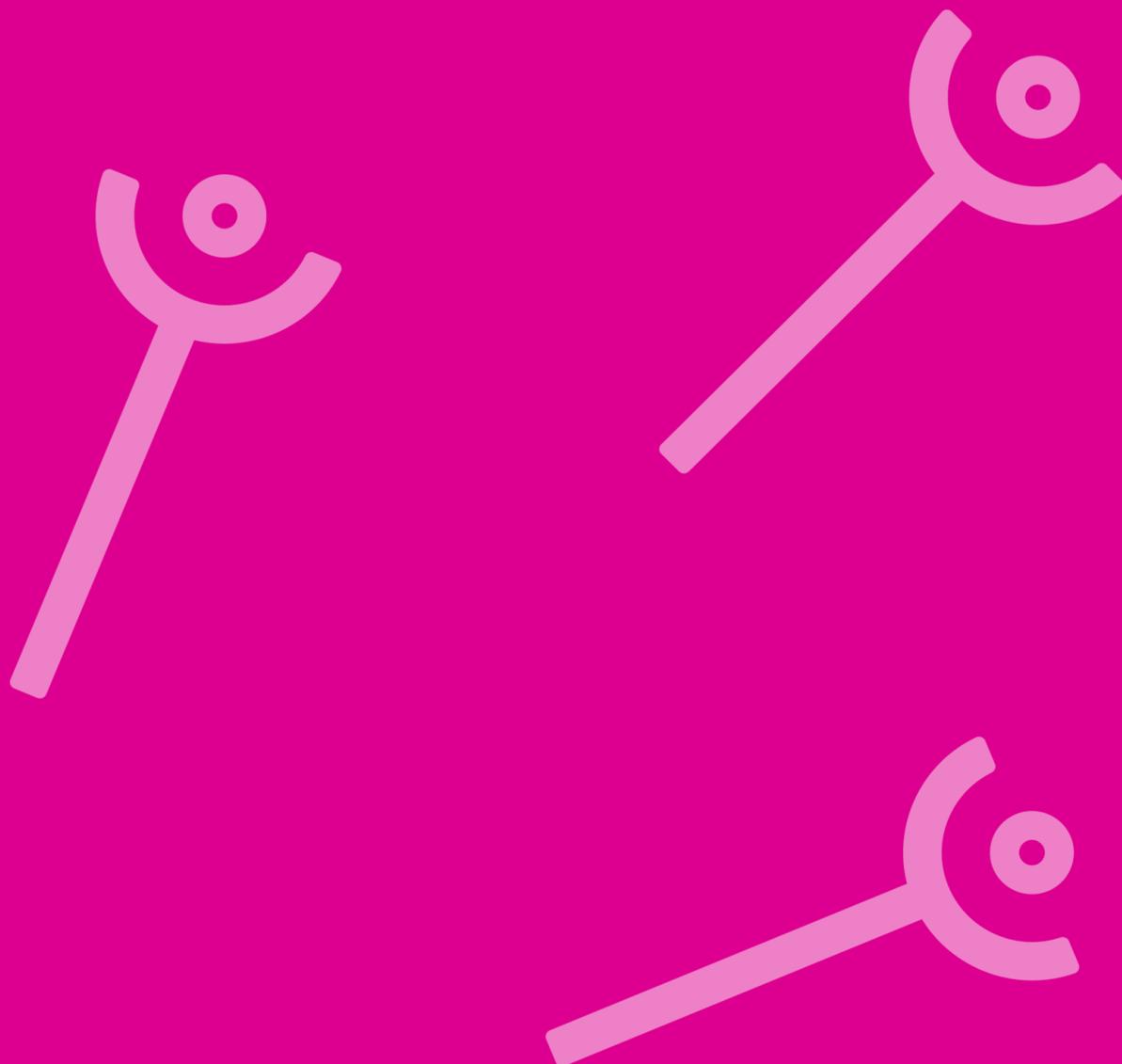


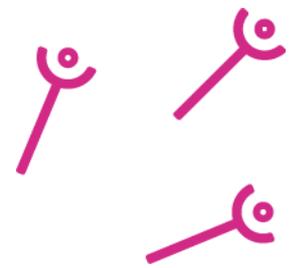
Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) strategy: Consultation Response

Fulfilling Lives Lambeth Southwark Lewisham
February 2021



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Fulfilling Lives Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham is funded by The National Lottery Community Fund and is part of the National Fulfilling Lives Programme. This is a £112 million investment over 8 years supporting people who are facing multiple disadvantage; the people we work with have a combination and interconnected needs of mental ill-health, are homeless/or at risk of homelessness, substance use and/or offending histories.

