2024

Taking Action to Tackle Abuse

# Foreword

Refuge welcomes the fact that all the major political parties have outlined their commitment to eradicating violence against women and girls (VAWG). Promisingly, we have also seen efforts towards the development of new policies aimed at tackling VAWG by the government in recent years. Whilst these measures signify an important shift in tone towards understanding the prevalence of VAWG, **it remains imperative that all parties recognise the urgent work that must be done to ensure women and girls can live free from gender-based violence.**

**“Tackling domestic abuse... requires a collective social response in which policymakers, the criminal justice system, government departments and each of us work together.”**

Domestic abuse remains a widespread issue, affecting one in four women in the UK. As a society we must recognise the gravity of this crime and the devastating harm it causes to individuals, families, communities and even our economy, at large. Tackling domestic abuse, therefore, requires a collective social response in which policymakers, the criminal justice system, government departments and each of us work together.

Refuge has successfully campaigned for landmark new legislation, together with our sister organisations, such as amendments to the **Online Safety Act (2023)** and the **Domestic Abuse Act (2021)**. These new measures are important steps forward towards the eradication of VAWG - yet further systemic change is essential if we are to deliver on the commitment to keep women and children safe.



**After years of chronic underfunding, specialist domestic abuse services are currently at breaking point.** Essential, sustainable, funding from the Government is vital to ensure domestic abuse services can continue to meet the soaring demand and increasingly complex needs of survivors. The sobering reality is, that without such financial commitment, the safety of women and children will be put at risk. This must change.

All political parties must recognise the far-reaching impact that domestic abuse has across our society. It is imperative that the policies designed to eradicate VAWG are translated into meaningful action that supports all survivors of domestic abuse. Sustainable investment in vital domestic abuse services is urgently needed to ensure VAWG policies will effectively support women to live free from gender-based violence.

**Abigail Ampofo,  
Interim CEO of Refuge**

# Introduction

Gender inequality is both a cause and consequence of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG).

Women and girls are more likely than men to experience abuse<sup>1</sup>.

Domestic abuse is the most prevalent form of VAWG, experienced by **1 in 4 women** in the UK<sup>2</sup>.

Despite its prevalence, there is still a disjointed and inadequate approach to tackling domestic abuse and other forms of VAWG.

**Survivors of domestic abuse continue to experience barriers to accessing support and justice from all areas of the system**, including but not limited to, the criminal and civil justice system, housing, education and health. All the while, the specialist domestic abuse and VAWG services that support them are experiencing an increasing demand for support within an insecure funding landscape.

Alongside the challenges faced by domestic abuse survivors, in wider society, the rise of online misogyny, police-perpetrated VAWG, and concerning societal attitudes towards women are threatening the physical and emotional safety of women and girls every day.

The need to improve the system for domestic abuse survivors is urgent and essential. Whatever the outcome of the upcoming general election, a new government must prioritise women and girls' safety. Refuge's manifesto for the 2024 General Election is calling for a whole-system approach to support survivors of domestic abuse and tackle VAWG.

**We are asking for political parties to:**

**1. Improve the system for survivors of domestic abuse**

**2. Invest in specialist domestic abuse services**

**3. Make the country safer for women and girls**

<sup>1</sup> Domestic abuse in England and Wales overview - Office for National Statistics ([ons.gov.uk](https://ons.gov.uk))  
[Sexual offences in England and Wales overview - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](https://ons.gov.uk)

<sup>2</sup> Home Office (2022), 'Tackling Domestic Abuse Plan.'

# 1. Improve the system for survivors of domestic abuse

It is essential that survivors of domestic abuse have access to the **legal, civil and economic support** they need to enable them to recover and rebuild their lives. But right now, many survivors of domestic abuse are unable to access that support.

There is dwindling confidence and trust in the police and the criminal and family courts to deliver protection and justice. Survivors of domestic abuse often tell Refuge when they report abuse that they experience minimisation and victim-blaming from police officers. This is paired with an overstretched criminal justice system, with survivors waiting for extended periods, sometimes years, for their case to go to trial due to overwhelming court backlogs.

Survivors are re-traumatised by the family court process. There continue to be serious structural issues in the ways that domestic abuse is responded to within the family courts, causing a serious risk of harm to survivors, including children, due to a pro-contact culture and presumption of contact with both parents, even in cases of domestic abuse. This leads to dangerous child contact arrangements with perpetrators, for both the survivor-parent and children.

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**When you find the courage to leave it's not easy and it's so frustrating when the system lets you down."**

- Louise\*



**For survivors of domestic abuse, 'home' is not a place of safety and security, but one of fear.** Inaccessible housing and a welfare system often weaponised by perpetrators means that survivors are often forced to remain living with a dangerous abuser. This is paired with structural issues such as local authority gatekeeping practices where they are not correctly applying legislation, forcing survivors to make difficult decisions between taking up unsuitable offers or facing prolonged periods of stay in refuges, returning to dangerous perpetrators or becoming at risk of street homelessness.

