

Written Evidence from Agenda for the  
Women and Equalities Select Committee Inquiry into  
Coronavirus and the impact on people with protected characteristics

April 2020

Joint response supported by a coalition of  
organisations working with women who face multiple disadvantage



## Summary

Agenda, the alliance for women and girls at risk, welcomes the opportunity to respond to this inquiry on the impact of Covid-19 on people with protected characteristics, and are encouraged to see the equalities impact prioritised. This joint response has been coordinated by Agenda and builds upon the concerns of specialist organisations at the frontline of supporting women and girls at risk during the pandemic. <sup>i</sup>

Women and girls facing multiple disadvantage experience a combination of complex and overlapping problems including homelessness, violence and abuse, substance misuse, mental ill health, poverty, and contact with the criminal justice system. For many, their experiences of disadvantage are underpinned by a history of extensive violence and abuse. As a result of the existing disadvantages they face, these women and girls are disproportionately at risk as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on society and support services.

As we highlighted in our open letter to the Prime Minister<sup>ii</sup>, without explicitly taking the needs of this group of women and girls facing into account – they, and the services that support them, are at risk of suffering deep and long-term consequences as a result of this crisis. We need urgent action to ensure the most marginalised women and girls get the support and protection they need, and to ensure women’s specialist services are part of longer-term solutions post-lockdown.

### Key points:

- 1) Women and girls with multiple disadvantage are more likely to experience a range of complex needs, which is often the consequence and legacy of abuse. These challenges are likely to intensify during lockdown, compounded by lack of access to services, and make women and girls more vulnerable to the virus.
- 2) Consequently, a VAWG and trauma aware approach must be woven across the public sector response. We welcome the focus on the importance of refuge and domestic abuse services, but highlight that many survivors rely heavily on a wider set of services.
- 3) Specialist women's services (in particular Women's Centres and services led 'by and for' women from minoritised communities) are expertly placed to support women with multiple disadvantage. Support from government must include this wider group of services, who are not just responding to an increase in demand now, but anticipate increased demand for services in the long-term, as the impacts of the intensification of the problems they face play out.
- 4) Investing in these vital services takes money into local communities, leads to employment and decreases pressure on wider service by preventing need

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<sup>i</sup> Agenda gathered this evidence through a roundtable with 21 member organisations working with women and girls at risk, held on Monday 27 April 2020. All quotes are from alliance members and their service users.

<sup>ii</sup> Open letter to the Prime Minister, sent on 2 April 2020, signed by nearly 50 organisations: [Organisations Call For Immediate Action To Ensure The Most Disadvantaged Women Are Not Ignored During Covid-19](#)

and women from reaching crisis point. Investing in local specialist services must be understood as central to our economic recovery, not as discretionary.

To ensure Government's promise to protect the population is inclusive of the most marginalised women and girls, and to relieve pressure and demand on severely strained public services, the following measures are needed.

Key recommendations:

<b>3 weeks: Immediate safety</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Emergency flexible funding for and involvement of women's services, including specialist 'by and for' organisations, in the crisis response</li><li>2. Immediate suspension of benefit conditions and sanctions</li><li>3. Immediate suspension of No Recourse to Public Funds</li><li>4. Immediate increased representation of women in girls in the Government's strategic Covid-19 response</li></ol>
<b>6 months: Post-lockdown</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>5. Local authorities must address cliff edges in support beyond lockdown</li><li>6. Understanding disadvantaged women's needs in the longer-term by collecting data that is disaggregated by gender, race, age, disability and other relevant vulnerability factors</li></ol>
<b>Future sustainability</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>7. Secure core funding for gender-specialist and 'by and for' services</li></ol>

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## **Full response**

### **Violence against women and girls**

1. Since the national lockdown to control the spread of Covid-19 was implemented on Monday 23rd March, there has been a significant increase in violence against women and girls (VAWG).

