

APPG on Domestic Violence

“Transforming our National Response - Priorities for the Domestic Violence & Abuse Act”

4-5pm, Wednesday 19 July 2017

Committee Room 16, House of Commons

The inaugural meeting of the APPG on Domestic Violence in the 2017-19 Parliament was held on 19 July 2017. The discussion focused on priorities for the forthcoming Domestic Violence and Abuse Act.

The meeting was chaired by Jess Phillips MP. Members of the APPG also in attendance were Maria Miller MP (vice-chair), Sarah Champion MP, Yvette Cooper MP, Paul Scully MP, Alison Thewliss MP, Nic Dakin MP, Alex Chalk MP, Thangham Debbonaire MP and Baroness Lister.

Speakers at the meeting were:

- Sarah Newton MP - Parliamentary under Secretary of State (Vulnerability, Safeguarding and Countering Extremism)
- Katie Ghose – Chief Executive, Women’s Aid
- Priya Chopra - Chief Executive, Saheli Asian Women’s Project
- Professor Jane Callaghan - Professor of Psychology, University of Northampton

Jess Phillips MP

Jess Phillips MP introduced the meeting and oversaw business items for the Group’s Annual General Meeting. Jess was re-elected as the APPG’s Chair, Maria Miller MP as the Vice-Chair, and the following Members as Officers:

- Sarah Champion
- Vicky Foxcroft
- Baroness Glenys Thornton
- Caroline Lucas MP
- Baroness Sally Hamwee
- Norman Lamb MP
- Angela Rayner MP
- Paul Scully MP
- Sir Peter Bottomley MP
- Gavin Newlands MP
- Alison Thewliss MP
- Sir Keir Starmer MP
- Thangham Debbonaire MP
- Seema Malholtra MP
- Alex Chalk MP
- Baroness Verma
- Emma Hardy MP

Jess Phillips MP additionally placed on record the APPG’s thanks to Polly Neate, who had recently departed as Women’s Aid Chief Executive and had been critical to driving progress on tackling domestic abuse, d.

Sarah Newton MP - Parliamentary under Secretary of State (Vulnerability, Safeguarding and Countering Extremism), Home Office

Sarah Newton MP, the Minister overseeing the legislation in the House of Commons, stressed that the Bill was a landmark opportunity for change. She highlighted that while both reporting and prosecutions for domestic abuse were increasing, there was no complacency within the Government and far more needed to be done. She outlined key elements for the new Bill (a new legal definition that can be applied across the criminal justice system and all statutory services; a new protection order to afford better protection to victims and a more robust response to perpetrators; a new Domestic Violence and Abuse Commissioner; and an aggravated offence where domestic abuse impacts a child), and stated that the Bill would be delivered alongside a package of non-legislative measures too. The Minister highlighted that the Government understood that legislation must go beyond the criminal justice system, and drive improvements for survivors in sectors such as housing, health and welfare benefits too. There would be a cross-government steering group and working group to ensure this was delivered.

Sarah welcomed all views and perspectives on the legislation, and stated that the government would lead a long period of consultation on the Bill during the autumn, where they wanted to hear the voices and priorities of survivors and specialist support services across the country.

Katie Ghose – CEO, Women’s Aid

Katie Ghose stated that it was a pleasure to mark her first week as the CEO of Women’s Aid by addressing the APPG, and welcomed the proposed Bill as an opportunity for a major cultural change in how domestic abuse is tackled. She highlighted the urgent need for progress, as women experiencing domestic abuse were currently being turned away from life-saving support due to services not having the space or specialism to support them after years of funding cuts. Three quarters of the 404 women referred to Women’s Aid’s No Woman Turned Away casework team during 16-17, were unable to find a suitable refuge space - often because they had complex needs or no recourse to public funds. She spoke about the harrowing experiences of these women, many of whom returned to perpetrators because they were unable to find a refuge space.

Katie explained that the new legislation must meet the needs of survivors and go beyond the criminal justice system alone. Women’s Aid wanted the Bill to deliver three key objectives:

1. Keep women and children safe in their own home - identify and support survivors at the earliest possible stage, before she is in life-threatening danger. This would require interventions from statutory agencies and public sector professionals, who have specialist training to recognise and respond to domestic abuse, and can guide women and children through referral routes to support.
2. End the postcode lottery of support to survivors - the new Commissioner must monitor and oversee the delivery of the Act on the ground, hold all local areas and statutory agencies accountable for robust service provision, and tackle damaging practices such as gender-neutral commissioning.
3. Remove the power of perpetrators - which is critical for allowing the victim safe time and space to seek support and consider their options. Perpetrators must be clearly and correctly identified - and held accountable.

Katie then explained why a new definition of domestic abuse was critical. The official government definition was now confusing and problematic, as it: obscures a gendered understanding of male violence against women; conflates family violence with intimate partner violence; and, downgrades forms of violence disproportionately experienced by BME women - such as FGM, forced marriage and honour based violence - which are now only a footnote in the definition. Katie stressed that

'what gets measured gets done', and that defining domestic abuse correctly was critical for statistics, policy making and decision making across the public sector.

