



Minutes of the APPG on Domestic Violence and Abuse Meeting

Enough is Enough:

Tackling VAWG in the Long-Term

Wednesday 30th March 2022, 14.00pm-15.30pm

Virtual meeting

Chair: Apsana Begum MP

In 2021, the high-profile murders of women including Sarah Everard and Sabina Nessa placed the issue of women's safety firmly in the spotlight and on the political agenda. Despite a number of proposals from the Government and criminal justice agencies to 'keep women safe', violence against women and girls (VAWG) continues to be an epidemic and requires a whole-system response.

The APPG on Domestic Violence and Abuse took a closer look at these commitments and the progress of this work, as well as the role and duties that statutory services play in tackling VAWG. The meeting was chaired by Apsana Begum MP and the other parliamentarians in attendance were Baroness Lister. The offices of Jess Phillips MP and Maria Miller MP were also present.

Apsana Begum MP

Apsana welcomed attendees and the speakers and thanked them all for sharing their expertise. She referred to the Government's recently published Domestic Abuse Plan and introduced the speakers.

Kerry, Expert by Experience

Kerry highlighted the shocking ONS statistics on domestic abuse, including the fact that 1.6 million women aged 16 to 74 experienced domestic abuse which equates to 7% of the population in England and Wales, and an estimated that 618,000, or 3% of women, suffered sexual assault, and 892,000, 5% of women, had experienced stalking. Kerry explained that the effect these incidents can have on women's lives cannot be underestimated. Kerry has been left permanently disabled as a result of domestic abuse, a situation which she had to flee with her child who was also abused. The effects of this journey still affect both her and her child until today.

Kerry noted the 'Counting Dead Women' project led by Karen Ingala Smith stating that 81 women were killed by men in the 28 weeks from March 2021 to October 2021. Most

of these women were killed by partners, former partners and sons in their own homes. Threats to kill were made to both Kerry and her child. She was ill, injured, and scared.

She welcomed the Government's Tackling VAWG strategy and its acknowledgment that VAWG can be hidden and therefore difficult to report as reporting is affected by shame and fear. Kerry's case in particular was full of missed opportunities and failures in terms of safeguarding referrals. She stressed that statutory agencies have a duty of care to take allegations of domestic abuse very seriously. In minimising women's lived experiences, they collude with abusers whether intentional or not. There is evidence of the police response improving, for example most forces now have their own VAWG strategies. However, no one agency alone can tackle VAWG - system-wide reform is needed.

She went on to talk about the impact of abuse on her child. Trauma re-wires the brain and there is little support for young people who have experienced post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of domestic abuse. She explains how her child as an 18-year-old would be criminally responsible for his actions but in reality, he has an emotional age of six. The system doesn't understand trauma or its responses.

Finally, Kerry set out how she was raped by her husband who gave her Pelvic Inflammatory Disease. She noted that many women don't understand sexual abuse within a relationship. There is also unfortunately not enough funding for IDVA and ISVA services which are fundamental in the recovery of survivors of rape. Kerry explained that the judicial system needs to better use its resources to understand survivors' experiences. Perpetrator programmes need to be more robust, and schools need to do more. The expectations of young men should be discussed and challenged and specialist services with the expert knowledge needed to be invested in. She called on the Government to deliver these changes.

Apsana Begum MP

Apsana thanked Kerry for sharing her story and echoed many of her comments around the issues in policing and that the Government need to invest in specialist services and improving the judicial and education systems to tackle VAWG.

Harriet Wistrich, Director, Centre for Women's Justice

Harriet explained how the Centre for Women's Justice (CWJ) has done a lot of work on police perpetrated abuse which started from dealing with a lot of enquiries from women who have been victims of domestic abuse by police officers. Since 2018 the Centre for Women's Justice has been a designated body for taking forward police super-complaints. The first police super-complaint put forward by the organisation was regarding the failure of police to enforce protective measures and not using the powers they have been given to protect women from domestic abuse. They believed the super-complaint system would be a good way to look at police perpetrated abuse. Some of

the enquiries they received were from women who were officers themselves and some from civilians in relationships with police officers. All these different cases highlighted significant problems in the system for dealing with these issues.

Harriet noted the identified pattern in the difficulty in reporting - patterns of failure in investigation and the manipulation of contacts and police processes. In some cases, the manipulation of systems by accused police officers even led to the arrest of the victim. Victims that were police officers themselves faced extra barriers when reporting due to the strong culture of loyalty in policing. Their reporting often leads to being ostracised and victimised. As a result of the police super-complaint, CWJ was flooded with stories of abuse being sent in - there was no piece of work done in the UK around this issue prior to the super-complaint. She detailed how CWJ launched an additional project to look at this, and at least 165 women from around the country have been in contact to get involved. So many women got on touch partly due to the level of publicity around the death of Sarah Everard. The Home Secretary's response which was to announce a public inquiry with the aims of preventing such a case from repeating itself. However, the inquiry was not given any statutory powers and the scope of the inquiry was limited. They have engaged with the Home Secretary on this, as they know that Sarah Everard's case was not an isolated incident but is reflective of a wider issue of police officers misusing their powers. However, the Home Secretary did not respond to their arguments so they issued judicial review proceedings which are awaiting a court decision on whether permission to proceed will be granted.