In addition, Perpetrators of domestic abuse are using aspects of the welfare system to facilitate and exacerbate abuse, particularly economic abuse, on survivors.

Black and minoritised women, migrant women, D/deaf and disabled women and members of the LGBTQI+ community continue to experience discrimination and additional barriers to accessing support. **Major reform is needed to ensure that minoritised and migrant women are supported equally and without discrimination.**

\* Names have been changed to protect identity

If we do not tackle structural issues in the response to domestic abuse across the system, the safety of survivors of domestic abuse will continue to be put at risk. Political leaders must make this a priority moving forward.

## We are calling on political parties to:

### Improve the criminal justice system by:

- Introducing a statutory duty for all police and criminal justice practitioners who come into contact with survivors of VAWG to undertake mandatory domestic abuse and VAWG training. This training should be culturally competent and reflect the barriers and experiences of minoritised women. It should be developed in collaboration with specialist VAWG services, and delivered by VAWG specialists.
- Fast-track, prioritise and guarantee fixtures of VAWG court trials to ensure cases proceed in a timely manner and the time between charge and trial is reduced.
- Improving the police response to domestic abuse, by responding to and acting on breaches of protective orders, improving the assessment of risk at the scene of a domestic abuse offence, and improving the investigation of domestic abuse offences and support to survivors during the investigation.
- Holding perpetrators who kill their partners to account by implementing the recommendations contained within Clare Wade KC's 2023 Domestic Homicide Sentencing Review.
- Ensuring domestic abuse survivors are protected in any efforts to reduce the prison population. This includes exempting perpetrators of domestic abuse and other forms of VAWG, including stalking, from the Early Release Scheme.



### Reform the family courts by:

- Expanding access to legal aid for all survivors of domestic abuse by exempting them from the means test for legal aid.
- Taking meaningful steps to prevent perpetrators from weaponising family court proceedings as a further tool of abuse by tackling the use of unregulated 'experts', so-called parental alienation arguments, and litigation abuse.
- Reversing the presumption in favour of parental involvement in cases involving domestic abuse where there is either a criminal conviction or a finding of fact in a civil court.
- Implementing mandatory trauma-informed training on domestic abuse and VAWG for family court practitioners and the judiciary, to be developed in collaboration with the specialist VAWG sector.

## Improve survivors' access to housing by:

- Introducing new regulations that require local authorities to exempt survivors of domestic abuse from any local housing connection or residency requirements as part of their qualification criteria for applicants of social housing.
- Introducing a simplified, legal mechanism for the transfer of tenancy in the family court if a survivor of domestic abuse shares a joint secured or assured social tenancy with the perpetrator.
- Providing local authorities with the resources and training they need to ensure all survivors can access their housing rights. In addition, introducing strong mechanisms for holding local authorities to account when these duties are not upheld.

## Support migrant survivors of domestic abuse by:

- Scrapping the 'No Recourse to Public Funds' (NRPF) condition to enable migrant survivors of domestic abuse to access lifesaving support and services, eliminating the existing two-tiered system.
- Expanding the scope of the Migrant Victims of Domestic Abuse Concession (MVDAC) and Indefinite Leave to Remain on the domestic violence or abuse route (DVILR) to include all survivors, regardless of immigration status, to include extending the timeframe of the MVDAC from 3 to 6 months.
- Implementing a data-sharing firewall between public services and immigration enforcement, enabling migrant survivors to safely report abuse.



## Commit to welfare reform by:

- Separating Universal Credit payments by default.
- Exempting survivors of domestic abuse from repaying benefit advances.
- Exempting survivors of domestic abuse from the benefit cap to enable them to meet basic living costs.
- Reforming the Child Maintenance Service to ensure the system does not serve as a further tool of abuse and that survivors receive sufficient and timely maintenance payments.
- Introducing an adequate, sustainable fund for survivors to receive direct payments to enable them to flee dangerous perpetrators.
- Introduce an Essentials Guarantee to embed into the UK's benefits the widely supported principle that, at a minimum, Universal Credit should protect people from going without essentials in the UK. This guarantee would ensure that Universal Credit's standard allowance must at least meet the level of the cost of essentials (such as food, utilities, and vital household goods) after any deductions.

## 2. Invest in specialist domestic abuse services

**Domestic abuse services are a lifeline for survivors, providing holistic, specialist support on both a short- and long-term basis.**

However, insufficient and short-term contracts, gaps in funding for specialist support, and recruitment and retention challenges exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis mean that service provision is inconsistent across the country. This is set against a backdrop of historical and chronic underfunding and increasing numbers of local authorities declaring bankruptcy. Survivors face a postcode lottery in accessing support. Refuge's Local Lifelines Report found that **85% of frontline workers** said their service is impacted by insufficient funding<sup>3</sup>. Without urgent funding uplifts, many services are at breaking point<sup>4</sup>.

To ensure survivors can access the specialist support they need, adequate funding for domestic abuse services is desperately needed. This should include funding for child support workers who provide vital support to child survivors of domestic abuse.

