

July 2022

# The independent strategic review of funding and commissioning of violence against women and girls services: **NSS response**

## Question 1 What do you consider to be the main function or purpose of services challenging violence against women and girls (VAWG)?

There are three main functions for services challenging violence against women and girls. The first is to provide support for victims of VAWG. The second is to bring perpetrators to justice. The third is to identify and address the root causes of VAWG. The third purpose may appear less urgent, but an effective strategy could prevent many cases of VAWG entirely or empower victims to escape the abuse at an earlier stage.

## Question 4.1 What role should third sector organisations play in the provision of specialist services to women, children and young people experiencing VAWG?

National and local authorities will often have good reasons to delegate services to third sector organisations. This may be because the organisation has a greater level of expertise or is able to access a section of the community that public bodies find difficult to reach. However, authorities should be very careful which organisations they use.

We have specific concerns about the push for more religious groups to provide services to the public. Many religious organisations do not support gender equality. This may take the form of barring women from leadership roles within the organisation and/or teaching that women are subordinate to their husbands or other male relatives. They may also oppose access to contraception and abortion, both of which may be essential to victims of VAWG. Public bodies should not outsource public services aimed at challenging VAWG to organisations which do not support the basic principles of gender equality.

In England, the push to outsource public services to religious groups has caused concern among those working specifically on women's issues. The government's launch of a £1 million pilot fund exclusively for faith groups that provide community services last year attracted criticism from Pragna Patel of Southall Black Sisters (SBS), which defends the rights of women in ethnic minority communities. She said SBS has to "constantly contend" with faith groups that claim to deliver services to women and children subject to domestic abuse but in reality puts them "at further risk of

abuse and harm". She said public funds should go to community groups, "especially those working on unpopular issues within their communities such as violence against women and girls".

Faith-based service providers can be alienating to service users who do not belong to the religion in question, as well as to LGBT people, who often have bad experiences with religion. This is especially the case if the religious group providing the service teaches that same-sex relationships are fundamentally wrong.

Finally, it is essential that religious groups are not allowed to run what should be public services in exchange for the right to proselytise to service users. This is both potentially alienating and exploitative. No organisation should be given access to vulnerable people in order to further an agenda separate to the service provided.

Some religious organisations understand the importance of not proselytising while serving the public and have policies in place to prevent this. According to the 2020 'Faith responses to modern slavery' report from the Universities of Sheffield and Leeds, a number of religious organisations helping survivors of modern slavery have self-imposed safeguards that warn against discussing faith with clients. The report mentions one such organisation which employs "a careful separation of faith" from "day-to-day operations". The report concludes that all organisations in contact with potential survivors of modern slavery should implement the 'non-proselytisation clause' of the Human Trafficking Foundation Slavery and Trafficking Survivor Care Standards.

But not all religious groups abide by this. One example from England is Azalea, a charity which says it provides support to women involved in sex trafficking. Its website says the organisation "was established in prayer" and that prayer is "essential for the fulfilment of the vision that we will see an end to commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking". It says prayer is "always offered" to the vulnerable sex-trafficked women its volunteers work with, and the prayer is "almost always accepted". There is more information here:

<https://www.secularism.org.uk/opinion/2021/07/helping-the-public-shouldnt-mean-pushing-religion-on-people>

However well-intentioned this offer of prayer, one must question the extent to which Azalea's clients feel they can refuse the offer. 'Faith responses to modern slavery' found some survivors who had sought help from religious organisations had experienced pressure to attend religious services because they felt it was a requirement of the support. Offering assistance to desperate people with 'religious strings attached' can cross the line into exploitation.

We are aware that in June, the Evangelical Alliance presented a report to the Scottish Government featuring case studies of Christian groups that work with people struggling with addiction:

<https://www.eauk.org/resources/what-we-offer/reports/stories-of-hope-addiction-recovery>. It should be noted that drug addiction can often play a role in VAWG.

The report was a response to a pledge from the Scottish government to increase funding to reduce levels of addiction in Scotland, with £50 million over the next five years committed to grassroots and community organisations. The report was partly a pitch for this money; as it said: "Our hope in producing this report is to demonstrate the value and necessity of directing this funding toward many of the pre-existing faith-based programmes across Scotland."

It is clear some Christian groups featured in the report do proselytise to the extremely vulnerable people they work with: "Many of the respondent organisations and individual workers who responded adhere to a Christian ethos and missional vision, consequently incorporating the Christian

faith into their programme curriculums. Every programme in the report welcomes people of all faith backgrounds and beliefs, however, in participating, patients are given opportunities to learn more about the Christian faith as part of their rehabilitation. Approximately 30% of survey respondents offer Bible studies as pastoral support."

We urge the Scottish Government to exercise caution in working with religious organisations to tackle VAWG. It should refuse to work with those that do not uphold basic principles of equality based on sex, sexuality or religion or belief, and those that proselytise or otherwise push their religious agenda while working with vulnerable women.

#### Question 4.2 What role should local authorities play in the provision of services to women, children and young people experiencing VAWG?

Local authorities should oversee services in their area and ensure that any third party providers are appropriate and are providing good quality service.

#### Question 4.3 What role should the Scottish Government play in the provision of services to women, children and young people experiencing VAWG?

The Scottish Government should oversee the strategy to ensure that appropriate services are provided to those who need them. They will need to be aware of vulnerable groups who may not have access to information, for example those who do not speak English or are members of insular religious communities. They will need to set guidelines to ensure that any third-party providers used are appropriate. This includes ensuring no providers are allowed to impose religious ideology on the public

#### Question 7 How can barriers to services for women, children and young people experiencing VAWG be removed across Scotland?

When services are run by religious groups this can be a significant barrier to access; please see our answer to Q 4.1 for more information.

Members of insular religious communities may sometimes be difficult to reach, especially those who do not speak English. It may be necessary to provide services specific to those groups. When doing so, it is essential that the organisations do not reinforce patriarchal norms that are conducive to VAWG.