

# Residential services for women survivors of abuse and multiple disadvantage

Implications of the Covid-19 pandemic:

Where are we now?

## Key Points:

- Knowledge and understanding of trauma and the workings of gender and other social inequalities are absolutely critical to effective work and service development.
- Women with lived experience, helping each other, should continue to be at the heart of the sector.
- When necessary improvements in service provision can be achieved in a very short time.

## Introduction

This paper is intended as a contribution to current discussions amongst those managing and working in residential services for women, who are concerned about the future of refuges and other services for women in urgent need of a safe place to stay. It offers some reflections on changes in the sector precipitated by the Covid-19 pandemic and although the pace of change is such that some of the contents may be quickly out of date, we believe there may still be useful learning for the future. This paper grew out of discussions that took place in the Women and Girls Initiative (WGI) Action Learning Set on Residential Services for Women. This group\* met regularly since September 2019, shifting on-line at lockdown. The themes that emerged were also explored in WGI Community Calls and conversations with key informants, and through examination of published literature.

In the spring of 2020, the Covid-19 virus began to take hold and in addition to the NHS and statutory social care, whole swathes of the not-for-profit sector providing services to people in need, were being directly and indirectly affected in a variety of ways. These included the reduction or closure of some face-to-face services at the same time as an increase in the number of people seeking support as a result of furlough, job losses, lock-down and the virus itself.<sup>1</sup>

Many providers, including of residential services, rapidly responded and adapted and are now recovering from the crisis.<sup>2</sup> In this they have been helped by the flexibility of commissioners and funders and the provision of some emergency funding.<sup>3</sup> However, women continue to need accommodation despite, as well as because of, Covid-19. In some areas, this need has increased as refuges and hostels have been forced to close their doors to new referrals as the result of the lockdown. Meanwhile the Coronavirus crisis continues to have a disproportionately adverse effect on women who are most vulnerable, including those from Black and minority groups, and women without recourse to public funds.<sup>4</sup>

Drawing on learning from The National Lottery Community Fund's Women and Girls Initiative, discussions with individuals who hold strategic and delivery roles and the available literature, here we describe why women need accommodation and what services should be like following the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on their lives and on residential provision. It concludes with a discussion of opportunities that have been created by the pandemic and the challenges that remain.

\* Angelou Centre; Bromley and Croydon Women's Aid; Eve; Hillcroft College; Housing for Women; POW Nottingham; Seerose; Trevi House; Venus; Women at the Well.

## What women need

The women of specific concern here are those in urgent need of a safe place to stay. This includes those escaping domestic violence and abuse, and those for whom homelessness is a consequence of the cumulative effects of a lifetime of abusive experiences, poverty and discrimination.<sup>5</sup> For many of these women, the struggle to survive their lives is evident in their mental health difficulties and, for some, reliance on drugs and alcohol.

### Violence, Abuse and Homelessness

In research conducted with women using a homeless shelter:<sup>6</sup>

- Between 40% and 50% were found to have experienced domestic violence
- Between 19% and 20% had experienced sexual abuse as a child.

In a study of women waiting for a refuge bed:

- 7% of the women slept rough and 40% of them sofa-surfed.

Regardless of individual differences, women in these circumstances have fundamental needs in common. They need to feel safe and secure; to be listened to and treated respectfully; to have their needs acknowledged, and for services to empower them to claim a better future for themselves.<sup>7</sup> Safe accommodation is pivotal in giving women time to think things through, gain support from other women who have been through similar experiences, regain strength, confidence and self-esteem, and put fear behind them. Refuges, hostels and supported accommodation for women are about much more than rooms and roofs:

“... successfully 'housing' an individual requires understanding and addressing underlying issues and meeting additional needs.”<sup>8</sup>

“Residential really can offer a fresh start. It's corny but sometimes that's what is needed. It also provides a place where women can learn about normal social relationships and interactions again – a resocialization process. Also living close up with women who have been through the same shit and got there is very powerful – it's the embodiment of hope.”<sup>9</sup>

## Effects of the Covid-19 pandemic

### Increased demand

Demands on services were already high prior to the pandemic.

