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VAWG Takeover at Labour Conference: Putting Women and Girls at the Centre

A joint press release from Southall Black Sisters, Latin American Women's Rights Service, Women for Refugee Women, Rape Crisis England & Wales, End Violence Against Women Coalition, Women's Aid, Refuge, Surviving Economic Abuse, Women's Budget Group, Respect, and SafeLives

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As the Labour Party Conference gets underway this weekend, specialist violence against women and girls (VAWG) organisations will take over the agenda – calling on the government to turn its pledge to halve VAWG within a decade into meaningful action.

Leading VAWG organisations – including community-based ‘by and for’ services – are coming together at the Conference to have the urgent conversations this government has neglected to hold. Through three key events, we will call for vital reforms:

- **Sunday 28 September – Reception** on building a whole-system approach to VAWG, focused on the sector’s priorities for the national strategy to ensure a joined-up, coordinated response to preventing VAWG, investing in support for victim-survivors, and holding perpetrators and institutions to account.
- **Monday 29 September – Roundtable** on the erasure of Black, minoritised, and migrant women and girls from government commitments, focused on the systemic barriers facing these communities and the urgent reforms needed to ensure access to life-saving support and justice.
- **Tuesday 30 September – Panel** on post-separation abuse of women and children, focused on the hidden harms of abuse that continue after separation and the measures government must take to address them.

These events will amplify the call for:

- A comprehensive, integrated, whole-system approach to prevent and respond to all forms of VAWG - including domestic abuse, sexual violence, economic abuse, so-called ‘honour’-based abuse, stalking, and online harms.
- Multi-year funding for specialist victim-survivor support services, with ringfenced support for ‘by and for’ organisations.
- Recognition of children as victims in their own right.
- A full firewall between the police and Immigration Enforcement, and the abolition of No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) for migrant victim-survivors.
- The inclusion of asylum-seeking women within the government’s mission to end VAWG.

The Labour government’s pledge to halve VAWG within a decade is a welcome starting point. But pledges alone will not be enough. As the scourge of VAWG – perpetrated disproportionately by men – continues to devastate lives, urgent and decisive action is required. Too many victim-survivors are left with lasting trauma, and for some, the consequences are fatal. VAWG organisations’ events at the Conference will make clear that if the government is serious about its mission, it must listen to the sector, centre women and girls in every decision, and deliver the reforms needed to end VAWG once and for all.

For far too long, state failures to prevent violence and respond effectively to victim-survivors have left women and girls with little confidence in the system. A recent [survey](#) revealed that 69% of women had either first- or second-hand experience of VAWG. Black, minoritised, and migrant women and girls are further marginalised by institutional racism and the barrier of NRPF. [Research](#) shows migrant women with NRPF are three times more likely to be subjected to VAWG. [Femicide figures](#) in London also highlight racial disproportionality: in 2023, over 62% of victims were Black, a shocking rise from 43% in 2022.

These numbers should stop us in our tracks. Behind every statistic is a woman or girl whose life has been cut short or profoundly harmed. Now, more than ever, we must prioritise tackling VAWG. The Labour manifesto offers hope for long-overdue reforms – reforms the specialist VAWG sector has been championing for decades.

Yet progress has been slow and, to VAWG organisations' deep disappointment, meaningful consultation has been blocked. Even discussions on the forthcoming VAWG strategy – which will likely underpin the government's solutions – have excluded many of the very experts who work alongside victim-survivors daily. This is alarming. The sector's expertise is rooted in decades of lived experience and frontline evidence; silencing these voices risks designing policies that fail the very women they are meant to protect.

Instead of centring victim-survivors, the government has leaned too heavily on a criminal justice approach. Reform of our broken system is essential, as it currently [re-traumatises many victim-survivors of sexual violence and abuse](#), particularly due to lengthy Crown Court backlogs and shamefully low charging and attrition rates. Yet a sole focus on the criminal justice system ignores the widespread mistrust that many women and girls hold towards it, preventing them from ever engaging with the system in the first place. This mistrust is even more acute for Black, minoritised, and migrant women, who often face disbelief, racist stereotypes, and the absence of a firewall to protect them from Immigration Enforcement when seeking help. Without a firewall, many women are forced to choose between silence and safety, fearing that reporting abuse will lead to detention or deportation. [Research](#) from the Step Up Migrant Women campaign found that over 60% of migrant women had the abuser threaten them with deportation if they sought help – showing how immigration status is weaponised to trap women in abuse.