2. Emergency measures restricting freedom of movement have put women and girls at greater risk by isolating them with their perpetrators and limiting their ability to safely access support. Women's Aid experienced a 41% increase in users visiting its Live Chat site in the first 3 weeks of lockdown.<sup>1</sup> Refuge reported a 700% increase in calls to its helpline in a single day.<sup>2</sup> In the first fortnight of being told to stay at home, ten women were killed by men they lived with.<sup>3</sup>

3. Agenda welcomes the Home Office's recently launched You Are Not Alone campaign, clarifying that isolation rules do not apply to individuals experiencing domestic abuse, and the additional £2 million announced for domestic abuse

services. **Further funding is needed, for community- and accommodation-based services to give women and their children safe exit routes.** At least £65 million<sup>4</sup> is needed to meet increased demand for VAWG and domestic abuse support.

*"I have experienced abuse and if I had to live with that person now, I would be in a permanent state of fight or flight, I may be suicidal. His rages would have been triggered by even more insignificant things and I would be doing everything to keep him happy."*

- Woman who has experienced abuse

### **Women and girls who are homeless**

4. Women and girls who are homeless are some of the most at risk in our society.<sup>iii</sup> Those rough sleeping are particularly susceptible to the illness: 74% of women who are homeless already have a current physical health issue.<sup>5</sup> The average age of death for a homeless woman who is rough sleeping is a shockingly low 43 years (compared to 45 years for men who are rough sleeping).<sup>6</sup>

5. In addition to the increased risk that women and girls who are homeless face of contracting the virus if they cannot safely self-isolate, they are at greater risk of exploitation and abuse during the pandemic. The increase in VAWG during lockdown puts women at greater risk of becoming homeless with nowhere safe to go, and many will be forced to remain with or return to a perpetrator. Emergency accommodation, such as mixed hotels and hostels, may be inappropriate and unsafe and can place women at further risk. Women and girls who are homeless are particularly vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse; 28% of homeless women have formed an unwanted sexual partnership to get a roof over their heads.<sup>7</sup>

6. As a result, many women are likely to be among the 'hidden homeless', sleeping out of sight for safety and avoiding male-dominated accommodation where they are at risk of sexual violence. Services anticipate seeing an increase in the number of women who are forced onto the streets, as precarious arrangements break down under the pressures of lockdown.<sup>iv</sup>

7. Agenda welcomes the Government's emergency fund of £3.2million to support people who are rough sleeping and homeless. This, and any **further funding, must include ring-fencing for women-only accommodation and specialist wrap-around support. All accommodation for women must be properly staffed by well-trained and trauma-informed workers, supported by safeguarding measures to prevent women from being exploited or trafficked from accommodation. Beyond lockdown, local authorities must provide suitable move-on options to prevent**

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<sup>iii</sup> Official government homelessness statistics (2020) report that 56% of statutorily homeless households in England are women with dependent children or lone women. The Government estimates that 14% of people sleeping rough are women. However, these figures do not give a full picture, with many women and girls likely to be among the 'hidden homeless'.

<sup>iv</sup> Agenda roundtable with frontline services, Monday 27 April 2020.

women from being pushed back into unsafe living arrangements or on to the street.

*"I stayed at my friend's house when I was homeless but always left during the day. She wouldn't have had the space to have me there during lockdown. It would have been terrifying - I would have absolutely nowhere to stay."*

- Woman who was 'Hidden Homeless'

### **Women and girls in poverty**

8. The economic impacts of the pandemic have compounded pre-existing inequalities, with women and girls facing poverty at the sharpest end of inequality.<sup>8</sup> Services reported significant challenges for women they work with in accessing food and essentials; closures of food banks and lack of affordable food and household items in shops has hit women hard.<sup>9</sup>

9. Some services report that destitution is driving some women in to 'survival sex', with some forced to return to selling sex, and others becoming involved for the first time.<sup>v 10</sup> In areas where there is not sufficient support in place, women previously involved in selling sex face potential homelessness, destitution and problematic substance use as a result of the lockdown. The few gender-specialist services that are most able to support these highly stigmatised women have had to cancel outreach services and face challenges around communicating with women remotely - with some women living in coercive and controlling relationships which make it hard for them to access support digitally.<sup>vi</sup>

10. We welcome the announcement of the suspension of reviews and reassessments of disability benefits. **There must be a pause on all sanctions and conditionality, alongside clarity for women and services about what resources and support are available to women facing multiple disadvantage.** Some local authorities and healthcare providers have responded effectively to meet the needs of women at risk of destitution. We now need a whole-systems approach to ensure women in poverty are not subject to a postcode lottery for support.