### Refuge Provision

- The UK and European Parliaments have adopted a capacity provision of one family refuge space per 10,000 population, a level of provision that has never been achieved.
- The UK national refuge provision is at 3,649 refuge bed spaces; the minimum target recommended by the Council of Europe in 2018 was calculated at 5,562.<sup>10</sup>
- There are only 325 designated bed spaces for Black and minoritised survivors in the whole country, representing 8.5% of the national provision.<sup>11</sup>

“Budget cuts means that only those women who have exhausted all other resources get referred to us: the threshold is very high and these are women with multiple adversities and no stabilizing factors in their lives – [many have] lost their children to care and are completely alone in the world.”<sup>12</sup>

All the indications are that the restrictive measures, lockdown, and associated stress have resulted in a sharp rise in women being subjected to violence at home leading to an increased need for refuge. Across Europe the number of women making emergency calls had risen 60% in April, compared to the same month in 2019.<sup>13</sup> No one is suggesting that the surge in domestic violence is a short-term phenomenon, as key factors including unemployment and poverty are likely to persist, and WGI projects reported numerous conversations with women planning to leave as soon as lockdown lifted.

Women have been more likely to sleep rough when anxieties about infection made it more difficult to access hostels, sofa surf or exchange sex for a bed. The impact of the lockdown on women working in low paid and vulnerable occupations is expected to further increase the population of homeless women.

### Government intervention

Concern to contain the spread of the virus amongst rough sleepers led to an unprecedented emergency operation.<sup>14</sup> Government demanded that Councils house rough sleepers within days, and by the end of May an estimated 5,400 homeless people in England and Wales were being housed in hotels at the government's expense. Empty hotels, an estimated fifty, mostly from the cheaper chains, were taken over by local authorities and charities.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, with few exceptions there is little to suggest that women's differing needs to men were recognised in the rush to provide short-term solutions.<sup>16</sup> The example opposite is one of those exceptions and exemplifies the speed, imagination and flexibility of specialist women's organisations in responding to the needs of particularly disadvantaged women in the context of Covid-19.

### A new model

At the beginning of the Covid-19 outbreak, the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) secured premises, suitable for use as emergency temporary housing to support local authorities in providing women with safe accommodation. To achieve this:

- GMCA approached a number of different agencies and Stockport Women's Centre in association with Greater Manchester Women's Support Alliance (GMWSA) were able to offer assistance.
- They were tasked with the mobilisation, set up and interim management of the accommodation and set about doing this in association with Great Places Housing Group, Manchester City Council and GMCA.
- The accommodation was intended for women who are homeless or facing homelessness, including rough sleeping or in shared supported accommodation where the service was unable to meet public health guidelines regarding Covid-19. This included women experiencing domestic abuse, trauma, or contact with the justice system as well as other multiple disadvantages.
- The service delivery model was designed to be a Trauma Responsive Service Model in order to create a safe and secure environment for each resident and to avoid further traumatisation.

What made it possible?

- The progressive nature of GMCA recognizing the specific needs of homeless women.
- Partnership working - the mix of statutory, voluntary sector and private support.
- Funding from a private Family Trust which enabled the purchase of whatever was needed.
- GMCA's acknowledgement of the expertise of the specialist organisations in the GMWSA and their understanding of the needs of severely disadvantaged women.
- Robust commitment by GMCA to support GMWSA in implementing a Trauma Responsive Service Model – a new way of thinking for some partners involved in the initiative.

## Service responses

Women's services faced a significant challenge in meeting increased demand, whilst re-organising services so that staff and residents could be protected from the virus. This has included a huge increase in staff working remotely, and providing clients with the technological resources and support to engage with this new way of working. The creative responses and commitment of those working in the sector is very evident.<sup>17</sup> To illustrate, part way through lockdown this is what was happening in one of the projects:

“ *The refuge population has been stable since lockdown. So 25 people – seven families. They have been living communally and very successfully. Fortunately, one woman is a teacher and has set up a 'school' for the children that is working really well, and one woman goes out to do the shopping every day. They have a big garden which helps. They have made good use of peer support and haven't needed to access any other services. The women feel very proud of themselves for managing in these circumstances. The refuge staff are on rota e.g. one day on, two days off. So far, everyone has stayed healthy.*”

**North Devon Against Domestic Abuse (NDADA)**

As the lockdown lifts, projects are responding to a further influx of women unable to make or maintain contact during the last three months. With continued uncertainty about funding, staff are anxious about being asked to respond to demand while 'standing on jelly', as one project worker said.

