

Written evidence submitted by Surviving Economic Abuse (SEA) (COR0039)

Summary

- 1 Surviving Economic Abuse (SEA) is the only charity in the UK dedicated to raising awareness of economic abuse and transforming responses to it. All our work is informed by Experts by Experience - a group of women who speak about what they have gone through so that they can be a force for change.¹ Our response to this call for evidence focuses specifically on our area of expertise, economic abuse as a form of controlling or coercive behaviour within the context of domestic abuse.
- 2 While SEA recognises that the focus of the Select Committee is the work of the Home Office, the response to domestic abuse and violence against women and girls more broadly must necessarily be multi-sectoral. We will therefore raise concerns which fall across government, calling for the Home Office as the department with primary responsibility to take the lead in ensuring effective coordination of all measures which relate to victim-survivors.
- 3 Isolation is already used by perpetrators of domestic abuse to control victims and cut them off from sources of help. The measures to curb the spread of Covid-19 such as self-isolation, home-working, not leaving one's home unless essential and social-distancing therefore create a conducive context for domestic abuse by increasing the power of the abuser and creating barriers to leaving (see paragraph 5 below). Similarly measures to relieve pressures caused by Covid-19 such as relaxing child maintenance payment requirements could inadvertently exacerbate post-separation economic abuse. While SEA welcomes the government's recent campaign on domestic abuse and Covid-19 'You Are Not Alone', this needs to be underpinned by a clear strategy for prevention and intervention, including funding for services.
- 4 SEA recommends the following key measures to support victim-survivors of domestic abuse, focusing on economic independence and stability. The government should:
 - i. Provide a payment as an emergency grant for victim-survivors of domestic abuse at the point of fleeing abuse
 - ii. Provide separate payments in joint claims for Universal Credit as a default
 - iii. Remove the five-week wait for Universal Credit payment
 - iv. Convert advance payments of Universal Credit into grants
 - v. Remove the two-child tax credit limit and the benefit cap
 - vi. Increase the amount of child benefit to cover additional costs from children being at home full time²
 - vii. Suspend the No Recourse to Public Funds policy
 - viii. Make a minimum payment of child maintenance where it is not being paid allegedly due to Covid-19
 - ix. Ensure mortgage payment holidays are available to all domestic abuse victims for the maximum period of three months, even if they are already in arrears
 - x. Provide non-means tested legal aid to all domestic abuse survivors

Background

- 5 SEA's research shows that 95% of domestic abuse victims experience economic abuse, and the current environment will provide abusers with more opportunities to control, exploit and sabotage their partner's economic resources. The field of employment is a clear example. Job losses, furloughing and failing businesses will leave women without access to the income they would rely on to escape an abuser and build the economic security needed to live independently. For many victim-survivors their workplace may be the one place they felt safe and could access support safely. For both women who are now asked to work from home, as well as those who already worked from home but who now also have the abuser working from home, there may be obstacles to working. For example, with schools closed and limitations on childcare options due to Covid-19 social distancing measures, abusers may refuse to do their share of childcare. Abusers may also prevent their partners from accessing equipment they need such as computers and phones. SEA has identified many different ways in which the Covid-19 outbreak measures provide a conducive context for abusers to start, continue or escalate economically abusive behaviours (these are further detailed below).
- 6 This is in a context where women are already at a disadvantage in accessing economic resources. Women are more likely to be in low-paid and insecure employment, and they are in the majority of those living in poverty, with female headed households more likely to be poor.³ Black, Asian and ethnic minority, disabled, low-income women and single mothers are in a more disadvantaged economic position and therefore will be particularly affected if the crisis is not responded to through a gendered lens.⁴
- 7 The prevalence of abuse at this time is well evidenced. There was an increase in calls to the National Domestic Abuse Helpline by an average of 25% during the week commencing 30 March, and hits to the national domestic abuse website increased by 150% during the initial stages of the lockdown.⁵ Similarly, demand for the Women's Aid national Live Chat service has risen by over 40% since lockdown. While the Covid-19 outbreak has caused an increase in demand for support, it has caused a corresponding decrease in sources of support. A survey has shown that 84% of domestic abuse service providers have had to reduce or cancel one or more services, and over a third of refuge providers have had to reduce or cancel the refuge services they usually provide.⁶