*"The economic impact of this crisis will force many women to sell sex, which brings up questions around transmission of Covid-19 and whether they are able to have safe sex. I was on the frontline at the age of 18 doing this work myself and for some women it's something you end up doing because you need to feed your children and survive. I think many more women will be forced into sex work during this crisis."*

- Woman who has experience of sex work

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<sup>v</sup> Changing Lives (2020) report an increase in the number of women selling sex on street, as well as those selling sex online.

<sup>vi</sup> Agenda roundtable with frontline services, Monday 27 April 2020.

## **Women and girls in contact with the criminal justice system**

11. Covid-19 poses a disproportionate risk to women and girls in custody - the majority of whom are highly vulnerable,<sup>11</sup> with extensive experiences of abuse and violence, serious mental ill-health, substance misuse, poverty, and homelessness.

12. We support calls to reduce the number of women and girls in detention, including custody and immigration detention, to save lives and reduce pressure on the NHS,<sup>12</sup> and welcomed the decision to grant early release to pregnant women and women in Mother and Baby Units.<sup>13</sup>

13. Support services report that despite the Ministry of Justice announcing plans to release pregnant women and women in Mother and Baby Units on 31 March 2020,<sup>14</sup> services have not been provided with sufficient and timely information from MoJ and HMPPS which would allow organisations to support women into the community.

**14. The early release scheme must be delivered urgently and extended to those with six months or less still to serve and those with underlying health conditions.** This must be underpinned by appropriate resettlement support, with the full involvement of women's specialist services. Without this, women leaving prison are at high risk of homelessness, destitution, substance misuse, exploitation and abuse.

On the impact of lockdown on women recently released from prison:

*"They had been locked up and are now being locked up again [...] It is bringing back traumatic memories of being in prison which we have to work through."*

- Women's centre service provider

## **Girls and young women**

15. The outbreak of Covid-19 and subsequent suspension of the Care Act<sup>vii</sup> present serious safeguarding concerns for girls and young women at risk. Girls are already overlooked in responses to issues facing children and young people, and there is a significant lack of age and gender-appropriate support.

16. We are concerned about reports that children's social carers are unable to provide sufficient appropriate support to children in care,<sup>15</sup> particularly where children are placed in unregulated accommodation and report not knowing who to approach with problems, or in out-of-area placements where there are pre-existing challenges maintaining contact with family and friends.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>vii</sup> Gov UK (2020) [Coronavirus Act 2020](#). Women facing multiple disadvantage are also disproportionately impacted by the suspension of the Care Act 2014.

17. The suspension of the assessment duties in the Care Act leaves many girls normally considered in need of care and support in high-risk situations.<sup>viii</sup> The suspension of the duty to assess the needs of young adults as they turn 18 and transition to adult services – a time already recognised as one in which young women face a ‘cliff edge’ in support – is of particular concern for young women already at risk, and may mean missed opportunities to prevent them becoming entrenched in poor outcomes.<sup>ix</sup>

18. School closures can increase the risks for adolescent girls of different forms of VAWG, sexual exploitation and abuse.<sup>17</sup> Without reaching and supporting them, there is a real risk that girls trapped at home in abusive families or relationships, with limited ability to contact services,<sup>x</sup> are at increased risk of all forms of VAWG,<sup>xi</sup> abuse and exploitation. Serious case reviews from child sexual exploitation incidents make clear that overlooking the needs of girls in these types of situations leads to devastating consequences.

