

## Supporting women's refuges

### Resolution Shortlist Briefing Notes



## Supporting women's refuges

*'Many women and children rely on refuges to escape violence and abusive relationships, but in recent years refuges have faced significant cuts to their services. The NFWI calls upon the Government to safeguard refuges and increase service provision in areas without adequate support.'*

### Proposer's Position

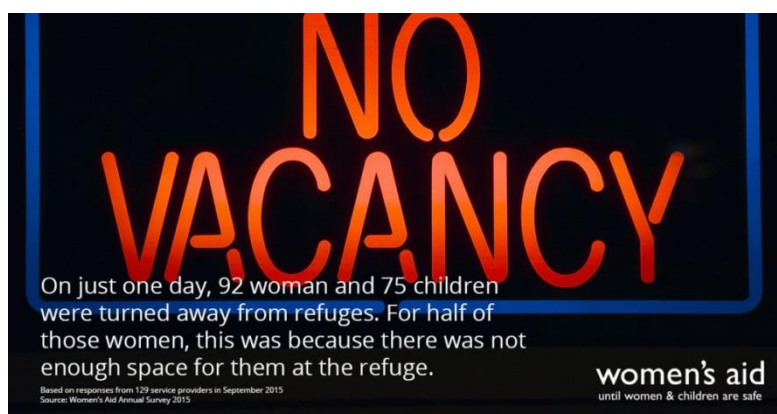
The proposer wants the WI to address the reduction in services to women's refuges for domestic abuse survivors and their children.

The proposer wants to ensure that refuges are safeguarded and service provision is improved so that those who need refuges have somewhere to seek support and protection.

### What is domestic violence and abuse?

Domestic violence and abuse is 'the repeated, random and habitual use of intimidation to control and threaten a partner within an intimate or family relationship' and can encompass, but is not limited to: physical, sexual, psychological, emotional and financial abuse.

In March 2015 the government introduced new legislation created a new offence of controlling or coercive behaviours in intimate or familial relationships. Often this abuse is unspoken of, and the type of behaviour includes; isolating a person from their friends and family, enforcing rules to humiliate and degrade the person and taking control of aspects of their daily life.



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### How do refuges help?

A refuge is a safe house for women and children escaping domestic violence and abuse, it provides a safe space for women, the address is confidential and men are not allowed in the building. Refuges are more than just accommodation; they provide emotional and practical support and allow women to have space to make decisions about their future. Children often have to flee violence and abuse with their mother.

Refuges provide a lifeline to domestic abuse survivors, on average in the UK two women are killed by their current or former partner every week, yet 66.1% of referrals to refuges are turned away. Refuges also provide counselling support for children residents as these experiences can have a devastating impact on them through into adulthood. Since 2011, domestic abuse charity, Refuge has experienced cuts to 80% of its services, and on just one day in 2015, 75 children and 92 women were turned away from refuges.



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## **Specialist support**

Refuges are used by a diverse range of people who have a diverse range of needs, for example women with mental health and drug and alcohol issues and those who may require specialist domestic abuse support, such as women from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) communities. With such complex issues, refuges require additional services to be available to the women to support them through recovery. Specialist support can include: accessing health services, gaining legal advice and finding specific refuges that cater to their cultural background.

In 2016, out of a total of 363 domestic abuse service entries on the UK Refuges database, there were only 38 services with specialist alcohol workers. Thirty-two specialist refuges have closed between 2010 and 2014, illustrating the inconsistent provision of these important services.

This is particularly worrying as women who flee violence often have to travel long distances to find safe refuge, leaving them increasingly vulnerable if certain areas have inadequate support. Local authorities are coping with shrinking budgets and may decide to cut funding for refuges, and some even enforce limits on non-local women using their services.

## **What is the government doing?**

In autumn 2016 women's refuges faced fresh threats to their services due to government plans to cap housing benefit. Womens Aid reported that this change would mean 67% of specialist refuges in England would close and 68% of those in Wales. However, on 15 September 2016 the government announced that refuges would not be adversely affected as a result of the proposed changes.

In March 2016 the government made a commitment to improving domestic abuse and violence services by pledging £80 million to protect women and girls from violence as part of a new violence against women and girls (VAWG) strategy. Although the strategy was welcomed, there were concerns that this will not improve the situation on the ground, as year upon year of cuts have left domestic abuse services struggling to cope. Alarming, in 2015 almost half (44%) of the domestic abuse services were running part of their service without dedicated funding and 19 refuge services were at risk of imminent closure.

## **How could the WI work on this resolution if it passed?**

A full campaign plan would be developed by the NFWI if the resolution is passed, taking into account developments since then. But to help inform your discussions, here are some ways the WI could consider working on this issue if it was passed.

At a **national level** the WI could call on the UK government to safeguard refuges to ensure no further cuts to their services.

At a **regional level** federations could challenge their local authority to guarantee women's refuges are at the top of their agenda.

At a **local level** WIs could work on the issue in their community by supporting their local refuge and helping with donations of clothes and supplies where needed.

## Arguments for the resolution

- The resolution has a clear objective: to support the women and children who rely on this crucial lifeline.
- The NFWI could be part of a strong coalition of charities working together to safeguard refuges, working with charities such as Refuge and Women's Aid.
- The resolution would build upon the NFWI's previous successful work on violence against women.



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## Arguments against the resolution



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- The NFWI already has a number of violence against women resolutions, although the call to action was different, there was a resolution from 1975 on providing alternative accommodation for women and children fleeing violence.
- The government has already committed £80 million to protect women and girls as part of a new VAWG strategy, will they be willing to commit any more?

## Further information

### **Women's Aid**

<https://www.womensaid.org.uk/>

T: 0117 944 44 11

E: [info@womensaid.org.uk](mailto:info@womensaid.org.uk)

### **Sisters Uncut**

<http://www.sistersuncut.org/>

E: [sistersuncut@gmail.com](mailto:sistersuncut@gmail.com)

### **Refuge**

<http://www.refuge.org.uk/>

T: 020 7395 7700

E: [info@refuge.org.uk](mailto:info@refuge.org.uk)

Contact your local authority to find out how they are supporting refuges in your area and your local refuge to see what their main concern is.

## **Video clip on the issue, available online**

Women's Aid 'SOS: Save Refuges Save Lives'

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gIjVHr6hw7I> (includes experiences that some may find distressing)

## Public Affairs Department contacts

If you have any questions about the resolutions or the resolutions process then please get in touch with the NFWI public affairs department:

Email: [pa@nfw.org.uk](mailto:pa@nfw.org.uk)

Phone: 020 7371 9300 ext 238

Post: 104 New Kings Road,  
London SW6 4LY