**We are calling on political parties to commit to:**

**Sustainably fund specialist domestic abuse services by:**

- Providing at least **£238 million per year**<sup>5</sup> for essential community-based services, which provide support to survivors in the community.
- Providing at least **£189 million**<sup>5</sup> per year for refuge services, which offer survivors safe temporary accommodation.
- Establishing a separate national 'by-and-for' funding pot, which would provide long overdue investment in specialist services that support minoritised survivors, including disabled survivors, LGBTQ+, Black and minoritised women, and those with no recourse to public funds, who typically face additional barriers in accessing support.

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**Without the support, I wouldn't feel like there was a possibility of being free."**

-Jessica\*



<sup>3</sup> Domestic abuse services in the community under pressure from lack of funding ([refuge.org.uk](https://refuge.org.uk))

<sup>4</sup> Domestic Abuse Commissioner (2023) A patchwork of provision

<sup>5</sup> Women's Aid. (2023) Investing to save: the economic case for funding specialist domestic abuse support. (<https://www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Investing-to-save-report-ResPublica-and-Womens-Aid.pdf>)

\* Names have been changed to protect identity

# 3. Make the country safer for women and girls

A woman's right to live safely and free from violence is a fundamental human right<sup>6</sup>. However, this has been threatened by violence and abuse towards women perpetrated by police officers and the rise of misogyny, both online and amongst young people.

The murder of Sarah Everard by a serving Metropolitan Police Service Officer and the crimes by serial rapist police officer, David Carrick, alongside mounting cases of police-perpetrated violence against women and girls, have highlighted the deep-rooted issue of institutional sexism and misogyny in the police and have resulted in a decline of trust and confidence in policing amongst women and girls.

In addition, women and girls have experienced an explosion in the rise of online misogyny and misogynistic influencers on social media platforms, whilst perpetrators of VAWG are increasingly using technology to carry out abuse.

Within schools, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) continues to be undervalued and lacks adequate investment, resulting in inconsistent and often poor-quality education. Education has a transformative role to play in tackling the root causes of VAWG, addressing new and emerging forms of domestic abuse that disproportionately impact young people, such as online harms and tech abuse, and ultimately, helping to prevent domestic abuse in the long-term.

## We are calling on political parties to:

### Root out police abusers and make policing safer for women and girls by:

- Introducing a presumption in favour of suspending police officers and staff with allegations of domestic abuse and VAWG, whilst under investigation.
- Tightening vetting processes by reducing the time between initial vetting and re-vetting, with consequences on police forces for non-compliance.

<sup>6</sup>Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women | OHCHR

<sup>7</sup>Refuge releases new data revealing low rates of women's confidence in the police to handle VAWG crimes

<sup>8</sup>Refuge (2021), *Unsocial Spaces*.



## Take decisive action to ensure the safety of women and girls online by:

- Improving the response to technology-facilitated abuse by allocating sufficient resources, training and technology to the police to promptly investigate online offences. Training on tech-facilitated abuse should be mandated and led by the expertise of the specialist VAWG sector and rolled out to the wider criminal justice system.
- Legislating to ensure technology is safe by design and to address the threat that artificial intelligence poses to survivors. Upgrading VAWG Guidance in Online Safety Act to VAWG Code of Practice if uptake proves low/compliance is poor.
- Adequately funding specialist VAWG services which provide support to victims of tech abuse and other forms of online VAWG. This could be achieved via a 'Tech Tax', ringfencing 10% of tax income from big tech companies to fund specialist VAWG sector efforts to effectively address online VAWG, or ringfencing fines collected by Ofcom as online safety regulator.
- Conduct a review of current legislation relevant to tech abuse to consider how the criminal justice system handles tech abuse cases, with a cross-government ministerial group convened to take forward actions.

## Refuge, in collaboration with a panel of domestic abuse survivors, is calling for work to prevent domestic abuse by improving Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) for all children and young people, including early years, by:

- Implementing the national rollout of the Whole School Approach to VAWG<sup>9</sup> to embed RSE into the curriculum, physical environment, and safeguarding policies of all schools. This should emphasise the need for an intersectional, inclusive, and trauma-informed approach, that centres the voices and needs of children and young people and embeds education on VAWG and gender roles into diverse subject areas within the curriculum.
- Providing adequate funding, investment in training, resources, and dedicated capacity for delivering RSE and embedding a Whole School Approach to tackling VAWG nationally.
- Involving the specialist VAWG sector in developing revised statutory guidance and curriculum materials to improve the quality and consistency of education on domestic abuse, including topics such as consent and technology-facilitated abuse.



<sup>9</sup> Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Coalition, 2023, [It's #AboutTime – A Whole School Approach to Ending Violence Against Women and Girls](#)

# Refuge



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## About Refuge

Refuge is the largest specialist domestic abuse organisation in the UK. On any given day our services support thousands of survivors, helping them to overcome the physical, emotional, financial and logistical impacts of abuse and rebuild their lives — free from fear.

**Need help now? Contact the  
National Domestic Abuse  
Helpline on 0808 2000 247**

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