19. Girls and young women are already at high risk of poor mental health and self-harm.<sup>xii</sup> <sup>xiii</sup> Experiences of being locked down, loneliness, loss and bereavement, are likely to exacerbate this in the short- and long-term. Services report that self-harm and suicide attempts have been higher amongst girls and young women than adult women for their services.<sup>xiv</sup> **It is essential girls and young women do not remain a blindspot in the UK’s response to the pandemic.**

*" A significant challenge for young women is that a number of services are not running as usual. [...] We are concerned that there is a barrier for young women who don't have access to Wi-Fi/ data in accessing their network and support services, which means that they aren't able to be involved in decisions regarding their care. This also leaves them isolated from their families and peers.*

- Service provider

### **Women and girls from minoritised communities**

20. Women and girls who are BME, LGBTIQ, disabled or from migrant communities experience VAWG,<sup>xv</sup> homelessness,<sup>xvi</sup> poverty,<sup>xvii</sup> and contact with criminal justice

<sup>viii</sup> Child protection referrals have plummeted [by more than 50%](#) in some areas of England.

<sup>ix</sup> McNeish, D. and Scott, S. (2014) [Women and Girls At Risk: Evidence Across the Life Course](#) (Lankelly Chase)

<sup>x</sup> Services report that many girls, particularly those in care, face a “digital disadvantage”, meaning they are unable to access online support services due to lack of access to a phone, computer or the Internet.

<sup>xi</sup> Services report fears that female genital mutilation will increase and potentially happen to increasingly younger girls, with schools no longer able to detect young women at risk. (Agenda roundtable with frontline services, Monday 27 April 2020.)

<sup>xii</sup> Over a quarter of young women (26%) have a common mental health condition like anxiety or depression – almost three times more than young men (9.1%). (Women’s Mental Health Taskforce, 2018)

<sup>xiii</sup> Self-harm rates have increased disproportionately among young women. Research published in the Lancet (2019) shows that since the year 2000, rates of self-harm in England have increased across the population, and in young women they have tripled.

<sup>xiv</sup> Agenda roundtable with frontline services, Monday 27 April 2020.

<sup>xv</sup> Imkaan (2020) research shows that specialist Rape Crisis services report that BME women constituted around a quarter to a third of the women accessing their support (the higher figure was for those based in London). The

system in distinct and often disproportionate ways. They also face additional barriers to support.<sup>xviii</sup> Emerging research reveals the uneven impact the pandemic is having on these women and girls, who depend on specialist and ‘by and for’ services as essential lifelines to support.<sup>18 19</sup>

21. Migrant women face distinct, legal barriers to support. Women’s services report that women with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) are being refused support or told to self-isolate with perpetrators, putting the lives of them and their children at risk. **There must be an immediate suspension of No Recourse to Public Funds conditions which exclude migrant women from accessing essential support.** This must include women with insecure immigration status, who should have immediate access to financial and housing support whether through the mainstream benefits or asylum support system.

22. Specialist services delivered ‘by and for’ specific equalities groups are already significantly under-resourced, and face additional challenges at this time. They have been most impacted by budget cuts and competitive tendering practices, and face most difficulty fundraising during the crisis.<sup>xix</sup> These services are essential to meet the needs of the most marginalised communities, most of which do not present at mainstream and public services. **Any funding response for women in the crisis must include a ring-fenced amount for specialist ‘by and for’ services supporting women and girls from minoritised communities.**

*“Women are unravelling – without national and local government giving clear guidance, survivors of abuse won’t come forward.”*

- Specialist service provider

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majority of women had been subjected to sexual violence in intimate relationships and described contexts marked by overlapping forms of abuse and high levels of coercive control. Disabled women were particularly vulnerable to repeated/daily rape from non-disabled partners. Migrant women are also particularly vulnerable to violence and abuse, with many fearing their insecure immigration status could result in deportation if they contact authorities.

<sup>xvi</sup> For example, BME households accounted for 31% of statutorily homeless households in, LGBT young people make up 24% of the youth homeless population, and last year the number of ill and disabled people becoming homeless increased by 53% ([Agenda briefing, 2020](#)).

<sup>xvii</sup> Research from the Women’s Budget Group (2020) shows that women make up the majority of low paid earners (69%) and the majority of people living in poverty, including 90% of lone parents – 45% of whom are living in poverty. Disabled and BME women are most likely to already be living in both in-work and out-of-work poverty in the UK.