Katie stated a new definition needs to: explicitly name the gendered nature of the crime; makes clear that coercive control is the overarching experience of domestic abuse; and breaks down the forms of violence experienced according to the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim. She ended by calling for a definition of domestic abuse that reflects the reality of crime - a cause and a consequence of women's inequality, which the UN define as taking place 'because she is a woman or happens disproportionately to women'.

Priya Chopra - CEO, Saheli Asian Women's Project

Priya introduced Saheli Asian Women's Project, a specialist Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) women's service established for almost 40 years. Saheli aim to enable Asian women to escape domestic abuse by providing an environment which is safe, culturally familiar and helps them come to independent decisions about their lives. The organisation provide refuge services, counselling and practical support, children's services, and advice and information.

Priya spoke to the APPG about the experiences and journeys of women using their services and stated that - due to shame, stigma and other cultural reasons - domestic abuse posed specific and serious risks to Asian women. She explained the lengths to which perpetrators go to stop women from leaving - including employing taxi drivers as bounty hunters. Perpetrators often have the resources, legal expertise and support of the community behind them, posing often insurmountable barriers against women seeking justice. Priya welcomed that one focus of the Bill is on the devastating harm that domestic abuse causes to a child. She asked how a perpetrator of rape, abuse and assault could ever be considered to be safe with a child, and called for action to stop abusers routinely using child contact arrangements to terrify and control victims.

Priya highlighted the barriers survivors face in accessing refuge, and the major challenges facing specialist Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) services in meeting these women's needs:

- Saheli's capacity to house families in refuge had reduced significantly due to funding constraints. The organisation received hundreds of calls for help, but were only able to rehouse a very small number.
- Specialist BME services were critical in providing dedicated and appropriate support to women, but had been severely impacted by funding and commissioning practices, and the impacts of austerity on other services and community groups which used to also provide support.
- She stressed that an effective criminal justice response wouldn't be delivered without specialist services that meet women's needs.
- Saheli supported many women with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF), which was a major barrier in being able to access support - as they are not eligible for welfare benefits. She called for action to hold perpetrators (often responsible for denying victims their legal immigration status) accountable, and stated that the Bill must protect the rights and safety of all women and children experiencing abuse.

Professor Jane Callaghan - Professor of Psychology, University of Northampton

Jane introduced her research on children's experiences of domestic abuse, which she had led with Dr Lisa Fellin from the University of East London. She explained that 29.5% of young people under 18 have been exposed to domestic violence during their lifetime, which resulted in serious impacts on their lives - including physical and mental health difficulties, educational challenges, lasting

neurological impacts, risks of criminal behaviour, interpersonal difficulties in future intimate relationships and friendships, and risks of experiencing sexual abuse, sexual exploitation and other forms of violence and abuse in later life, or alongside the domestic abuse. Despite these impacts, she stated that services for children who experience domestic abuse were underdeveloped and difficult to access.

Callaghan and Fellin had conducted interviews with 107 children and young people about their experiences of domestic abuse, and conducted focus groups with professionals and carers. The research had identified a number of key themes, including:

- Avoiding blaming victims for children's poor outcomes: it is well known that children's outcomes are better when they have positive relationships with their mother, but responses to domestic abuse too often obscure the perpetrator's violence in children's outcomes. This leads to a focus and expectation on the non-violent partner, and risks a victim-blaming response. Parents hugely fear losing their children if they don't leave abusive partners. It is critical that responses to children do not result in further victimisation of the non-violent parent.
- Hearing children's voices and recognising their experiences in policy and law: children are not passive witnesses to violence, but part of a family system within which violence occurs. However, often in policy they are positioned as witnesses. This has implications for practice and service provision, often meaning that their experiences and needs are overlooked. She stressed that policy must position children as equal victims- not as witnesses.
- Children can articulate their experiences: too often services (including the police) are reluctant to speak to children about their experiences of abuse. It is critical that we establish a legal and policy framework that stresses the importance of talking to children and young people when domestic violence and abuse occurs.

Jane shared an example of a child's account of domestic abuse, and stated that it is critical that our legal and policy framework reflects that children *experience* domestic abuse and coercive control - they are not only collateral damage.

Discussion

The speakers were followed by a Q&A and discussion with the audience, which focused on:

- The critical need to hear children's voices in developing policy and legislation on domestic abuse.
- The importance of joined-up agency responses to both women and children experiencing abuse, to ensure that decisions made in one area aren't undermined in another.
- The need for a robust response to perpetrators, that holds them fully accountable for the crime.
- The mechanisms for accountability that the Domestic Violence and Abuse Commissioner will hold, and what their relationship will be with existing Police and Crime Commissioners.
- The need for legislation that goes beyond domestic violence and abuse, and incorporates sexual violence and other forms of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG).
- The importance of legislation that distinguishes between gender (a societal construct of what it is to be female or male) and sex (biological differences between women and men).
- The importance of recognising the needs of specific groups of women who are often overlooked in responses - including older women, and women in employment.
- The difficulties in achieving a cross-sectoral approach, particularly within health, which has been long discussed but has not become a reality in the response to domestic abuse. Clearly defined outcomes, shared action plans, and combined resources were identified as critical for delivering this.