



All-Party Parliamentary Group on
Domestic Violence and Abuse

women's aid
until women & children are safe

Minutes of the APPG on Domestic Violence and Abuse meeting

'How can the VAWG strategy prevent post-separation abuse and protect children as victims in their own right?'

Monday 23rd June 11:30 – 13:00

Hybrid Meeting

Chair: Apsana Begum MP

The National Audit Office's (NAO) Report, published in January, stated that previous government efforts to tackle violence against women and girls have not improved outcomes for survivors. To date, prevention has rightly had a strong focus on working with children and young people, however the success of the upcoming Government's VAWG strategy will rely on a joined-up approach that extends beyond educational settings and seeks to disarm perpetrators from the tools they use to continue abuse, whether that be the family courts, economic abuse or housing.

In anticipation of the Government's VAWG strategy, due to be published in the coming months, the APPG will meet to consider a holistic approach to prevention, exploring opportunities for institutional reform to ensure that both women and children are protected from post-separation abuse.

The meeting was chaired by Apsana Begum MP.

Links/citations to any research or briefings mentioned will be shared at the end of the minutes.

Apsana Begum MP, Chair of the APPG for Domestic Violence and Abuse

Apsana Begum MP welcomed everyone to the meeting and opened the APPG with an overview of the role of the APPG to bring together professionals and survivors with policy makers.

Apsana introduced the panel of speakers as well as herself, as Chair of the APPG. She spoke of commitment to raising the issues of domestic abuse in Parliament and the importance of convening on the issues today.

The panellists include:

- Sophie Francis-Cansfield, Head of Policy at Women's Aid
- Kerry, an Expert by Experience
- Jess Asato MP, Chair of the APPG for Perpetrators of Domestic Abuse
- Shazia Choudhry, Professor of Law at the University of Oxford

Apsana also shared that Women's Aid has published a new report today that looks into the children who have been killed by a parent who is also a perpetrator of domestic abuse after contact was granted in the family courts or by statutory agencies despite disclosures of abuse. Apsana then introduced Sophie to talk about the report and Women's Aid's work on this issue.

Sophie Francis-Cansfield, Head of Policy at Women's Aid

Sophie opened by thanking Apsana and the whole of the APPG for holding the space for this crucial discussion today.

Sophie began by outlining Women's Aid's reports on child homicides, including the report published today. She shared that almost ten years ago, Women's Aid produced a report identifying 19 children who had been killed because of statutory or legislative failures in the context of the family courts. This also saw the launch of Women's Aid's Child First campaign in 2016 and the calls to the Government and all agencies involved with the family courts to make the process safer for women and child survivors.

In the time since this Women's Aid have seen an array of key milestones including:

- Five years ago, the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) published its Harm Panel report which included a set of recommendations to improve the safety of women and children in the family justice system.
- And four years ago, children's experiences were legally recognised within the statutory definition of domestic abuse in the Domestic Abuse Act 2021.

Sophie added that at the heart of Women's Aid's Child First campaign is the objective of bringing to an end avoidable child deaths as a result of unsafe child contact with dangerous perpetrators of domestic abuse. Because of this, Sophie added that today, with the publication of the new report 'Nineteen More Child Homicides', it is a challenging and sobering moment to confirm that despite being nearly a decade on from the previous publication, Women's Aid have found that the same number of children have been killed in circumstances that could have been avoided, should there have been the political and judicial will to do so.

Sophie shared that Women's Aid's new report, 'Nineteen More Child Homicides', uncovers details of 19 children killed in 18 families by perpetrators of domestic abuse in circumstances relating to child contact, either formally or informally arranged. These homicides took place in England and Wales and were described in Serious Case Reviews

(SCRs) and Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews (CSPRs) published between September 2015 to September 2024 (inclusive).