## Learning from the Covid-19 pandemic

Evidence is accumulating about the ways in which Covid-19 has affected women's lives and the services which support them. What are the lessons for those providing and commissioning residential services? How can they inform on-going debate and provide a legacy that ultimately improves provision?

## How has Covid-19 impacted the quality of residential provision for women?

There is agreement that the pandemic has shown what can be achieved when there is a willingness to find solutions. Street homelessness was reduced in days, and many of those housed in hotels had no recourse to public funds. As one informant put it: *'This is what can happen when you are bold'*. Reports from homeless women who moved to hotels have largely been positive.<sup>18</sup> The psychological impact of living as a guest in pleasant facilities has been considerable. It has also had a beneficial effect on health and provided workers with opportunities to form relationships with women, and begin linking them up with relevant services. The Manchester hotel initiative (see above), developed in partnership with women's organisations, was unique and considered to be particularly successful in providing residents with safe, gender informed, care and accommodation.

## Can greater equality be promoted?

Over the years, concerns have been expressed that the philosophy of equality and mutual aid of women's refuges and other women only accommodation has been undermined and that competition for funding and pressure from commissioners has led to a more 'professionalised' 'social service' style provision:

“ *...a change from a feminist ethos of mutual empowerment of women, where workers would often be experts by experience, towards a less equal relationship of professional workers helping service users.*<sup>19</sup>”

In contrast, many WGI projects have reported that the pandemic has created a context that is promoting more equal relationships between staff, volunteers and women seeking support. The shift to remote working and on-line meetings is one reason for this change. In the past, location of a meeting was an important determinant of who had the time and resources to attend. It is no longer necessary to factor in travel time and cost; and participation in meetings and networks is much easier:

“ *I have joined spaces that I have never joined before.*<sup>20</sup>”

Meetings and conversations on-line are also reported as feeling less intimidating and more equitable:

“ *[On Zoom] everybody is around the table in the same size.*<sup>21</sup>

*You see the commissioner on their bad hair day – that’s very levelling.*<sup>22</sup>

*On-line meetings are a great equaliser.*<sup>23</sup>

Importantly, these effects also impact the relationship between worker and client where on-line working is reported to reduce the ‘social’ distance, and the status differential between worker and client.

“ *Working from home is a leveller. It’d be good not to lose that ... not to slip back into ‘othering’ women.*<sup>24</sup>

During lockdown women in refuges have had to live with less day to day contact with staff, and to interpret and follow ever changing policies about safety. WGI residential services report that women living in shared accommodation during the lockdown have supported each other practically and emotionally and although occasionally conflict and tension have occurred they have benefited from building trust and intimacy with each other and from the trust necessarily placed in them by staff:

“ *The enemy was the virus outside – so it brought us together; we were all in this together and residents recognized the risks and compromises staff were making to keep them safe and were very grateful that the service wasn’t closing down around them as was happening elsewhere.*<sup>25</sup>

There are signs that women in some residential services have wanted, and are taking, more control over decision making. For example, reflecting on the changes that had taken place in their residential unit, one of the managers of the Nelson Trust commented:

“ *The women wanted to own the situation and the [lockdown] guidance immediately and allowed how they responded to the situation to empower them.*

There are also reports that women, including young women, are being more forthcoming about their lives, experiences, views and options. They want to be heard and are being emboldened by activism taking place elsewhere.

#### **Are new partnerships and shared campaigns emerging?**

A recent WGI briefing paper suggested that new partnerships have emerged from the crisis.<sup>26</sup> Where competition for resources had frequently characterised the funding model, alliances of services supporting women with housing and accommodation can create a stronger voice in representing women’s needs. Through the WGI, more than a dozen providers of refuges and hostel accommodation have been meeting (and continue to meet virtually) to share their concerns collectively.

