



Minutes of the APPG on Domestic Violence and Abuse Meeting

The next VAWG Strategy: creating an equal society for women and girls

4:30-6pm

Monday 12th October 2020

Virtual meeting

Chair: Jess Phillips MP

During the pandemic, specialist violence against women and girls (VAWG) organisations have continued to raise concerns that VAWG has not been factored into the [highest levels](#) of the COVID response and called for [coordinated, cross-government action](#) to mitigate the impact of COVID on the rights of all women and girls to live free from violence. The most recent VAWG Strategy came to an end in March 2020, and it seems that a new strategy won't be in place until 2021. At the time of this meeting, there was still no public clarity about the process for renewal.

VAWG is one of the most widespread, persistent and devastating human rights violations. Therefore this APPG is clear that a renewed VAWG Strategy must be ambitious in scope, respond to the current context, and deliver measurable change in preventing VAWG, improve protection and support for all survivors, hold perpetrators accountable and end the ongoing funding crisis that VAWG services face.

This meeting enabled the APPG and Officers to hear from an expert by experience and experts from specialist VAWG organisations on what the next Strategy should include and aim to address. The meeting was chaired by Jess Phillips MP, and the other parliamentarians in attendance included:

- Baroness Lister
- Apsana Begum MP
- Maria Miller MP
- Baroness Bertin
- Kate Griffiths MP

Jess Phillips MP

Jess welcomed attendees, and thanked speakers for sharing their expertise today. Jess raised her concerns about the potential for there to be a separate Domestic Abuse Strategy, as when the Parliamentarians and the sector questioned the gender-neutral DA Bill, the government stated the legislation would be within the VAWG framework. She also noted that such a Strategy would seriously undermine the UK government's commitments – such as through the Istanbul Convention – to deliver a coordinated response, and integrated measures, to ending VAWG.

Heena, Expert by Experience

Heena highlighted that mental health remains a key gap in the response to VAWG. Heena shared that she was in an abusive relationship for twenty years which had a significant impact on my mental health. She noted that her mental health was also used as a tool by her perpetrator; he used to lock her in the house and telling the children she was unwell, and that he would not get the children if she left. Heena emphasised that fear keeps many survivors and mothers in relationships, as they fear speaking out about their abuse in case their children taken away by social services.

Heena set out that the key challenges and barriers that she faced: the lack of immediate support around mental wellbeing and you're left to fend for yourself; the failing of statutory service professional to proactively ask about domestic abuse; and the types of support available are not appropriate, and lack of understanding of trauma and domestic abuse. Heena also noted that as an Asian woman, she has specific experiences and needs that require understanding and expertise from those providing support, particularly as she still feels like she continues to be controlled by her family.

Heena concluded by highlighting the need for: long-term support for survivors' mental wellbeing from specialists who understand trauma, domestic abuse and are empathic; GPs and schools taking a more proactive approach to ensure women and children can access this support; and support from specialist professionals when survivors make the difficult transition to living independently.

Jess Phillips MP

Jess noted that previous strategies have predominantly focused on justice or home affairs, but it's clear that the next Strategy needs to ensure that all parts of the public sector are delivering an effective response – including a focus on specialism within mental health. Jess added that this is particularly lacking for children and acknowledged that Heena's daughter has only just been referred to CAMHS six years after leaving the abuser.

Baljit Banga, Executive Director, Imkaan

Baljit emphasised the next VAWG Strategy must tackle structural inequality and the gross underfunding in the specialist led 'by and for' sector, noting that these services are 40% underfunded, and 30% understaffed. Baljit added that these services are often unrepresented at key meetings and decommissioned in the tendering process, despite the continuing high demand for these services; 'if you're not at the table, you're on the menu'.

Baljit highlighted that this de-stabilisation of specialist support results in a lack of support for black and minoritised women, women with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) and women with insecure immigration status. This has been particularly evident during COVID which has brought additional costs of ensuring services work safely; cleaning products, PPE and smart phones to enable online working. Baljit also explained

that specialist led 'by and for' services for black and minoritised women are more likely to support women living in destitution, therefore the cumulative impact of COVID hit these services on day one: increase in referrals from statutory services; evictions; loss of jobs; and women being turned away from other services.

Baljit added that this structural inequality is a long-term issue that these services have faced; 25 Imkaan members share £10 million income in turnover whilst 10 generic white services have a turnover of £25 million. Their members are six to seven times less likely to be successful in their funding bids, there is a refuge bedspace shortfall of over 1,000 in services for black and minoritised women, and their services have seen a 35% reduction in staff due to a lack of funding. Baljit concluded that it is therefore essential for the next VAWG Strategy needs to include a strategic response to black and minoritised women's needs (which is not currently included in the Domestic Abuse Bill), and ensure the long-term sustainability of specialist led 'by and for' services.

Jess Phillips MP

Jess echoed Baljit's concerns about the commissioning of generic services and the shortfall in refuge bed spaces despite government figures suggesting otherwise.