Sophie then shared some of the key findings, which include:

- Seventeen of the 18 perpetrators were men, and 15 out of these 17 men were the fathers to the children that were killed.
- There were 28 deaths in total, 27 of which occurred in the 18 families: 19, children, three mothers, two dogs, and three perpetrators who committed suicide. Another female survivor was also killed by one of the perpetrators after he had already killed two of his children and attempted to kill another.
- There were at least 44 children of the mothers and fathers in these 18 case studies. This means that through these homicides, 24 children lost a sibling, and six children lost both a parent and a sibling.
- In 12 cases, the perpetrator was found guilty of murder.
- Out of the 18 perpetrators, 13 were known to statutory agencies as perpetrators of domestic abuse, and 12 of these were known for this by the police.
- In five cases it was stated that the perpetrator was not known to statutory agencies as perpetrators of domestic abuse, however, there were clear and acknowledged failed opportunities to ask or follow up concerns regarding domestic abuse.
- Two more children were seriously harmed in these 18 case studies; one through attempted murder, and the other through grievous bodily harm during the same incident where another child was killed.
- Four women were also killed by the perpetrators, three at the time of the child homicides. In the three cases where the woman was the mother a DASH (Domestic Abuse, Stalking, Harassment and Honour Based Violence) risk assessment had been completed and was scored as medium risk.
- In three of the cases, the perpetrator had other children where he either had only supervised contact with these children or no contact at all. In one of these cases there was a non-molestation order in place to prevent the father from contacting his ex-partner and their child/ren.
- In five of the cases, the couple appeared to be living together despite being separated. In three of these cases, the reviews stated that this was for financial reasons. In the two remaining cases the perpetrator moving back in appeared to form part of the perpetrator's controlling behaviour and financial abuse.
- Excluding the five cases where the parents were living together but separated, contact was arranged informally in eight of the cases. These informal arrangements included one case where a supervision order had expired; one where family courts had granted supervised contact only to the perpetrator's other child; one where both a restraining order and non-molestation order had been put in place to prevent the perpetrator from having contact with a previous partner and their child, along with a pre-birth assessment undertaken by social care prohibiting the father from having residency with his subsequent child but

placing no restrictions on contact. In the case where it was unclear how contact was arranged or whether killing happened during child contact, there were bail conditions in place to prevent the perpetrator from contacting the mother or entering the area she lived and requiring child contact to be arranged through a third party.

- In two of the cases, the perpetrators had a history of committing child sexual abuse, including child sexual exploitation. In one of these cases the victim was the mother of one of the children killed and agencies had failed to respond appropriately to this concern at the time. She had been exploited as a child by the same perpetrator with whom she shared a child with as an adult/ when she became an adult.
- Four of the cases involved the family courts. This includes two involving private family law arrangements where the non-abusive parent had residency, and in one case the perpetrator had been granted unsupervised contact and in the other the perpetrator had been granted supervised and indirect contact only. Attempts to safeguard the child in the latter case through supervised and indirect contact only were undermined by evidence of three occasions where details of the family address were shared with the perpetrator in error. When the mother reported this to the police it was accidentally passed to the wrong neighbourhood team where it was closed without further action. Another case involved a Special Guardianship Order (SGO) following the breakdown of a previous Child Arrangement Order. In the final case social care had temporarily arranged for the child to live with the perpetrator under supervision of another adult as an interim measure after he had made an allegation about the mother.

Sophie added that through these findings Women's Aid has identified five key themes where improvements could be made to better protect child and adult survivors around child contact with a perpetrator of domestic abuse. These key themes are:

1. Recognising children's experiences
2. Professional understandings of coercive and controlling behaviour
3. Understanding child contact as a tool to manipulate professionals
4. Agency separation as a risk factor
5. Supporting non-abusive parents as survivors

Sophie added that the report makes some clear recommendations for each of these key themes, which although she will not have time to cover in full today, can be characterised by some of the overarching recommendations that she stresses the Government, family court, judiciary, Cafcass and other agencies must urgently act upon. Sophie shared that these include:

- Repeal the presumption of parental involvement through urgent legislation.

- Explore options for hearing from and providing advocacy, representation and support for children as a central consideration for social care workers, including in Child Impact Reports.
- Conduct a rapid evidence review of the experiences of children bereaved by domestic abuse, including a review of the statutory and voluntary sector provision available to them.
- Put in place functioning mechanisms for communication, coordination, continuity and consistency at national and local levels between statutory agencies, which includes more detailed logging of both the survivors' and perpetrators' histories.
- Ensure that social workers undertaking assessments for private law children's proceedings are not only accredited, but reviewed as part of their career progression by domestic abuse specialists to help ensure the requisite knowledge and skills are sufficiently assessed.