This is also a good time to build on the pre-existing work of organisations such as the Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance (DAHA), which campaigns for women who have experienced domestic abuse. DAHA has developed a Whole Housing Approach designed to prevent women becoming homeless and relieve the bottlenecks in refuges through a coordinated pathway into more sustainable housing options for women.<sup>27</sup>

#### **Challenges**

Residential services for women have been buffeted by the Covid-19 pandemic and while some of the changes described here are positive and demonstrate what is achievable, those working in the field are still mindful of the challenges that persist.

#### **Are broader services more women-centred and gender informed?**

It is not clear that mainstream services are any more focused on the multiple and complex needs of homeless women than previously. While new partnerships and models of provision for women have emerged policy makers and providers need now to adapt and use this experience to ensure that services are tailored to women’s needs.

“ *The hotel model is gaining traction – but it’s not sufficient just to allocate beds and a couple of volunteers. It is skilled work engaging and working with women in crisis!*<sup>28</sup>

The signs that the pandemic has fostered greater connection, solidarity, and desire for action is encouraging but it is important that these changes are not taken for granted:

“ *Don't lower the energy – this seems to be one of the most challenging times for the sector. We are most at risk of not getting funding – it is Covid now... If it isn't that it will be Brexit.*<sup>29</sup> ”

While new technology has facilitated some positive changes, its limitations also need to be recognised:

“ *Not everything is going to be progressed through on-line meetings/conversations; it shouldn't be treated as a universal solution?* ”

Holding on to valued changes in the provision of direct support needs to be accompanied by efforts to keep the needs of homeless women on the agenda of government. This means adding weight to national campaigns such as DAHA and new partnerships forged to meet the challenge of Covid-19.

#### ***How are services to be funded in the future?***

There are concerns about short term emergency funding which has no obvious legacy including where women, who have been housed in accommodation including hotels, will be provided for in the longer term. This includes women with No Recourse to Public Funds as refuges depend on housing benefit to cover women's rent. Relatively small sums of money have been made available rapidly to assist services in dealing with a crisis situation but it is the long-term effects of Covid-19 on women's lives and services that now need to be addressed.<sup>30</sup>

There is therefore a need to stabilise and increase funding for services. Services may need to broaden their search for sustainable solutions and look to the private sector, legacies and building an individual and corporate donor base alongside commissioned services and grants.

“ *This may also be a time to reduce reliance on commissioning and find new sources of funding. Do we really want to go back to completely being reliant on commissioning to pay for our refuges?*<sup>31</sup> ”

## Final thoughts

The range of responses to the need for emergency accommodation during the pandemic is offering women different experiences. Some women, placed in women-only hotels, are benefiting from greater safety, respect and contact with staff. There are indications that for others living in refuges and residential services, the pandemic has intensified the communal living and group processes that are known to be healing; which counteract the isolation of abuse, and help women to claim a better life for themselves.

Taken together, these effects of Covid-19 could help ensure that more women with lived experience take their place at the centre of decision making and service provision and that developments in the sector are more fully survivor led and inclusive of those who are most marginalised.

**Information in this paper draws on the contributions of participants in the Women and Girls' Initiative Action Learning Set on residential services for women and girls which met between September 2019 and May 2020; on-line community call meetings for WGI projects held during lockdown and on additional discussions with staff from Nelson Trust and Welsh Women's Aid.**

**Published: September 2020**

The Women and Girls Initiative is a £44.7million investment by The National Lottery Community Fund supporting 62 projects across England with funds raised from the National Lottery. This discussion paper was written by Jennie Williams with Georgie Parry-Crooke as part of the [WGI Learning and Impact Services](#) provided to WGI projects by the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (TIHR), DMSS Research and the Child and Women Abuse Studies Unit (CWASU). We would also like to thank Janet Bowstead for her insights and contribution to our discussion. Find out more [here](#).

