

A close-up photograph of several hands gently holding a bright green, three-dimensional house-shaped object. The house has a chimney on the left and four square windows arranged in a 2x2 grid. The background is softly blurred, showing more hands and skin tones.

Make Home Safe for Survivors - Critical Issue Briefing on Housing & Homelessness in Scotland

Critical Issue Briefing Make Home Safe For Survivors

Make housing a right, not another fight for survival

"No woman should have to choose between staying with her abuser and becoming homeless."

Background

Every year, thousands[1] of women and children in Scotland are forced to flee their homes to escape domestic abuse. Domestic abuse is the leading cause of women's homelessness in Scotland.[2] The impact of homelessness is particularly acute for BME women, disabled women and women with no recourse to public funds.

With social housing supply falling to its lowest level in a decade[3] the cost-of-living crisis intensifying financial pressure on households, and homelessness showing only a minor fall on last year's 12-year high[4][5] survivors are increasingly left without safe options. Women are forced to choose between staying with their abuser or facing homelessness, a choice no one should ever have to make.

Women leave their home, their safety net of friends and family, their children's school and their healthcare support to escape abuse. Leaving puts women and children at risk of harm, often death. Current policies and practices are not adequate to remove the perpetrator from the home.

Separation does not equate to safety. Women are at most risk when leaving their abuser. In 2022, 61(51%) women were killed by a current or former partner and at least 25 women were leaving or had left their partner. Of these women, 11 were killed trying to separate or within the first month of separation.[6]

Background cont...

National and local housing policies and practices still too often fail to recognise women's different experiences and that these are exacerbated by domestic abuse. The Housing (Scotland) Act 2025 offers a critical opportunity to change this, but only if implemented through a gendered, human rights-based approach.

In April 2024 to March 2025, Scotland's Domestic Abuse and Forced Marriage Helpline recorded:[7]

- Over **1800** contacts where housing or homelessness was a key issue.
- Over **900** contacts where refuge was a key issue.
- Over **1500** contacts where safety was a key issue.

While helpline figures provide vital insight, they reflect only a fraction of the people seeking help. The national helpline is just one of many places survivors turn for support, and many more never make contact at all, meaning the true scale of the crisis is far greater than recorded.

For too many survivors of domestic abuse in Scotland, escaping violence does not guarantee safety. Instead, they face years on waiting lists, underfunded refuge services, and a housing system ill-equipped to meet their needs.

- A 2024 report commissioned by the Scottish Conservatives found that survivors of domestic abuse are waiting years for permanent accommodation[8]
- Women's Aid services across the country have long waiting lists for refuge spaces.
- Funding for refuge or specialist services has not increased, with some experiencing cuts, making it hard to meet increasing demand.[9]
- Most social landlords do not have adequate domestic abuse policies in place. Only a few meet good practice standards.[10] Without adequate domestic abuse policies, social landlords risk leaving survivors trapped in unsafe housing or prolonged homelessness. The Housing (Scotland) Act 2025 puts this on a statutory footing.

Because of the delays, survivors may stay in temporary accommodation, refuges, or in unsafe settings, including residing with their abuser for very long times without a permanent or safe home established. This can worsen other risks, including mental health, serious risk from abusers, and children's access to school, healthcare, and local child support.

Our ask

For the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence campaign 2025, Scottish Women's Aid calls on MSPs to ensure that women and children experiencing domestic abuse have a genuine right to housing, not just a roof over their heads, but the foundation to rebuild their lives. The briefing below provides the key issues and actions needed to address this crisis.

Key Issues and Actions Needed

1. Domestic abuse remains a leading cause of women's homelessness

Women make up the majority of those made homeless because of domestic abuse.[11] One in three survivors has to move from their home as a result of domestic abuse.[12] The Fund to Leave pilot, now rolled out nationally for 2025-26, a total of 1109 people, 538 of whom were children.[13] Responses remain inconsistent across Scotland. Local authorities vary widely in how they record, prioritise, and support survivors. Women are still asked to prove abuse to access housing, are forced out of joint tenancies, or are placed in temporary accommodation far from schools, work, and community networks.

Quote from a survivor: *"As the abuse escalated, I finally came to terms with the fact that it would be better to leave the area, so I approached the council again and was offered temporary accommodation in a hotel in the city centre. However, I'd heard of this hotel. People generally referred to it as a doss house, so I cried and pleaded with the housing officer not to send me there. Apart from its bad reputation and my vulnerable state, how on earth would I get my children to school? I also knew that if I stayed there, I'd probably have to give up my job, as my employment at that time was 17 miles away and I had no car."*

Actions Needed:

- **Make domestic abuse a nationally recognised housing need**, accepted at face value, across all local authorities.
- **Embed specialist domestic abuse training** for all housing and homelessness staff.
- Require councils to **develop prevention pathways** tailored to the needs of women and children.

2. Barriers to refuge and safe temporary accommodation

Refuge remains lifesaving, but access is shrinking. Many women are unable to access the Housing Benefit needed to pay for refuge, such as women in employment or who have assets like a mortgage, cannot meet income eligibility criteria. They are faced with the difficult choice of remaining in employment or accessing refuge, with many having to reluctantly quit their job to qualify. Women with no recourse to public funds, or those navigating complex benefit and immigration systems, find themselves financially dependent on their spouse and trapped in unsafe accommodation.