Sophie then added that, through a wider lens, the report highlights the risks to women and child survivors post-separation, and that post separation abuse is recognised as part of coercive control and it is well-evidenced that a perpetrator does not end their abusive behaviour when the relationship ends. She added that Women's Aid knows that the end of the relationship can intensify the focus of the abuser, as they risk losing control and may resort to extreme or persistent behaviours to try and regain this control. Sophie added that this can take many forms, however Women's Aid knows how perpetrators weaponise children as a tool for their abuse and instrumentalise the family courts and agencies involved in the process.

Sophie shared that this is why Women's Aid has continued to push for numerous key pieces of legislation to be broadened out to include the family courts. She added that an overt focus on criminal justice does not always reflect survivors lived experience, and this is particularly the case with post-separation abuse. Sophie added that Women's Aid have campaigned for the new violence against women strategy to address the previous gap of not including the family courts, and urged for the new strategy set out a clear timeline for implementing the reforms to the family courts recommended in the Ministry of Justice's Harm Panel review.

Sophie concluded by asking APPG members and audience members to read the report published today in full and encourages everyone to use their voice to support the recommendations to prevent further avoidable child deaths.

Sophie then finished by sharing a huge thank you to Claire Throssell MBE for all the tireless work she has done since the murders of her two sons, Jack and Paul, and the whole Women's Aid Experts by Experience Family Justice Subgroup, of which Kerry is a member, who were consulted on the research and fed in vital contributions.

Kerry, a survivor of domestic abuse

Kerry thanked the APPG for inviting her to speak and gave some background of her journey having fled following ten years of domestic abuse. Kerry shared that she spent two years in the family courts where findings of abuse towards myself and my son were made against my perpetrator. Kerry shared that she was cross-examined by the perpetrator and his sister, and was told by a judge that he knew convicted murderers who had more contact with their children than Kerry's son had with his dad.

Kerry attended two court-appointed contact centres during the proceedings and despite being warned not to by CAFCASS, her son was emotionally threatened several times including the threat of kidnap at one centre. Due to Kerry's son's neurodiversity, the arrangement was an open-ended long-term contact order in a supported setting.

Kerry shared that over the course of the next seven years, her son repeatedly raised fears at school and around others about the perpetrator further abusing him and ending his life. All of Kerry's son's fears were ignored which resulted in PTSD and volatile behaviour at home; when Kerry tried to source help for him, she was accused of familial induced illness and instantly lost her ability to advocate for him.

Kerry shared that two years before her son's 13th birthday he was sexually assaulted at a contact centre. He then disclosed a historic assault. The case was passed around and it was no further actioned. A social worker instructed Kerry to tell him the outcome of the case, and that her son would need to resume contact arrangements. As his next birthday was his 13th, that was the last time that Kerry's son saw the perpetrator. Kerry shared that this experience caused horrific additional trauma for her son, for which over six more years there was no mental health support. As Kerry was her son's only safe space, his escalating emotional needs borne out through violent and aggressive episodes were levelled at Kerry, meaning that although she knew her son needed help and it was not his fault - she was once again living with domestic abuse. Kerry repeatedly tried to get help, but referrals were rejected and then at the age of 17, Kerry received a call from her son's college informing her that he was on a bridge and they feared he was going to jump – another referral was made and once again rejected. Kerry was told that had he have jumped he would have fit the criteria for the adult mental health team, but not jumping meant that he didn't.

Because of this crisis, the service that Kerry volunteered with was able to source funding for some trauma informed therapy. If it hadn't been for the service, Kerry shared that her son, due to his age would either now be behind bars due to the violence, or he would have taken his own life. He still lives with PTSD but the therapy and the service transformed his life and his responses.

Kerry prefers to use the term 'VAWC' (Violence Against Women and Children') rather than 'VAWG' (Violence Against Women and Girls). Kerry's son does not feel visible or included in the VAWG space. Kerry added that she knows from her work that while provision for male child survivors is within another policy, others hearing the term VAWG will not understand that provision, statutory responsibility or guidance will apply to male children. Kerry added that by using the term VAWG she fears that we risk alienating the very people we want to help and we risk perpetuating the very cycle we are trying to break through male violence from trauma.