Harriet stressed that we have to learn from these issues to ensure police are using their powers in the right way to protect women from domestic abuse but also to remedy the lack of trust in police.

Apsana Begum MP

Apsana echoed many of Harriet's comments, highlighting in particular those around the lack of trust in police and the necessity of tackling the systemic issues within the police.

Andrea Simon, Director, Ending Violence Against Women (EVAW)

Andrea explained how early in the month of March, the EVAW coalition released its second annual snapshot report which covers 2021-2022 which summarised relevant key statistics and policy developments relation to VAWG.

She highlighted how although VAWG has received more media and political attention in the past year than ever before, most of the attention has been focused on the safety on women and girls. EVAW believes that responses to VAWG must not only focus on women's safety but must also be comprehensively rights based. They believe in an approach that places significant emphasis on prevention and that addresses harmful attitudes and behaviour. It also requires major financial investment and sustained

support for specialist VAWG sector organisations including those led 'by and for' Black and minoritised women. There should be a focus on VAWG that happens online as well as in public spaces and a fundamental transformation of the criminal justice system.

Despite all the commitments and funding announced to tackle VAWG, the Government has followed what ERAW calls a 'contradictory trajectory', introducing legislation that will erode the protections of women and survivors of VAWG and remove our ability to challenge state failures to safeguard women. Such elements are found in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, the Nationality and Borders Bill, the Judicial Review and Courts Bill and the Human Rights Act consultation.

Andrea cited many of the statistics from their report which show that the criminal justice system is failing to address VAWG. It's also clear there is urgent work that must be done to understand different outcomes for marginalised women. Andrea expressed that if the Government and criminal justice agencies expect women to come forward, report and engage with the justice system then it must tackle police perpetrated abuse head on and address the institutional culture of discriminatory attitudes and abuse.

At the heart of the report's recommendations are VAWG sector organisations and specialist services because of the key role they play in shaping national and local action needed to address VAWG. Women's lives are not fragmented and therefore society's response to VAWG cannot be, partnerships must be prioritised to ensure that survivors receive the most effective safety and support planning.

Apsana Begum MP

Apsana thanked Andrea and encouraged attendees to read the report.

DCC Maggie Blyth, National Police lead for Violence Against Women and Girls

DCC Maggie Blyth thanked Kerry for sharing her experience. She explained that VAWG is an epidemic and policing knows the role it must play as part of wider systems change.

She explained how the police were rocked by a serving officer (Wayne Couzens) having killed Sarah Everard. This has framed the start of her role. The role was secured through Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) Recommendations and is a policing role funded by the Home Office. The role aims for a national coordination of the 43 police forces. She recognised that there has been improvement but there is room for much more. All 43 forces collect data in different ways, but they are trying to learn from each other and harness practises that work to ensure the forces are coordinated. Policing alone cannot resolve and address VAWG, and often when police becomes involved in a case often opportunities for early prevention and intervention have passed. Tackling VAWG requires a collective approach. The National Framework was published within the first few months of the Maggie's role, it set out a clear framework and expectation following the HMICFRS recommendations for all 43 police forces.

It sets out three pillars which highlight the aims focused on: trust and confidence and ensuring women and girls can trust the police; perpetrators and the requirement for forces to be offender focused; and safer spaces and the expectation for PCC to lead the commissioning at a local level of services in partnership with other agencies to support improvement around safer spaces.

The Police know that improvements must be made. There is a commitment to prioritising VAWG across the country, but the trust and confidence linked to VAWG are crucial. She is committed to improving this by improving outcomes for women who experience domestic abuse and VAWG. She highlighted the importance of partnering with criminal justice but also with education to take forward some of what was outlined in the government's domestic abuse plan.

Discussion

- Training for policing and the need for the police to consider recommendations made that come from the super-complaint.
- The proposals within the new Domestic Abuse Plan to explore a register of domestic abuse offenders.
- Auditing police forces to ensure they are doing enough to tackle VAWG.
- PCCs being accountable for local police forces and should be held accountable for their response to VAWG.
- Intersectionality not coming through sufficiently in policy and consequently in support for 'by and for' specialist services and Black and minoritised survivors.
- Ensuring that survivors voices are at the centre of all response to VAWG.
- VAWG training for coroners as suicides are often in their remit.