Evidence of survivor concerns/prevalence of issues

- 8 One in five British women have experienced financial abuse (a sub-category of economic abuse) in a current or former relationship.⁷ Economic abuse threads through controlling and coercive behaviour. Six in ten successful prosecutions of the offence of controlling or coercive behaviour involve at least one form of economic abuse.⁸ Abusers may use the Covid-19 outbreak as an excuse to gain or increase their control over a victim's economic resources, or exploit/sabotage them, thereby creating

economic dependency and/or instability. Economic abuse could include, but is not limited to: using the current uncertainty to enforce ‘cutting back’ on utilities such as heating and food and other essentials such as medicine; sabotaging the survivor’s ability to work from home as explained above; pressurising her to support him financially where he has lost employment/income; making demands for her to keep making purchases and maintain a particular standard of living despite lack of income; and threatening to throw her out of the house at a time when it is even more difficult to find alternative accommodation.

- 9 A survey of domestic abuse survivors following the Covid-19 outbreak has found that access to economic resources are high on their agenda, with 54% worried about finances and 39% worried about housing.⁹ Calls to the guidance line funded as part of the Domestic and Economic Abuse Partnership operated by SEA and Money Advice Plus, have increased by 60% since lockdown. Hits to SEA’s website have increased by 83%. Most calls to the guidance line concern benefit claims and/or no income, or waiting for income, self-employment and concerns about getting into debt. There is expected to be more pressure on services when the current safety measures are lifted, as survivors who could not access them are more able to seek support and needs grow as a result of the effects of lockdown.

Access to benefits and child maintenance

- 10 Lockdown and self-isolation measures increase the scope for abusive men to limit their partners’ space for action by creating economic dependency. The single payment of Universal Credit in the case of joint claims traps women in situations of abuse, cutting off a vital source of income which could provide a means of escape. The current situation only highlights the problems with the government’s answer to the single payment in that those experiencing domestic abuse have the option of requesting alternative payment arrangements. SEA and others have pointed out that this ‘option’ is fundamentally flawed, since actively challenging the control exerted by the abuser is dangerous. Research shows that the risk of experiencing physical abuse among those who experience economic abuse is nearly five times greater than those who do not.¹⁰ In addition, when women experience economic abuse within a context of coercive control then they are at increased risk of domestic homicide¹¹ and suicide.¹² These dangers are increased for victims in the current environment, when opportunities for reaching out to support from family and friends for economic support are even more restricted. Further, with the surge in demand for Universal Credit and the stress on the service, it is unrealistic to expect that women will be able to successfully negotiate alternative payment arrangements in a way that meets their urgent needs, even if they felt it was safe to do so.
- 11 When a single payment is made to joint claimants, as is currently done, a survivor leaving an abusive partner has to go through the process of setting up a separate claim, with all the formalities and delays that involves. In addition she will have to contend with the five-week wait for payment, which has already caused difficulties prior to the outbreak, but could be intolerable at a time when this may be the only means she has to establish safety for herself and her children.
- 12 The benefit system needs to step up urgently to support women in the current climate. Many are losing their jobs, and delays in processing and obtaining Universal

Credit are leading to difficulties in getting basics including food. Foodbanks which victim-survivors would have previously been able to rely on, and which provide food for most women in refuges, are facing shortages in donations and volunteers, while other sources of support are also becoming more difficult to access.