Kerry then shared some of her thoughts on working as an Expert by Experience and how she and her son have been able to contribute to policy making. Kerry shared that during lockdown 2020 her son worked with Jess Phillips MP on the 'No Victim Left Behind' Campaign and was instrumental in achieving children being recognised as survivors in their own right of domestic abuse, through the Domestic Abuse Act 2021. Kerry added that unfortunately, she is finding at a local level that the reality of this change is it being used to further blame survivors for not leaving sooner or protecting their child and therefore further disadvantaging them in the eyes of the family court, CAFCASS and children's services.

Kerry is the leader of DA SEEN, which stands for Domestic Abuse Surrey Expert by Experience Network – a group of women from across the county who have all received support from the Surrey Domestic Abuse Partnership specialist outreach services. DA SEEN's objectives since March 2021 has been to 'put survivors at the heart of what you do' and to keep survivor voices at the heart of policy and decision making firmly placing the responsibility of that onto the professionals with whom the survivors come into contact.

Kerry added that ensuring work with survivors is ethical can be a challenge and too often engagement is tokenistic. Kerry the DA SEEN group have come up with five key principles for working with survivors:

1. Transfer of power - Professionals stepping back in their power and empowering survivors to step into theirs to inform tangible change cannot be underestimated
2. Support – The CEO of our domestic abuse partnership states that 'true and trauma informed survivor engagement must be carried out within a framework of specialist support, investment in clinical supervision, pre and post session specialist support, expenses and robustly challenging agencies on their intentions. We must move beyond a model that seeks survivor voices in return for a small token of good will. These women are experts and should be treated as such. When we truly listen and act we have the opportunity to create systematic change"

3. Investment – Professionals need to invest time in survivors and be reflective and respectful in making our experiences visible.
4. Intention – Professionals intentionally keeping in touch and informing survivors on every step of a working process is very meaningful for those whose lived experience is being worked with.
5. Commitment – Committing to using survivors lived experience to change the lives of others in a tangible way.

DA SEEN are known across the country for their work and Kerry shared some examples where they have been particularly impactful. In 2023 DA SEEN worked closely with Surrey Police to look at three of their policies that directly affect survivors and their children. As a result of the collaboration using the five principles listed above, their work was centralised within Surrey Police domestic abuse policy and the rape and sexual assault policy. In addition to this, Surrey Police worked with DA SEEN on their policy around safeguarding women with insecure immigration status which led to the creation of the first process for prioritising safety and encouraging reporting via a firewall. An article of the work has recently been published by the Independent Office for Police Compliance.

Secondly, the family court in Surrey together with Rights of Women and the Firebird Foundation have been running a pilot involving all statutory agencies and stakeholders within Surrey to improve the experiences of survivors going through court. Again, DA SEEN's work has been centralised within this project. One exercise in particular created by DA SEEN looked at the impact of verbal and written victim blaming language that DA SEEN members have experienced within the family court. This has been so influential that it has now been requested in other spaces. Kerry added that the learning from this has been one of the most transformative aspects of the project so far.

Kerry then spoke directly to government officials, both in the room, online and any who may see the minutes. Kerry spoke about the reports published by Women's Aid on child homicides which were the result of unsafe contact orders in the family courts. Kerry said that after the 2016 publication survivors were given assurances by the Government that those deaths would not be in vain and that action would be taken, but that the title of the follow up report being published today, '19 More Child Homicides' says it all.

Kerry shared some of the key findings from the report, including that 19 children were killed, affecting 18 families and that the children were aged three weeks to 11 years old, four of whom were disabled. Kerry added that four women were killed, two dogs killed, there was one attempted murder of a child, one case of grievous bodily harm with intent inflicted on a child, 25 children left without a sibling, eight children left without a

parent, six children left without a sibling and a parent, and eight cases of a child over the age of five killed where coercive and controlling behaviour of the child was evidenced in the case.