Compounding this, investment in life-saving support has been grossly inadequate. Community-based 'by and for' services – proven to be highly effective – are [six times less likely](#) to receive government funding. Despite [evidence](#) showing a need for £502 million annually for victim-survivor domestic abuse support, including £280 million for community-based services, only £19.9 million additional funding has been pledged for victim-survivor support services this year to a handful of services, in the [context of actual and real-terms cuts to existing funding streams](#). The effect of this inadequate funding is already having a tangible impact on victim-survivor services and victim-survivors, with three specialist Rape Crisis centres forced to close their doors already this year and services for Black, minoritised, and migrant victim-survivors operating under unprecedented precarity. While the Government has invested £53 million across four years into high-risk, high-harm domestic abuse perpetrator responses, the disparity with direct investment in essential victim-survivor support, particularly specialist 'by and for' services and sexual violence provision, is stark. These services remain on a cliff edge, raising a pressing question: where in these measures are victim-survivors being seen, heard, and supported?

The focus on reporting and already identified perpetrators sidelines Black, minoritised, and migrant women – particularly those with insecure immigration status – who face structural barriers to engaging

with the criminal justice system. The failure to invest in specialist 'by and for' services not only leaves them with limited avenues for safety but also costs the state. [Estimates](#) show investment in such services could save £127 million nationally. Without this investment, marginalised women are left with the least protections and the greatest risks. In the current political climate, these risks are further exacerbated by the way VAWG is being [weaponised](#) to fuel racist, anti-immigrant narratives – distracting from the true causes of violence and undermining the frontline work that is already saving lives.

VAWG organisations see the Conference as a vital opportunity to reset the government's approach. We urge ministers to recognise the urgency of what is being called for – and to work in partnership with the VAWG sector to deliver the transformative change women and girls have been demanding for decades.

Selma Taha, Executive Director, Southall Black Sisters, said:

"While we welcome the government's commitment to halving violence against women and girls within a decade, we are extremely concerned that the current approach risks leaving Black, minoritised, and migrant women and girls behind. Specialist, community-based 'by and for' services have too often been sidelined and excluded from vital conversations about the urgent reforms needed to prevent and address VAWG. We are calling for an end to this exclusion – we must have a seat at the table to share the lived experiences and needs of some of the most marginalised women and girls, and to contribute meaningfully to shaping legal and policy reforms, particularly in an increasingly racist and hostile immigration environment. We hope that the VAWG takeover at the Labour Party Conference will be a first step toward that change."

Gisela Valle, Executive Director, Latin American Women's Rights Service, said:

"For far too long we have known that the prioritisation of immigration control over safety places migrant women at risk of violence and abuse whilst severely limiting their access to justice and support. Recent vital pieces of legislation such as the Domestic Abuse Act and the Victims and Prisoners Act left migrant survivors completely unprotected, cementing existing discriminatory responses that disproportionately affect black and minoritised migrant women. For this reason, an ambition to halve VAWG could not be achieved if it doesn't specifically address the needs of those most marginalised and offers equal protection to all. The ending VAWG sector is keen to support the government's development of a strategy that brings all of these considerations to the table to develop robust system wide responses that effectively respond to the needs of the most vulnerable. We view the VAWG takeover at the Labour Party Conference as a prime opportunity to foster this collaboration for the benefit of all."

Andrea Vukovic, Co-Director, Women for Refugee Women, said:

"Most women seeking asylum in the UK are survivors of gender-based violence – including rape, domestic abuse, forced marriage, sexual exploitation, and female genital cutting. Yet their experiences are routinely overlooked, and instead of receiving the safety and support they need to recover, they are met with an asylum system that exposes them to further abuse, exploitation and harm. This not only causes immense suffering but directly undermines the Government's ability to meet its pledge to halve violence against women and girls within a decade. If asylum-seeking women are excluded from this promise, a dangerous two-tier system will persist – where asylum-seeking women, predominantly from racialised backgrounds, are treated as less deserving of protection and support. We look forward to building momentum around this issue at the Labour Party Conference, and to working with others across the sector to push for a VAWG strategy that leaves no woman behind. The government must recognise that protecting all survivors is not optional, it is essential for achieving real, lasting change."

Dr Sara Reis, Deputy Director and Head of Policy and Research, UK Women's Budget Group, said:

"The lifetime economic cost of sexual violence and abuse perpetrated in one year alone is estimated to be £400 billion. Failing to invest in tackling VAWG is not just morally indefensible – it's also economically reckless."

Gemma Sherrington, CEO, Refuge, said:

"The government's pledge to halve violence against women and girls is ambitious and important – and it's vital we do not let that focus slip. This commitment must mean halving all forms of VAWG – both online and offline – and protecting all women and girls, including Black, minoritised and migrant women, and those with insecure immigration status. It must be backed by long-term, sustainable funding for frontline services – particularly 'by and for' organisations – and developed in genuine partnership with the specialist VAWG sector. We have a real opportunity to transform the systems that are failing women. We cannot afford to waste it."