Certitude is the lead agency of the programme, delivering the programme in partnership with Thames Reach and strategic partners; South London and Maudsley NHS Trust and the three boroughs of Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham.

Our three core aims are:

- Change the lives of people experiencing multiple disadvantage for the better – now and in the future.
- Give equal value to the voices of both the decision makers and the people we support, so that all opinions are heard and respected equally.
- Make an impact on the way individuals are supported - by influencing policy and practice, locally and nationally.

If you would like to get in touch you can on:

Website - fulfillinglivesisl.london

Twitter - [@fl_isl](https://twitter.com/fl_isl)

Email - information@fulfillinglivesisl.london

Introduction

Fulfilling Lives Lambeth Southwark Lewisham (LSL) work with people experiencing multiple disadvantage, 57% of whom are women. These women experience high levels of domestic abuse, sexual exploitation and violence, alongside drug and alcohol use, poor mental health, experience of the criminal justice system and having children removed from their care. Involvement in sex work, particularly street-based sex work, is high. All women experiencing multiple disadvantage are likely to have experienced gender-based violence because of the impact of and interconnected nature of VAWG, mental ill-health, drug and alcohol use, criminal justice contact and other support needs.

24% of the women we are working with have reported experiencing violence in a relationship

45% of the women we are working with are involved in street-based sex work

76% of the women we are working with are using more than one type of drug

78% of the women we are working with have had children removed; this amounts to 82 children placed in the care system

This document provides evidence from women with lived experience of multiple disadvantage and our experience of supporting these women to contribute to the UK Government's Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Call for Evidence to inform the development of the next Tackling VAWG Strategy. It provides a response to the questions asked in the survey relevant to the work delivered by Fulfilling Lives LSL. It focuses on representing the experiences and voices of women involved in street-based sex work because this marginalised and stigmatised group is often not represented in Government policy and strategy and their voice is often not heard.

Types of VAWG

Women experiencing multiple disadvantage and who are involved in street-based sex work are especially vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence. A list of some examples of the physical, sexual and psychological abuse disclosed are below:

Being required to perform a sex act on a dog • Being robbed • Being filmed performing sexual act • Being headbutted by a punter because he wanted his money back – after having done what he asked for and they had agreed on • Having head pushed down whilst performing oral sex • The punter refusing to pay • The punter refusing to leave • The punter refusing to let woman out the car or leave • The punter removing a condom without the woman's consent • Being told by a punter disrespectfully what sexual act he wants her to perform • Being asked to play a child-like role during a sex

"I got raped – I had to get out the car and this guy was taking me the wrong way he had all these surgical knives on him, I was kidnapped on a couple of occasions"

"I've met with a guy in a hotel who I realised had a gun – the fact that I stayed there and didn't get killed was unbelievable"

act • Raped by a punter • A forced abortion • Hearing a woman being violently sick in a dealer's flat, the dealer having been known to falsely imprison women in his flat and beat them badly • Raped by a known perpetrator • Being hit with a hammer by a dealer • Being assaulted with a wrench by a punter • Being restrained and attacked by a dog resulting in numerous facial injuries • People calling a woman "stinky [name]" for so long she now responds to this as her name • Being banned from local shops • Men giving free drugs to the women and then demanding they go out and earn money or else threaten violence exerting control • Being held at gunpoint by a punter • Someone putting pictures of woman's children around the area with the words "their mother is crack whore" • The women being pitted against each other sexually and appearance wise by punters • False imprisonment • Broken bones • Being called horrific names on the phone by partner • Being burnt by a dealer • Stranger shouting "crack-whore" at a woman • Someone writing in graffiti "[name] has AIDS" in phone boxes and other places around the area • Being beaten unconscious by a punter who she had stolen money from • Punter/dealer/boyfriend playing psychological games with woman including getting other women to wear her underwear and having sex with other women in front of her • A perpetrator who is known for making women consume his faeces and smearing on their faces • Witnessing another woman involved in prostitution being beaten up with a plank of wood • A punter known to buy drugs for the women before the sex act and then places towels all around the car and wears surgical gloves when committing the assault • Being branded with a tattoo • A video of a woman performing a sexual act being posted online without her permission • Being kicked out

Accessing support

The people we work with often lack trust in services and in the police, which presents a barrier to reporting incidents. There is a perception that the police are not caring or understanding of their situation due to their involvement in the sex industry and use of drugs. This is reflected in the feedback below from women we support.