- 13 Specific issues that have been raised are inability to contact advisors and Job Centres and lack of response to Universal Credit journal queries, leading to women not having the money to make ends meet. Women are three and a half times more likely to experience domestic violence if they find it impossible to find £100 at short notice.¹³ Research also shows that financial barriers to leaving can result in women staying with abusive men for longer than they otherwise would and experiencing more harm as a result.¹⁴ As well as being a barrier to leaving, lack of access to economic resources post-separation is the primary reason victim-survivors return to an abusive partner. Indeed, there are reports from frontline staff that some women currently in refuge are considering returning to abusers because they have no income to support their and their children's needs.¹⁵
- 14 The requirement that applicants must repay advance payments made under Universal Credit is a barrier for survivors trying to rebuild their lives and gain economic stability. This will be worse in the current context, where women are facing loss or reduction of employment and so are less able to rely on wages to repay these advances. They will similarly be less able to rely on family or friends given the economic constraints across the population. The parliamentary Joint Committee scrutinizing the draft Domestic Abuse Bill recommended that ministers consider whether these payments should be converted into grants which are not repayable.¹⁶
- 15 There are other aspects of the welfare system which have disproportionate impacts on women and should be urgently reformed to ensure protection for domestic abuse survivors at this time. Even with the recently announced increase in unemployment benefit, an out of work family with two children will still be 20% below the poverty line.¹⁷ The two-child tax credit limit will cause even further hardship at this time. As the Child Poverty Action Group has pointed out, the rationale that the government put forward for this policy, that families should plan their finances to accommodate a third child, falls away in a situation such as this which no one could have planned for. Similarly the benefit cap will also cause additional difficulty for families. The No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) policy denies equal protection to all migrant women, as the limited access to benefits through the Destitution Domestic Violence Concession (DDVC) applies only to those on certain types of visas. This creates a barrier to accessing refuge, leaving domestic abuse victims with NRPF the stark choice of staying with the abuser or becoming destitute.
- 16 Concerns have also arisen over the current practice of the Department of Work and Pensions to allow parents to stop or reduce the amount of child maintenance they pay without any investigation or appeal.¹⁸ Women who have left an abuser often rely on child maintenance for economic stability and withholding payment is a form of post-separation economic abuse. Child maintenance is essential for many single parent families to provide food, clothing and housing costs, and without these payments many such families will be at risk of debt and poverty.¹⁹ As the recipient parent is not informed ahead of this possibility, they are unable to plan for a reduction in income.

- 17 As such, the government should provide proper support to single parent families, to ensure that vulnerable women and their children do not fall further into poverty as a result of non-payment of child maintenance. SEA agrees with Gingerbread that the Child Maintenance Service (CMS) should inform single parents of any applications regarding change of circumstances that will impact on the amount they and their children will receive. As Gingerbread has pointed out it is important that women avoid the triple penalty of having their incomes cut, bearing the extra costs of looking after children not going to school and additionally lose out on benefit entitlements they rely on for basic needs.
- 18 SEA therefore calls for the government immediately to:
- i. Provide a payment as an emergency grant for victim-survivors of domestic abuse at the point of fleeing abuse
 - ii. Provide separate payments in joint claims for Universal Credit as a default
 - iii. Remove the five-week wait for Universal Credit payment
 - iv. Convert advance payments of Universal Credit into grants
 - v. Remove the two-child tax credit limit
 - vi. Remove the benefit cap
 - vii. Increase the amount of child benefit to cover additional costs from children being at home full time²⁰
 - viii. Suspend the No Recourse to Public Funds policy
 - ix. Make a minimum payment of child maintenance where it is not being paid allegedly due to Covid-19

