
COVID-19



Violence against women and girls (VAWG) guidance for homelessness settings (July 2020)

Evidence and experience has shown that women in homelessness settings are impacted by different forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG). This includes domestic and sexual violence, but also extends to other forms of gendered violence and exploitation where the abuser might not be a partner, ex-partner or family member.

The COVID 19 outbreak has increased the risk of all forms of VAWG for women in homelessness settings, limiting contact with services that can help and forcing them into increasingly unsafe situations.

Women experiencing VAWG may feel afraid or alone and be mistrustful of services. As a homelessness worker, you may be the only person checking in on that woman to see how she is doing. Your professional curiosity could make all the difference. If something doesn't look or feel right:



Trust your gut if something doesn't feel right, and always call 999 in an emergency.

- **Ask** sensitively but directly, when it is safe to do so. Refer to guidance on [asking about domestic abuse and sexual violence during COVID-19](#).
 - **Validate** whatever the woman shares with you, or accept her reasons not to share and ask again at another time.
 - **Support** your client by asking her what she wants to happen, and reassure her that support is there if she wants it.
 - **Report** the violence or abuse to specialist services, MARAC or safeguarding as necessary.
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What to look out for:

Sexual exploitation - transactional sex

Transactional, or 'survival' sex is where sex is exchanged for somewhere to sleep, alcohol, drugs, food, tobacco or perceived safety/protection.

Women engaged in transactional or survival sex are at high risk of experiencing **sexual exploitation and violence**. There are concerns that the number of women engaging in

transactional sex could be on the rise during COVID-19, as the lockdown cuts off funds from other sources, through work, begging or shoplifting.

What can I do to help?

If you think this is an issue for someone you are working with, try and create space to talk about it, making sure it is safe to do so.

- Ask “*Is anyone doing anything that is making you feel frightened or anxious at the moment?*”
- See [domestic abuse and sexual violence guidance](#) for advice on asking about VAWG.
- Ask about how the woman is earning money. “*It must be hard to earn money at the moment, how are you managing? Do you ever feel like you have to do things that you don't want to do?*”
- Support around accessing contraception and sexual health services.
- Contact local women's specialist services for advice

Physical or sexual violence from members of the public

Women experiencing homelessness face judgment from peers, services and the public, and as a result the range of abuse, harassment and violence they experience is extensive. Women who use substances are at increased risk from drug dealers and the public.

For many multiply disadvantaged women this will be a ‘normal’ part of their life experience and they might not question it. You are unlikely to observe this behaviour in your service but you may see signs and your client may make a disclosure. There is evidence that since lockdown street harassment for women is increasing.

What can I do to help?

- Be vigilant in your conversations with your client, just because they see it as ‘normal’ doesn't mean we can't offer support or validate their experience.
- If your client discloses abuse happening outside of your service stress that it's not right. Reassure your client that she shouldn't have to ‘put up’ with it.
- Support her to report to the police and/or access a [Sexual Assault Referral Centre](#).

Exploitation from other homeless people

Women experiencing homelessness often have to make very difficult decisions about how to measure risk and how to keep themselves safe. Anecdotal feedback from outreach professionals has suggested that women can get ‘passed around’ by rough sleeping men.

In situations like these there may be multiple perpetrators, it may be difficult to identify who the perpetrator is, or at times, to understand the nature of those relationships. This can lead professionals to feel like violence and abuse ‘goes back and forth’. We need to stay attuned to power imbalances in relationships and be aware of who has more control.

What can I do to help?

Even if the person isn't an intimate partner, ex or family member you can still be curious and take the opportunity to clarify the nature of the relationship.

- Ask women about their relationships: *“Do you feel supported by that person? What do you get out of that relationship?”*
- Women might take the ‘least worst’ option in order to maintain some level of protection, especially when they are sleeping rough - for example putting up with sexual violence and abuse from one man, in order to be protected from others. It is important to reinforce that this is still violence and abuse, your client doesn’t have to just ‘put up with it’ and can explore other ways of staying safer.

Financial exploitation and abuse

Women who are homeless are at high risk of financial exploitation, which can be perpetrated by their partners, associates, drug dealers, pimps or other members of the homeless community or members of the public. Women in this position are at an economic disadvantage already, and this can be compounded by abuse and exploitation, for example:

- being **forced to beg** with the proceeds removed by the perpetrator
- being **forced to shoplift** or undertake other acquisitive crimes with the proceeds being removed by the perpetrator
- having **money/phones/bank cards withdrawn** temporarily or removed completely
- being coerced in to having **benefits paid in to a perpetrator’s account**
- **harassment on and around payday**

What can I do to help?

- Make questions about money/benefits normalised. Try saying *“Can we have a chat about how things are with your money and /benefits - we ask everyone at the moment to make sure people are financially OK during COVID-19.”*
- If the suspected perpetrator(s) are often or always present, use social distancing as a way to make a safe space for the women to discuss her issues. You could ask her to come down to the office/meet in an outdoor confidential space to support her to call her bank or the DWP, and explain to the perpetrator that you are only able to see one person at a time.
- If a woman is getting her benefits paid in to someone else’s bank account, if it is safe to do, so you can support her to open a bank account. Nationwide will open accounts with one recent benefits letter and a letter from a support service confirming the client’s ID and details.
- If the client is willing, obtain their signed consent to liaise with the DWP or the bank on their behalf.
- Complete a safeguarding alert if you are aware that financial abuse is taking place.

Harmful practices - forced marriage, ‘honour’-based violence

As with other forms of abuse, the risk from harmful practices is high during lockdown. Women may become homeless after fleeing forced marriage or ‘honour’ based violence, or hidden homeless women may be relying on family for accommodation during lockdown, at risk of violence or abuse.

What can I do to help?

- Ask regular questions about family relationships as well as partner relationships. Do not assume that all family or community relationships are safe and supportive.
- Be alert to the signs of harmful practices and sources of specialist support. Visit [Karma Nirvana](#) for more information and support, or contact local [Imkaan member services](#).

Get support

Support for clients

Silent 999 calls: if your client is in danger and it's not safe to talk on the phone, they can call 999 and then press 55 for help without speaking.

Support your clients to access support or call on their behalf:

- **Rape Crisis** ([opening hours](#)): **0808 802 9999**
- **London Survivors Gateway:** <https://survivorsgateway.london/>
- **National Ugly Mugs** (support for clients selling sex): <https://uglymugs.org/um/>
- **Victim Support** ([opening hours](#)): **0808 168 9111**
- **Karma Nirvana** for honour based abuse and forced marriage ([opening hours](#)): **0800 599 9247**
- **Imkaan** for directory of BME specialist services: <https://www.imkaan.org.uk/get-help>
- **Galop** for LGBT+ clients experiencing violence or abuse: <http://www.galop.org.uk/>



Advice for staff working with clients experiencing violence or abuse

For advice on complex cases, staff can consult the organisations listed above, or contact:

- **Local specialist services** – there may be specialist women's services in your area that can support around violence, abuse and exploitation. Many are continuing to deliver support during the lockdown. Do your research and get in touch with your local service to find out how they have adapted.

This guidance was produced in partnership:



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