<sup>xviii</sup> Imkaan (2020) research identifies stigma following disclosure, service accessibility, lack of trust in and experience of poor policing responses, and gaps in sustainable service provision as key examples of barriers marginalised women face – all of which must be understood in the wider context of institutional racism.

<sup>xix</sup> These points about the value of ‘by and for’ services, and the disproportionate vulnerability they face as a result of Covid-19, have been reiterated in other oral evidence collected in Select Committee inquiries into the impact of Covid-19. Karl Wilding, Chief Executive of the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), distinguished women’s charities, domestic violence charities, rape crisis centre and BME services for the difficulty they face fundraising - now more than ever. Mr Wilding identified BME services as being most financially vulnerable, and as working with the most marginalised communities who are furthest from the state (Digital, Culture, Media and Support Select Committee (2020) [Impact of Covid-19 on the charity sector](#), 14:29-14-33). Dame Vera Baird QC, Victims’ Commissioner, also identified smaller specialist organisations supporting BME, LGBT, disabled communities and sex workers as being in most in need of financial support during this crisis (Home Office (2020) [Home Office preparedness for Covid-19](#) (Coronavirus), 10:47 – 10:50 ).



## Specialist services in crisis

23. Women facing multiple disadvantage are more likely to need the support of a range of services. Specialist gender- and trauma-responsive services, best placed to meet their needs,<sup>20</sup> are already limited and stretched beyond resource.<sup>21</sup> Lockdown has compounded many of the challenges these organisations, and the women they support, already face.

24. At a time when specialist women's support services are most in demand, they are facing staff shortages, increasing need amongst the women they support, additional overheads related to working remotely, and a decline in income from fundraising and donations - reducing their ability to respond to and prevent harm and placing their long-term financial sustainability at risk.<sup>xx</sup> Many do not have the capacity to compete for emergency funding from local authorities and independent funders, and disruptions to commissioning cycles will create further challenges to their funding pipeline. **All decisions being made in the short to medium term about commissioning processes must put contingency planning in place to ensure women's services are not disadvantaged by changes to these processes.**

25. Despite these challenges, women's specialist services have adapted service provision to meet heightened demand and changing need in the face of the emerging challenge. They have continued to support women flexibly, finding new and innovative ways of doing so, while managing their own internal challenges of adapting their services. These services have developed local expertise, regional sensitivity, trusted relationships and appropriate trauma- and gender-informed support to respond quickly and effectively to women and girls in crisis.

26. They are a vital part of the recovery picture longer term and central to the country's social and economic regrowth - key to relieving pressure on the public sector, which is already under strain and poorly equipped to respond to women's specific needs. **Post-lockdown, these services must be valued and sustainably funded by central government to reflect that.**

"I just want to say a massive thank you to (the women's service) for helping me move through Covid-19. They are the only people who will help and have done more than I can ever thank them for. If it wasn't for them I would be in an empty property heavily pregnant with no support whatsoever and would have probably lost my child, or worse. I literally can't thank them enough. Truly brave, amazing women."

*- Feedback from someone supported by a Women's Centre*

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<sup>xx</sup> A [survey by SafeLives](#) found that three quarters (76%) of respondents said they have had to reduce service delivery due to COVID-19.

## Key recommendations

To alleviate the impact of the crisis over the following periods of time, we are calling for:

### 3 weeks

- **Emergency funding for women's specialist services:** an emergency funding package to increase the capacity of specialist services that can provide an emergency response, single-sex accommodation and gender specialist support to meet increased demand by women and girls experiencing violence and abuse, homelessness, poverty and leaving prison. This must include a ring-fenced amount for specialist 'by and for' services supporting women and girls from minoritised communities.
- **Immediate suspension of benefit conditions and sanctions:** to prevent women being trapped further in poverty.
- **Immediate suspension of No Recourse to Public Funds:** and clear public messaging for women and services about what resources and support are available.
- **Immediate increased representation of women in girls in the Government's strategic Covid-19 response:** at a national level this must include the Domestic Abuse Commissioner and Victim's Commissioner in COBRA decision-making, and the full involvement of the women's sector. There must be an explicit consideration of gender and multiple disadvantage in Government strategy and future response to the outbreak.

