

Women's Aid Federation of England's Response to the BBC's Consultation on the draft BBC Editorial Guidelines 2024

Women's Aid is the national charity working to end domestic abuse against women and children. Over the past 50 years, Women's Aid has been at the forefront of shaping and coordinating responses to domestic abuse through practice, research and policy. We empower survivors by keeping their voices at the heart of our work, working with and for women and children by listening to them and responding to their needs.

We are a federation of 180 organisations which provide just under 300 local lifesaving services to women and children across the country. We provide expert training, qualifications and consultancy to a range of agencies and professionals working with survivors or commissioning domestic abuse services, and award a National Quality Mark for services which meet our quality standards. We hold the largest national data set on domestic abuse, and use research and evidence to inform all of our work. Our campaigns achieve change in policy, practice and awareness, encouraging healthy relationships and helping to build a future where domestic abuse is no longer tolerated.

Our support services, which include our Live Chat Helpline, the Survivors' Forum, the No Woman Turned Away Project, the Survivor's Handbook, Love Respect (our dedicated website for young people in their first relationships), the national Domestic Abuse Directory and our advocacy projects, help thousands of women and children every year.

Over the past decade, we have been working closely with the media on reporting domestic abuse, developing our media guidelines and workshops in 2020. During this time, we have seen greater awareness of domestic abuse, the complexities of it and the sensitivities that surround reporting of survivors' experiences, or tragically, the stories of victims who have been killed by an abuser.

That is why this consultation is a good opportunity for the BBC to undertake a key aim of the Editorial Guidelines – "*protect the vulnerable from harm*". Whilst awareness of domestic abuse has improved, the rapid growth of social media and the fast-paced nature of online news, more and more readers have begun calling out bad practice when they see it, often flagging the articles they see as problematic to Women's Aid. We have also unfortunately experienced poor practice from BBC journalists when engaging with survivors of domestic abuse, including one who referred to an individual as "*not normal*" which was incredibly insensitive and caused emotional harm.

The ability to provide regular feedback, and formal feedback through this response, means that we hope that the BBC's reporting and journalists are held to increasingly high standards when it comes to ensuring that survivors of domestic abuse are heard, their needs are met and their stories are told in a way that is accurate, respectful and empowering to those who might be affected by the issues raised in the articles. It is also crucial that the BBC's intentions to '*test assumptions and push boundaries*' does not further promote myths and stereotypes on domestic abuse or wider violence against women and girls. Women's Aid's research shows how societal sexism and victim blaming enables and excuses domestic abuse. Shockingly, many

adults do not view societal views as harmful in this way.¹ We must all challenge the everyday sexism and misogyny in society, which is the root of all violence against women.

We would encourage the BBC to regularly internally circulate and signpost to Women's Aid's Media Guidelines² and to Level Up's Domestic Homicide Media Guidelines³. We would also welcome the opportunity to further support the BBC Editorial and Safeguarding teams with our expertise and representation of women and children's voices, to ensure help the BBC make the most of this review – particularly given the gap between reviews. We hope we can discuss this opportunity further with you.

Consultation questions

1) Are the draft Guidelines clear and straightforward?

The guidelines are written in clear English, however as the document sets out there is an expectation that *“everyone who makes or presents BBC content is contractually required to observe and abide by them”*. Given the document is 300 pages, there should be a much clearer signposting to the accompanying website which contains further guidance, a clearer issue-based structure and access to relevant forms. The website would be an ideal location for the violence against women and girls (VAWG) sector guidelines noted above, as well as ensuring journalists have access to a full breadth of signposting information – from mental health and suicide to domestic abuse, child sexual abuse and violence against women and girls services.

2) Do they set out appropriate editorial standards for those making BBC programmes and content?

The standards fail to make reference to either sexism or misogyny. The root causes of domestic abuse by men against women lie in the disempowerment, objectification and silencing of women. The response must be building empowering spaces for women, challenging inequality and giving all women a voice, including women from minoritised groups. For a corporation as interwoven into our society as the BBC, it is crucial that the editorial standards reflect this. We also note that whilst the standards make a number of references to ‘racist language’ or ‘racist terms’, this is currently not being examined alongside an individual's social identity. We would encourage the standards to have a more intersectional lens to produce a more holistic understanding of social issues, policies and research.

We would also recommend:

- Whilst it is noted there is greater clarity on programmes signposting ‘to reflect how important elements of the debate will be achieved in another programme’, it is crucial that the BBC undertakes its duty to signpost to support services due to the awareness-raising or triggering nature of content being discussed on programmes and by journalists.
- The section on ‘Referrals to Director Editorial Policy and Standards’ should have more explicit reference to all perpetrators of violence against women and girls (VAWG), including stalking, domestic abuse (including forced marriage, honour-based abuse, FGM), and online harms such as intimate image abuse.

¹ [Come-Together-to-End-Domestic-Abuse-a-survey-of-UK-attitudes-to-domestic-abuse-2022.pdf](#)

² <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Reporting-domestic-abuse-in-the-media-April24.pdf>

³ <https://welevelup.org/active-campaigns/media-guidelines-domestic-abuse/>