"The other day there was an incident when I got hit, the police turned up, they found out it was about drugs money, they just took details and left, they couldn't care less"

"I'm on a red alert and they still won't come out for me – I'm being threatened and they still won't protect me – he's gonna hurt me again before they come out – they just don't care – I have to let him abuse me and hit me and keep him there just for them to take me seriously"

"If you smoke drugs and you call the police they just don't care/ treat you right"

"What will it take for women to get the support we need – a broken face, a broken leg, a death – police don't care about us"

"I won't report to the police, they don't care they just care about their statistics, they just look at us as if we are more paperwork for them"

"I got raped as well and I never reported it... From the way I heard other women talk about it – I didn't want to put myself through that."

"The police never even ask you how you are – they just come and take a statement and leave –they act like they don't care"

Services, including VAWG services, are often not able to offer flexibility in terms of when and how to access a service, which is crucial to enable services to engage with this group of women. It can also take time to build trusting relationships with staff which is essential in enabling women to access support and is key in a trauma- and gender-informed approach. Previous negative experiences of services mean that women are often suspicious of services and experience of trauma can impact on the times it takes to form trusted relationships. The support options available for survivors are limited and may not be able to accommodate the aspects of disadvantage experienced by this group such as drug and alcohol use. This means that survivors are excluded from accessing these services.

More support is needed

We believe that more flexible support should be made available for survivors. We advocate for the importance of trauma- and gender-informed services, that give access to people when they need it. Support should be flexible in terms of access times and locations that suit the individual. Some specialist counselling services have timeframes in which someone must engage following an incident; we believe this should be open-ended.

“Sometimes you just need to get away from men...this is especially true for women who are involved in prostitution or who are with a guy who beats them up”

“When you go to a place like that [drugs service] its horrible anyway and then if you’re a working girl you see people you really don’t want to see when you’re there...All services should have a women’s only space”

All services should have an understanding of VAWG, including recognising the signs, knowing how to ask and where or how to refer. This includes the police. Although the role of the police is not to support survivors, but the time it takes between reporting an incident and being offered support is too long. There is a need for police to be trauma-informed as every interaction with the police matters. It is important to have female police officers available for reports of sexual violence or domestic abuse. It is retraumatising for people to repeatedly tell their story, so consideration should be given to the processes around this. Court processes can also be retraumatising and time consuming which can lead people to withdraw their statements. More ISVA (Independent Sexual Violence Advocate) should be available to support people through this process. Both IDVA (Independent Domestic Violence

Advocate) and ISVAs should have specialist training in multiple disadvantage so they are able to offer good quality support to this group.

There should be increased availability of specialist mental health services; specialist support is particularly important for people experience multiple disadvantage.

Sex work and VAWG

We believe that it is dangerous to label all sex work as VAWG. We also believe the Nordic Model whereby the purchase of sex is criminalised, drives the sex industry further underground making it more dangerous for women. As such, we oppose the Sexual Exploitation Bill 2019-21 that was introduced to the Houses of Commons in December 2020 and will be publishing a response to this soon.

There are different levels of exploitation and kinds of risk associated with different types of sex work and the reasons for doing it, which impacts how likely a person is to report to the police and how likely the police are to take the report seriously.

We recognise the importance of specialist support for people involved in street-based sex work. If the Government wants to provide options for exiting, this needs to be done in partnership with commissioning of drug and alcohol services and housing. Drug and alcohol use is often a factor leading to involvement in sex work so it is essential to address this in order to support people to exit sex work. Housing is also a key barrier for this group. Supported accommodation is often not appropriate and other residents can harass or exploit vulnerable women, and women sleep in crack houses or stay with punters or abusive boyfriends as an alternative.

“Already there is desperation and violence – what’s going to happen [with a Nordic Model] its going to get worse. There would be more deaths, more unreported crimes”

Government priorities

Based on the evidence outlined above we believe the Government should prioritise:

Investing in specialist support for women who experience sexual exploitation and violence and ensuring this is accessible to everyone. This should include funding specialist BME services.

Embedding trauma-informed and gender-informed practice across services, including police and criminal justice systems.

Embedding coproduction to ensure that the voice of those with lived experience is central in the development of policy, strategy and legislation change.

A national commitment to, and incentives for, the commissioning of codesigned, co-delivered and co-evaluated services for women facing multiple disadvantage and VAWG in all local areas.