Access to safe accommodation, housing and financial services

- 19 Access to safe accommodation in the form of refuges and move-on housing options is key to women's economic stability and to rebuilding their lives independently after leaving an abuser. Covid-19 is impacting heavily on refuge provision, with refuges having to close or not take their full complement of residents due to their contracting or having symptoms of the virus. This means that a key source of funding for refuges, which comes as rental income through each resident's entitlement to housing benefit, will be lost. This will be a major obstacle to refuges running their vital services both during and following the outbreak. Reduced staffing and moving to remote working also leaves women with less support than they would usually get from refuge workers with important processes such as completing their housing benefit applications.²¹
- 20 It is important to recognise that this is happening in a context where refuges were already hard-pressed to accommodate demand for places, with 64% of all referrals to refuges being declined.²² A study also showed that 45% of people fleeing an abuser end up sofa surfing and almost 12% sleep rough while they wait for a space to free up.²³ SEA therefore supports reasonable measures to provide alternative emergency accommodation for domestic abuse survivors, such as the call by Southall Black Sisters for hotels to provide rooms to women escaping abuse, linked to proper support services where they do so (and by the Domestic Abuse and Victims Commissioners asking ministers to offer hotel accommodation free of charge to women fleeing domestic abuse where they have been unable to access refuge).²⁴ SEA is providing support to Lloyds Banking Group with its implementation of a new free emergency assistance scheme for employees escaping domestic abuse which includes providing temporary accommodation in a hotel.

- 21 SEA welcomes the measures by the government to provide support with regard to essential costs during this time including mortgages and rent, by way of mortgage payment holidays and suspension of evictions. These will give much needed relief to domestic abuse survivors concerned about keeping a roof over their heads and avoiding mounting debts. However, SEA has picked up certain concerns of survivors over the operation of these measures. One relates to the discretion of banks and other mortgage lenders in granting the payment holiday of three months. A survivor who was in a vulnerable situation due to years of economic abuse and who applied for the three month break from payment was given only a one month break, with the bank saying that the three months was for customers who would not get any pay at all from their employers. She was refused a two-month holiday as the bank was concerned that repayment later would be difficult as she was already high in arrears, a situation caused by economic abuse.
- 22 While preventing landlords from evicting tenants for three months provides protection to domestic abuse survivors, it could also mean that it may be more difficult to evict abusers. The suspension on evictions will also not help those in insecure and invisible housing arrangements who are the most vulnerable to abuse by those controlling the property they live in.²⁵ In addition, there is concern over spiralling debt during the eviction ‘holiday’ and the precarious situation of women who are threatened with eviction at the end of this period.²⁶ There is an equivalent concern regarding mortgage holidays. SEA is therefore concerned that we will see increasing numbers of women struggling with housing-related debt including rent and mortgage arrears in the aftermath of the outbreak.
- 23 SEA has also found that the closure of many frontline banking services and move to online banking due to social distancing measures, has created specific difficulties for older women who are less able to access or use services online. Older women who have left abusers and are in the process of setting up new lives independently after years of coercive control, are finding it very difficult to have to suddenly learn how to manage bank accounts and payments online because they cannot go to the bank. There is also evidence of long waits or inability to get through to banks. We also have an example of an isolated older person who was unable to access the internet to claim a council tax reduction and prevent further arrears.
- 24 The government should:
- i. Pay block housing benefit payments for all refuge spaces for at least three months²⁷
 - ii. Intervene in/coordinate initiatives for alternative emergency accommodation for domestic abuse survivors such as provision of hotel rooms
 - iii. Ensure mortgage payment holidays are available to all domestic abuse victims for the maximum period of three months, even if they are in arrears
 - iv. Consider ways to support domestic abuse survivors, particularly older women, in accessing banks and conducting other essential financial activity online

Access to courts

- 25 As courts move to online hearings, and pressures increase on pro bono legal services with firms themselves impacted by Covid-19, this is a time of heightened anxiety for domestic abuse survivors who need to access the family justice system. SEA and others have raised elsewhere²⁸ how the family courts themselves become an arena for further economic abuse, as women struggle to navigate a complex legal system as litigants in person because they fail the legal aid means test.
- 26 This is highlighted in an account which SEA had from a survivor that some abusers are refusing to pay court ordered maintenance, even if they are claiming £2,500 as furloughed salary under the government scheme, using the pandemic as an excuse not to pay. This is causing significant stress to their ex-spouses, who do not have the money to go to court, while some of the men refusing to pay are very rich. The fact that the courts are not sitting regularly adds to the stress.
- 27 The government should exempt domestic abuse victims from the legal means test with immediate effect.