## References

1. <https://www.ncvo.org.uk/practical-support/information/coronavirus>.
2. Cooney, R. (2020). 'The voluntary sector does not die: How charities took on Covid-19'. *ThirdSector*, 27 May 2020.
3. In May 2020, the UK Government announced a £200 million emergency funding scheme for delivery organisations experiencing income concerns alongside increased demand for services <https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/news/press-releases/2020-05-20/statement-about-the-coronavirus-community-support-fund>.
4. Imkaan. (2020). [Letter to the Prime Minister: urgent need for government action to support Black and minoritised women victims and survivors of violence during the COVID-19 pandemic](#).
5. Heimer, R. (2019). *A Roof, Not a Home: The housing experiences of Black and minoritised women survivors of gender-based violence in London*. London: Latin American Women's Aid: [http://lawadv.org.uk/en/waha\\_executive\\_summary/](http://lawadv.org.uk/en/waha_executive_summary/).
6. St Mungo's. (2014). *Rebuilding Shattered Lives: Getting the right help at the right time to women who are homeless or at risk*. London: St Mungo's.
6. Groundswell. (2020). *Women, Homelessness and Health: A Peer Research Project*: <https://groundswell.org.uk/what-we-do/peer-research>.
7. Bowstead, J. C. (2019). 'Spaces of safety and more-than-safety in women's refuges in England. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 26(1), 75-90. doi:10.1080/0966369X.2018.1541871.
7. Homeless Link. (2019). *Promising practice from the frontline: Exploring gendered approaches to supporting women experiencing homelessness and multiple disadvantage*. London: [https://www.homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/site-attachments/Women%27s%20research\\_March%2019\\_1.pdf](https://www.homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/site-attachments/Women%27s%20research_March%2019_1.pdf).
8. Smeaton, E., Boase, R., Cheshire, S., & Tinsley, L. (2020). *Adapting in adversity (Summary): Delivering services to people experiencing multiple disadvantage during Covid-19*. National Lottery Community Fund.
9. In conversation with Kirsty Tate and Rose Mahon at the Nelson Trust.
10. Imkaan. (2020). Letter to the Prime Minister: urgent need for government action to support Black and minoritised women victims and survivors of violence during the COVID-19 pandemic.
11. Imkaan. (2020). Letter to the Prime Minister: urgent need for government action to support Black and minoritised women victims and survivors of violence during the COVID-19 pandemic.
12. In conversation with Kirsty Tate and Rose Mahon at the Nelson Trust.
13. <https://unric.org/en/who-warns-of-surge-of-domestic-violence-as-covid-19-cases-decrease-in-europe/>.
14. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/audio/2020/may/19/how-coronavirus-led-to-rough-sleepers-being-housed-in-hotels>.
15. Gentleman, A. (2020). 'Hotels used to house rough sleepers during pandemic return to business'. *Guardian*. 18th June 2020.
16. In conversation with Janet Bowstead, June 2020.
17. Smeaton, E., Boase, R., Cheshire, S., & Tinsley, L. (2020). *Adapting in adversity (Summary): Delivering services to people experiencing multiple disadvantage during Covid-19*. National Lottery Community Fund.
18. Gentleman, A. (2020). 'I might have died if they hadn't rescued me': life inside the new hotels for the homeless'. *Guardian* (Online), 7 May 2020.
19. Bowstead, J. C. (2019). 'Spaces of safety and more-than-safety in women's refuges in England. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 26(1), 75-90. doi:10.1080/0966369X.2018.1541871.
20. Community Call.
21. ALS Member.
22. Community Call.
23. Community Call.
24. Community Call.
25. In conversation with Kirsty Tate and Rose Mahon at the Nelson Trust.
26. [https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/insights/documents/WGI-Briefings-Partnership-Working\\_Final.pdf](https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/insights/documents/WGI-Briefings-Partnership-Working_Final.pdf). June 2020.
27. <https://www.dahalliance.org.uk/what-we-do/whole-housing-approach/>.
28. In conversation with Sara Kirkpatrick, Welsh Women's Aid
29. Community Call.
30. <https://www.solacewomensaid.org/news/solace-southall-black-sisters-launch-covid-19-crisis-project-create-urgently-needed-safe>.
31. Community Call.