### 6 months

- **Local authorities must address cliff edges in support beyond lockdown:** including the provision of suitable move-on accommodation. Exit strategy planning must have the full involvement of women's specialist services in the planning and delivery.
- **Understanding disadvantaged women's needs in the longer-term:** to understand the gendered impacts of the crisis and ensure disadvantaged women's needs are included in longer-term planning, it is essential that national and local data on Covid-19 deaths, domestic abuse, homelessness, benefits claimants and prison releases is collected and published by gender, race, age, disability and other relevant vulnerability factors.

### Future Sustainability

- **Secure core funding for gender-specialist and 'by and for' services:** it is essential that after emergency support is withdrawn, gender-specialist and 'by and for services' are recognised for their value and given secure core funding to reflect the central role they will play in rebuilding the country. The crisis has revealed the critical role these services play in marginalised women and girls' lives, and the need for these services is likely to continue increasing post-lockdown. These services cannot adapt to this new, challenging environment without adequate support from central government.


## **This evidence submission is supported by:**

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## About Agenda

[Agenda](#), the alliance for women and girls at risk, is working to build a society where women and girls are able to live their lives free from inequality, poverty and violence. We campaign for women and girls facing abuse, poverty, poor mental health, addiction, contact with the criminal justice system and homelessness to get the support and protection they need. We work to get systems and services transformed, to raise awareness across sectors and to promote public and political understanding of the lives of women and girls facing multiple disadvantage. [www.weareagenda.org](http://www.weareagenda.org) 

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## References

- <sup>1</sup> Women's Aid (2020) [Women's Aid comments on government announcement](#)
- <sup>2</sup> Refuge (2020) [Refuge sees online traffic to its National Domestic Abuse Helpline website rise by 700%](#)
- <sup>3</sup> The Guardian (2020) [I know the trauma of abuse in the home, so I fear for women in lockdown](#)
- <sup>4</sup> [Joint VAWG Sector Emergency Funding Statement](#) (2020)
- <sup>5</sup> Groundswell (2020) [Women, Homelessness and Health](#)
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- <sup>7</sup> Crisis (2006) [Homeless women: still be failed yet striving to survive](#)
- <sup>8</sup> Women's Budget Group (2020) [Crises Collide: Women and Covid-19](#)
- <sup>9</sup> End Violence Against Women Coalition (EVAW) (2020) [Open letter to the Prime Minister: Covid-19 pandemic and preventing and responding to an increase in violence against women and girls](#)
- <sup>10</sup> Changing Lives (2020) [COVID-19 Changing Lives Open Letter to the Home Secretary and Lord Chancellor](#)
- <sup>11</sup> Ministry of Justice (2007) [The Corston Report](#)
- <sup>12</sup> Women in Prison and INQUEST (2020) [Powerful coalition call on government to immediately reduce number of people in detention settings](#)
- <sup>13</sup> Agenda (2020) [Organisations Call For Immediate Action To Ensure The Most Disadvantaged Women Are Not Ignored During Covid-19](#)
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- <sup>15</sup> Children's Commissioner (2020) [What is socially distanced child protection and can it work?](#)
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- <sup>18</sup> Women's Budget Group (2020) [Crises Collide: Women and Covid-19](#)
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- <sup>20</sup> Agenda and AVA (2019) [Breaking Down the Barriers: The National Commission on Domestic and Sexual Violence and Multiple Disadvantage](#)
- <sup>21</sup> Agenda and AVA (2017) [Mapping the Maze](#)

## Other references

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- Imkaan (2020) [Reclaiming Voice: Minoritised Women and Sexual Violence](#)
- Sally McManus et al (2019) [Prevalence of non-suicidal self-harm and service contact in England, 2000–14: repeated cross-sectional surveys of the general population](#)