The national housing crisis is having an impact. Women, who are ready to move on, are stuck in refuge for longer than they need due to the lack of available housing blocking women in immediate need from accessing space. Women who can afford housing can't access anything quick enough, housing is too competitive, and it can take months to find a suitable private place.

Being ineligible for Housing Benefit means women cannot cover refuge costs and must choose between safety and financial survival.

Women's Aid specialist services are struggling to recover costs or making up the shortfall, with many absorbing losses to keep doors open. Budgets no longer allow services to support women with short term access to refuge, such as women with no recourse to public funds. Financial support for specialist women's services is dwindling in favour of generic support services meaning women and children do not get the trauma informed support that recognises the different, greater impact of homelessness on women.

Actions Needed:

- **Guarantee sustainable national funding** for refuge and specialist accommodation. Refuge should be freely available to ALL women.
- Urgently **review eligibility barriers** for Housing Benefit and Universal Credit.

3. Hidden homelessness

Women's and children's lives are different from men's. Women are more likely to stay with friends or "sofa-surf" than rough sleep or use homelessness services, where they can be at risk of assault. While official figures for Scotland increasingly highlight visible homelessness, the reality is that many women and children remain 'hidden' from the system—choosing sofa-surfing, staying with friends or family, or remaining in unsafe informal arrangements rather than presenting as rough sleepers or making formal homelessness applications. Women experiencing domestic abuse are disproportionately likely to be uncaptured because they use informal strategies rather than approaching services.[14] They may have children and need to stay close to schools and healthcare or are wary of child protection involvement if they present as homeless.[15]

Actions Needed:

- **Improved and gendered data collection** to evidence scale and difference of women's and children's homelessness.
- **Provide trauma-informed guidance for landlords and housing officers** handling domestic abuse cases.

4. Economic abuse and housing insecurity

Economic abuse[16] traps women in abuse and poverty. Public debt is often accrued by the perpetrator in the woman's name without her knowledge, or she is coerced into taking on debt. Women escape abuse burdened with debt, such as rent arrears or joint council tax liabilities that prevent them from starting again. Being held responsible for coerced debt and the inability to make those payments because of economic abuse often forces survivors and their children to return to their abusive partners.[17]

Actions Needed:

- **Recognise domestic abuse as a mitigating factor** in all debt recovery, rent, and credit frameworks.
- **Expand financial advocacy services** within Women's Aid and housing pathways.

5. A gendered approach to housing reform

Domestic abuse is a gendered crime, but Scotland's housing policies remain largely gender blind. Without gendered analysis, reforms risk reproducing the inequalities that drive women's homelessness.

Actions Needed:

- **Embed a gendered analysis of housing and domestic abuse** in all national and local strategies.
- **Develop a National Women's Housing and Homelessness Strategy**, co-designed with survivors and Women's Aid services.
- **Resource data collection and monitoring to track outcomes** for women affected by domestic abuse.

Housing is justice. Without a home, there can be no recovery, no safety, and no future for women and children escaping abuse.

Conclusion

Every woman and child in Scotland deserves a safe and secure home. Domestic abuse must no longer be a fast track to homelessness.

MSPs and the Scottish Government have the power to change this and implement the Housing (Scotland) Bill to ensure survivor safety and wellbeing. This includes:

- Funding refuge and specialist services sustainably.
- Committing to housing as a cornerstone of gender equality and justice.

Together, we can build a Scotland where no woman or child is made homeless by abuse ever again.

Further contact

To discuss these matters further, please contact Stephanie Millar, Head of Policy - stephanie.millar@womensaid.scot

References

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- [3] Shelter Scotland, Social house building plummets to lowest level in a decade. 2024 [online] Available at: https://scotland.shelter.org.uk/media/press_releases/social_house_building_plummets_to_lowest_level_in_a_decade_following_budget_cuts
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- [11] 23% vs 5% Scottish Government (2024) Homelessness in Scotland: 2023-24. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/homelessness-in-scotland-2023-24/pages/characteristics-of-the-homeless-population/>
- [12] Women's Aid (2019) Economics of Abuse. Available at: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Economics-of-Abuse-Report-2019.pdf>

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[13] The Scottish Government's Ending Homelessness Together Fund, and Equality Unit, provided £500,000 for a 4-month pilot. This fund was delivered by 9 Women's Aid services and provided financial support of up to £1000 to women living in the 5 Local Authority areas that had seen the highest women's homelessness applications (according to Scottish Government statistics 2022-23) because of domestic abuse.

The fund was delivered by 9 Women's Aid services across the 5 Local Authorities, providing a vital service where women could apply to the fund, whilst also having access to essential, specialist DA support as well as being able to be referred on for any other relevant support and advice. Scottish Women's Aid (SWA) supported the specialist services, and together develop the necessary infrastructure to administer, monitor and record the fund.

[14] Office for National Statistics, 2023. "Hidden" homelessness in the UK: evidence review
Available at:

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[15] (2024) Gender and the Housing Emergency, Engender and Shelter Scotland. Available at:

<https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Shelter-Scotland-and-Engender-Report.pdf>

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[17] Scottish Women's Aid (2025) Response to Social Justice and Social Security Committee Inquiry: Financial Considerations When Leaving an Abusive Relationship. Available at:

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