Pragna Patel, Director, Southall Black Sisters

Pragna firstly raised the issue of gender neutrality, noting that the Domestic Abuse Bill aims to ratify the Istanbul Convention and if we are going to meet the provisions within the Treaty we must acknowledge the gendered nature and heed the non-discrimination clause. Pragna added that gender must be reflected in all planned and future policies, this isn't what we are seeing and if policymakers continue to take a gender neutral approach they will be ignoring the cause and consequence of VAWG. Pragna also raised concerns about the establishment of an Independent Government Advisor on VAWG who won't be addressing all forms of gender based violence, as this will lead to fragmentation of the work on VAWG and lead to inequality in access to protection. Pragna added that not enough is being done to address women's intersecting needs and the cross-cutting barriers they face.

Pragna set out Southall Black Sister's call for a VAWG strategy that includes at least a substantial section on minoritised women, in particular migrant women, or a separate strategy that works alongside a VAWG Strategy. This is particularly important given that women with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) are a central flank to the hostile environment, and continue to be the most vulnerable group. Pragna emphasised that they would want a separate section/Strategy so that it is comprehensive in tackling the multiple and overlapping barriers that migrant women face. It is needed to: centre the voices of migrant women; address the NRPF condition; end the detention of women; end the dispersal of asylum seeking women who have experienced violence; ensure access to legal aid; end the hostile environment; and provide sustainable funding specialist VAWG organisations.

Ruth Bashall, Chief Executive, Stay Safe East

Ruth highlighted that Stay Safe East are one of only two 'by and for' user-led service for Deaf and disabled survivors of abuse in the UK. Ruth explained the importance of taking a gendered approach to violence against disabled women, and that VAWG does not happen in a vacuum, but in the context of wider power structure which marginalises disabled women and at times denies their very existence. Ruth also noted the importance of taking a gendered approach to disability, for example "the disabled" are seen as a homogenous group and in a negative light but there is also more pronounced stigma for disabled women; focus on appearance, 'normality', 'being good', only one way of 'being a good mother'.

Ruth also set out the specific barriers that disabled women face and the poor responses they receive from services: disbelief; removal of children; lack of accessible information; safeguarding system failures; and very low conviction rates. Ruth emphasised that the next VAWG Strategy must be inclusive and take account of the depth and breadth of experiences of all survivors, recognise the complexity of intersectionality, and include institutional abuse and other forms of abuse specific to disabled women. Ruth added that it's also important to ensure policy makers practice the ethos of 'nothing about us, without us'.

Ruth concluded that there were also two key actions that the Government could take in the Domestic Abuse Bill, currently going through Parliament. The Bill does not currently reflect their lived experiences, and are calling for the repeal of the discriminatory 'carer's defence' in the 2015 Serious Crime and Domestic Abuse Act, and a wider definition of domestic abuse to include abuse by paid or unpaid carers who are personal connected but not family members.

Sylvia Walby, Professor of Sociology, Director of the Violence and Society Centre at City University of London

Sylvia highlighted that the Violence and Society Centre at City, University of London, makes a contribution to the development of policy and strategy with its focus on data. She noted that the apparent tension between the focus on domestic abuse and on VAWG can be addressed for the purposes of data, by disaggregating data collected on violence and abuse by sex, thus making its relevant to both approaches. Sylvia set out how, domestic abuse is gendered and has a disproportionate impact on women using data from the Crime Survey for England and Wales: 75% of victims with injury are female; 82% of victims of more than 10 crimes are female; while women are the victims in 98% of crimes when those were severe injury are the focus.

Sylvia noted the recent developments in legislation that have made further forms of domestic abuse or VAWG criminal offences in incremental steps. Naming 'new' forms which haven't previously been acknowledged has, enabled policy development and also better data to be collected. Sylvia highlighted that there remains a critical need for the already collected national data to be analysed and published disaggregated by sex

(including sex of victim, relationship with perpetrator etc) for different forms of violence. The Centre is undertaking work to improve the measurement framework which will further support the understanding of the intersections of multiple inequalities that drive violence.

Discussion

- It was queried as to why the Government were so intent on separating out the forms of abuse, and it was highlighted that the gender-neutral policy approach had been a long-term problem the sector faced, but that factors such as austerity and the backlash against feminist struggles were also at play.
- It was highlighted that VAWG disrupts women's lives from childhood through education to work, at home, in the community and now increasingly online, and therefore the VAWG strategy has to be cross departmental, tackle structural inequalities, and has to include domestic abuse. The APPG echoed concerns about a separate Domestic Abuse Strategy, and the lack of consultation with the VAWG sector on this.
- A question was raised about the money spent on previous strategies and the cost we know VAWG has on society. It was noted that cost is a valuable way of persuading people and that since the last strategy was published, the government had published figures stating that domestic abuse cost £66billion a year and therefore the cost for VAWG would be even greater.