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- ¹ See Surviving Economic Abuse (2018). *Economic Abuse is your past, your present and your future* - a report on the practical barriers women face in rebuilding their lives after domestic abuse - https://survivingeconomicabuse.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/SEA-Roundtable-Report_FINAL-1.pdf
- ² Women's Budget Group (2020), *Crises Collide: Women and Covid-19*
- ³ Women's Budget Group (2020), *Crises Collide: Women and Covid-19*
- ⁴ Women's Budget Group (2020), *Crises Collide: Women and Covid-19*
- ⁵ <https://www.refuge.org.uk/25-increase-in-calls-to-national-domestic-abuse-helpline-since-lockdown-measures-began/>
- ⁶ <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/womens-aid-calls-for-emergency-cash-injection-during-covid-19-crisis/>
- ⁷ Sharp-Jeffs, N. (2015) *Money Matters: Research into the extent and nature of financial abuse within intimate relationships in the UK* London: The Co-operative Bank/Refuge
- ⁸ Sharp, N. & Learmonth, S. (2017) *Into Plain Sight: - How economic abuse is reflected in successful prosecutions of controlling or coercive behaviour*
- ⁹ <https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Safe%20at%20Home%20survey%20results.pdf>
- ¹⁰ Outlaw, M. (2009) *No One Type of Intimate Partner Abuse: Exploring Physical and Non-Physical Abuse Among Intimate Partners* Journal of Family Violence. 24: 263-272
- ¹¹ Websdale, N (1999) *Understanding Domestic Homicide* California: Northeastern University Press
- ¹² Aitken, R and Munro, V.E. (2018), *Domestic Abuse and Suicide: exploring the links with Refuge's client base and work force*
- ¹³ Walby, S. and Allen, J. (2004) *Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault and Stalking: Findings from the British Crime Survey* London: Home Office Research Study 276
- ¹⁴ Earlywhite, M. and Stohl, I. (2005) *In Our Shoes: The Next Steps*, Washington: State Coalition Against Domestic Violence
- ¹⁵ Joint VAWG sector open letter to the Prime Minister, 3 April 2020 - <https://1q7dqy2unor827bqjls0c4rn-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/An-open-letter-to-the-prime-minister.pdf>
- ¹⁶ Parliamentary Joint Committee report on the draft Domestic Abuse Bill: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt201719/jtselect/jtddab/2075/207502.htm>
- ¹⁷ Child Poverty Action Group, *Supporting Families through the Covid-19 Pandemic* - <https://cpag.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/briefing/supporting-families-during-covid-19-pandemic>
- ¹⁸ <https://inews.co.uk/inews-lifestyle/women/single-mothers-losing-out-on-child-maintenance-payments-as-a-result-of-coronavirus-2540128>
- ¹⁹ <https://inews.co.uk/inews-lifestyle/women/single-mothers-losing-out-on-child-maintenance-payments-as-a-result-of-coronavirus-2540128>
- ²⁰ Women's Budget Group (2020), *Crises Collide: Women and Covid-19*
- ²¹ Joint VAWG sector open letter to the Prime Minister, 3 April 2020, above
- ²² Women's Aid, *The Domestic Abuse Report 2020: The Annual Audit*
- ²³ Women's Aid, *Nowhere to Turn, 2018*
- ²⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/apr/19/hotels-refuge-abuse-snubbed>
- ²⁵ EVAW briefing on Covid-19 and the duty to prevent VAWG - <https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/EVAW-Coalition-Briefing-on-COVID19-Pandemic-and-Duty-to-Prevent-VAWG-April-2020-FINAL.pdf>
- ²⁶ Women's Budget Group (2020), *Crises Collide: Women and Covid-19*
- ²⁷ Joint VAWG sector open letter to the Prime Minister, 3 April 2020, above
- ²⁸ SEA response to Ministry of Justice consultation 'Assessing the risks of harm to children and parents in private law children cases', August 2019

April 2020