Ciara Bergman, Chief Executive, Rape Crisis England & Wales, said:

"Every year, Rape Crisis centres support enough survivors to fill Wembley Stadium. Our 24/7 Support Line connects another stadium's worth of calls. And over a million people come to our website, most often wanting to know whether what happened to them 'counts'.

We think it does. But a lack of political will or funding commitments means we are on the brink of losing these, and other, specialist support services. Rape Crisis Centres have not benefited from additional funding announcements, 3 Rape Crisis Centres have closed in the last year alone, and almost a third of our remaining centres (27%) are at risk of imminent closure unless the government commit to extending funding beyond March 2026. We call on the Government to secure the future of all services supporting women in the aftermath of VAWG, including vital specialist by-and-for services supporting Black, minoritised and migrant women and girls.

Survivors of male violence and abuse deserve better than this, and we know it's possible."

Farah Nazeer, CEO, Women's Aid, said:

"We are at a pivotal moment in our fight towards eradicating domestic abuse – our government has made the welcome commitment to halving VAWG in the next decade and the time for decisive action is now. We urge the government to work with us and our sector colleagues to deliver change where it truly matters – the epidemic of VAWG will not be solved without addressing the root causes of misogyny and racism. Improving perpetrator responses and the criminal justice system alone will not work in isolation, we must listen to survivors and support them where they need it most, and for that, long-term, secure funding for domestic abuse services is essential. Only this can guarantee that the sector continues providing life-saving support to women and children when and where they need it most. Survivors must have the same access to support regardless of where they are in the country, regardless of their race or immigration status. The upcoming Strategy is a unique opportunity to make true, long-lasting change and keep women and children safe – we stand ready to work together to end this heinous crime once and for all."

Andrea Simon, Executive Director, End Violence Against Women Coalition, said:

"We are now over one year on from the Labour government's election with its manifesto commitment to halve VAWG within a decade. We are still without any published VAWG strategy which sets out what action the government plans to take to uphold the rights of women and girls to live free from violence and abuse. This state of limbo is causing great uncertainty for our coalition – with every day that passes, more

women and girls are avoidably harmed and life-saving specialist VAWG services lose staff and face risk of closure. Meanwhile, the government's approach to migration continues to entrap survivors, whilst migrant and racialised communities are targeted and scapegoated. The challenge we face is urgent. The End Violence Against Women Coalition is participating in this VAWG takeover at Labour Party conference to ensure that VAWG is a political priority for the government, that all survivors are supported without discrimination, and to set out our [recommendations](#) for change."

Sam Smethers, CEO, Surviving Economic Abuse, said:

"Last year, 4.1 million UK women had their money and belongings controlled by an abusive current or ex-partner, trapping them in dangerous situations and making it harder to rebuild their lives. Black, Asian and other racially marginalised women are disproportionately affected, facing economic abuse at more than twice the rate of White women. For migrant victim-survivors, the risks are even greater and escape routes even fewer. To halve violence against women and girls, the government must scrap no recourse to public funds for migrant survivors, create a firewall between statutory services and immigration enforcement, and ensure migrant survivors can open a bank account while regularising their status. The Prime Minister has rightly called economic abuse a "national emergency". Now we need action to match those words and break the cycle of economic abuse."

Liz Thompson, Director of External Relations, SafeLives, said:

"We are 100% behind the ambition to halve VAWG in ten years. We call on the PM and the Chancellor to back this commitment with effective long-term resourcing for the system and the services which respond to victims and survivors, particularly those working to support marginalized and minoritised victims, and ensuring these voices are heard. We want to see all Government departments playing an active role and backing any fine words in the new strategy with real cash and hard commitments. Survivor voices must be at the heart of the new strategy along with meaningful engagement with VAWG and domestic abuse services, who play such a vital role in supporting them. We see the ambition from key Ministers to driving change – let's match that with a pan-Government strategy which goes beyond the criminal justice system and into every area of the response. We stand ready to play our part in making that real for every adult and child survivor."

Jo Todd CBE, Chief Executive, Respect, said:

"Respect is pleased to be working with our fellow VAWG sector partners to deliver our collective messages at this year's Labour conference. The pledge to halve VAWG in a decade is an ambitious one that will only be fulfilled if the government takes a wider view that not only goes beyond criminal justice but also looks at the root causes of domestic abuse. In addition, we need to see government deliver the funding needed for victims to match the scale of the problem. We stand with our colleagues from the "by and for" organisations that have long been calling for meaningful inclusion in the development of the VAWG strategy, and for issues such as the lack of a firewall to protect migrant victims of domestic abuse to be addressed, as a matter of urgency."

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