Scottish Women's Aid Parliamentary Briefing VAWG debate

30th November 2022

The cost of living crisis

One in four women will experience domestic abuse in their lifetime, 1 in 5 children live with domestic abuse. Men's violence against women is a cause and a consequence of women's inequality, as recognised by Scotland's Equally Safe strategy. Women's economic inequality means they have fewer financial resources, capital or savings and more existing debt to be able to cope with rapidly increasing costs of energy and food. Women's disadvantaged position in the labour market, including part-time, insecure and/or low paid employment and unpaid care work, has a direct impact on their incomes and poverty. Women's caring responsibilities, interrupted employment patterns, and lower incomes make women twice as likely to be reliant on social security as men.

Recent changes to the social security system have had a profound impact on women. For example, the benefit cap and the two-child limit predominantly affect lone parents, 91% of whom are women. The single household payment of Universal Credit weakens women's access to an independent income and facilitates abusers' ability to gain financial control. The Scottish Government is committed to providing individual payments of Universal Credit within flexibilities devolved under the Scotland Act 2016, however, this has yet to be delivered. As a result of these changes, women have been put at greater risk of deeper and sustained poverty. The UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights reported that these changes have perpetuated the gendered aspects of poverty, taking a greater toll on women than men.[1]

The costs of leaving crisis

Women's pre-existing economic inequality means that they are disproportionately harmed by the cost of living crisis. Within this, lone parents, black and minoritised women, disabled women, unpaid carers and women with insecure immigration status are particularly disadvantaged. Women's poverty is one of the critical enabling conditions for perpetration of domestic abuse. **Soaring energy and food costs, coupled with stagnant wages and an inadequate social security safety net, enables perpetrators of domestic abuse to entrap women and places more women and children at increased risk of abuse.**

In recent research **73% of victims of domestic abuse said that the cost of living crisis had either prevented them from leaving[2]** or made it harder to leave. The immediate costs of leaving, not being able to afford to live on a single income, and the stark reality of not being able to support their children all feature in women's constrained choices. **66% of victims said**

[1] https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G19/112/13/PDF/G1911213.pdf?OpenElement
[2] https://www.womensaid.org.uk/the-cost-of-living/

that abusers are now using the cost of living increase and concerns about financial hardship as a tool for coercive control.

The Scottish Government working group on improving housing outcomes for women and children experiencing domestic abuse recommended in 2020 the development of a dedicated support fund to enable women to leave an abusive partner. This should include essential crisis costs and bridge the gap between leaving and the first Universal Credit payment.[3]

The costs of homelessness crisis

Domestic abuse is the main cause of women's homelessness in Scotland.[4] Homelessness comes at a huge financial and emotional cost to women and children, compounding the trauma of domestic abuse. In March 2021 the Scottish Parliament unanimously passed the Domestic Abuse (Protection) (Scotland) Act which granted police and courts power to remove abusers from the home and gave social landlords greater control to transfer tenancies to a victim-survivor. The legislation gives women time and access to support to consider her options and upholds her right to remain in her home. However, **18 months on this legislation is not yet enacted. Women are forced to present as homeless and social landlords across Scotland have largely failed to introduce policies that prevent and respond to women's homelessness**.[5]

Women's (and resulting children's) poverty and men's violence against women are inherently and causally connected. In Scotland we have identified key actions that will support women's access to an independent income, access to financial support and avoid homelessness:

- **Deliver automatic individual payments of Universal Credit as first committed to in 2017.**
- **Create a new fund, potentially delivered through the Scottish Welfare fund, to support women experiencing domestic abuse to be able to leave an abusive partner.**
- **Implement the Domestic Abuse (Protection) (Scotland) Act 2021 to protect the rights of women and children to remain in their home.**

Scottish Women's Aid

Scottish Women's Aid is the lead organisation in Scotland working to end domestic abuse. We plays a vital role in campaigning and lobbying for effective responses to domestic abuse. We provide advice, information, training and publications to our 34 member groups and to a wide variety of stakeholders. Our members are local Women's Aid groups, which provide specialist services, including safe refuge accommodation, information and support to women, children and young people.

For more information contact media@womensaid.scot

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[3] https://womensaid.scot/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Improving-Housing-Outcomes-for-Women-and-Children-Experiencing-Domestic-Abuse-Report.pdf (2020). All recommendations were agreed by the Scottish Government
[4] https://www.gov.scot/publications/homelessness-scotland-2021-22/pages/9/
[5] https://womensaid.scot/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Domestic-abuse-guidance-for-social-landlords-FINAL.pdf