women's aid
until women & children are safe

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Rt Hon Sajid Javid MP
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care
Department of Health and Social Care
39 Victoria Street
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28th July 2021

Dear Secretary of State for Health and Social Care,

Domestic abuse and mental health

We want to congratulate you on your recent appointment as Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, and hope to work closely with you in your new Ministerial role.

We are writing to urge you to ensure the needs of survivors of domestic abuse are central within upcoming reforms to the health system, including the women's health strategy and the Health and Care Bill.

It is vital that the women's health strategy recognise that domestic abuse and male violence against women and girls (VAWG) are fundamental drivers of women's mental health problems. Research demonstrates clear links between the experience of domestic abuse and mental ill health -survivors commonly experience post-traumatic stress disorders, severe anxiety, severe depression, eating disorders, self-harm and suicidal thoughts and actions. Perpetrators also exploit existing mental health problems as part of their abusive and controlling behaviour Women's Aid's latest annual audit report found that an alarming 37% of women using domestic abuse services in 2019-20 reported feeling depressed or having suicidal thoughts as a result of abuse.

Although these links are well evidenced, statutory mental health services often do not respond effectively, and survivors report that mental health practitioners still do not ask about their experiences of domestic abuse or VAWG. In addition to this, survivors have spoken about being exposed to alarming and triggering experiences such as physical restraint and practices which cause further harm – such as being placed on mixed sex wards or facing additional forms of discrimination and inequality from staff and other patients. As statutory mental health services often do not understand the impact of domestic abuse and VAWG on women, survivor's trauma is further compounded – which of course increases demand on the health system.

In contrast, specialist women's services are uniquely placed to meet the needs of survivors, with expert understanding of the gendered nature of abuse, trauma and its impacts on women's health and wellbeing. Yet funding from the Department of Health and Social Care, CCGs and NHS Trusts for women's specialist services remains severely limited; just 10.2% of community based domestic abuse services were funded by CCG commissioning in 2019-20. Ahead of the next Comprehensive Spending Review, we are calling urgently for the

Women's Health Strategy to be delivered alongside sustainable investment for specialist domestic abuse and VAWG services which meet women's mental health needs and support their empowerment and recovery. This must include dedicated funding for counselling and therapeutic services for women and children within domestic abuse services.

Ahead of the introduction of the Health and Care Bill, we also urge your department to listen to the needs of survivors of domestic abuse and VAWG – particularly the most marginalised women – and ensure their voices and experiences are central to Integrated Care Systems. The new ICS' must have duties to report back on key outcomes for survivors and clear mechanisms for including the voices of survivors and specialist women's services within decision making, in line with the principles of patient engagement in decisions about their care and in the commissioning process.

We hope you consider our concerns and meet with Women's Aid's Chief Executive to ensure that survivors of domestic abuse are central to the women's health strategy and the upcoming reforms to the health care system. Without sustainable funding for specialist women's VAWG services, we know that survivors of domestic abuse will not be effectively supported to recover from the devastating effects of domestic abuse.

Thank you for your consideration of this letter and we hope to receive your response in due course – please contact f.nazeer@womensaid.org.uk to arrange a meeting.

Yours sincerely,

Farah Nazeer, Chief Executive, Women's Aid Federation of England

Ms Dickie James MBE, Chief Executive, Staffordshire Women's Aid

Caren Barnfather, Business Manager, Harbour Support Services

Wendy Bulman, Shropshire Domestic Abuse Service Manager, Shropshire Domestic Abuse Service as part of Connexus Homes

Dr Liza Thompson, CEO, SATEDA

Beverley Jones, Chief Executive, The Next Chapter

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Paula Carling, Service Manager, Wear Valley Women's Aid

Ms Souad Talsi MBE, Founder, Al Hasaniya Moroccan Women's Centre

Fiona Gwinnett, CEO, Wight DASH

Sophie Meuwissen, Project Coordinator, Cambridge Women’s Aid

Jo Gough, CEO, Rise

Heidi Riedel, CEO, Woman's Trust