Kerry shared that she knows women who will live their lifetime without being able to hold their children again, women who will live their lifetime without their sisters or their daughters due to femicide. Kerry added that these women are often invisible with no one really understanding, or recognising the lifelong impact of the nature of their loss. Kerry added that she knows women and children like herself, who will live their lifetime with the lifelong physical and emotional health consequences from domestic abuse. Kerry concluded that all of these women deserve the same level of recognition.

Kerry added that she feels the inaction of successive governments and ever revolving door of delays on decision making and lack of accountability and responsibility for safeguarding survivors in the family court sends a clear message that their lives and the lives of those who have gone before them don't matter.

Kerry then shared some key priorities that she feels we will never achieve an end to violence against women and children without. These included:

- implementing the recommendations of today's report 'Nineteen More Child Homicides', by Women's Aid in full.
- implementing the recommendations of the Harm Panel report in full.
- repealing the presumption of parental involvement. As today's report states 'Legislation falls short of understanding the full breadth of children's experiences of domestic abuse. There is a substantial underestimation of risk as well as over optimisation that perpetrators can still be good enough parents'.
- prioritising and ringfencing funding for specialist community based domestic abuse outreach services.
- ringfencing additional funding for these services for highly specialised therapeutic support for survivors, their children, and for those bereaved from femicide and filicide. The current NHS offer is woefully inadequate. You cannot CBT someone out of trauma.
- recognising bereaved families from femicide and filicide within the Victims and Courts Bill, their individual needs, difficulties they face and their rights.
- Renaming the VAWG strategy the VAWC strategy to centralise the experiences of male child survivors.
- creating a nationally accredited mandatory domestic abuse training programme inclusive of the effects of domestic abuse on children for all judges, magistrates, social workers, CAFCASS officers, child contact centre staff, and any other

practitioners responsible for decision making in relation to child contact or facilitating child contact.

Kerry added that in any other setting that involves safeguarding there are strict rules around the provision of safety for children and posed the question - 'why does this not apply to the family courts, and child contact where children are arguably at their most vulnerable?'

Kerry ended with a statement that she is at a loss to understand the political and professional fear of taking responsibility for making and enforcing accountability within the family court, child contact decisions, and statutory responses to safeguarding. She asked that the Government please trust her and the voices of survivors when they tell you that that fear is nothing compared to the fear survivors and their children to live with on a daily basis.

Jess Asato MP, Chair of the APPG on Perpetrators of Domestic Abuse

Jess opened by thanking the APPG for the opportunity to speak on an issue that affects thousands of families across the country—and how Parliamentarians including herself, through the forthcoming VAWG strategy, can prevent post-separation abuse and finally recognise children as survivors in their own right.

Jess commented that too often, separation is viewed as the endpoint of abuse, but for many women and children, separation marks the beginning of a new chapter of coercion and fear. She added that there is a need to recognise that post-separation abuse, through legal systems, financial control, child contact, and ongoing harassment, is not just a continuation of violence; it is a calculated effort to maintain power and control and at the heart of this dynamic are children.

Jess stated that children are not merely witnesses to abuse, they are deeply affected by it—psychologically, emotionally, and physically and that while they are survivors too, too many policies and practices continue to treat children as secondary, invisible in the eyes of the system, especially once the parental relationship has ended.

Jess then shared how she feels that the forthcoming VAWG strategy can strengthen support for survivors and recognise children as victims in their own right through four key measures. She shared that she thinks as a first step, Government needs to see real movement on the Harm Panel report. She added that so much evidence and work went into the development of the report, and while some steps forward have been made, this is not reflected in the realities of survivors when she speaks to them, and they are going through exactly the same issues as they did at the time of the report's publication.

Jess added that the family courts too often prioritise parental access over safety, both to women and children. She stressed that the VAWG strategy must work alongside the Ministry of Justice to ensure that domestic abuse allegations are thoroughly assessed before contact is ordered, and that the presumption of contact is disapplied where harm is a risk.

Further, while succession of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 was a victory, and recognises post-separation coercive and controlling behaviour as a crime, sadly we still do not know how many perpetrators have been convicted as there is no specific way of recording post-separation. Jess added that this limits our ability to truly understand how effectively the new law is being used.

Jess added that as a second measure, the strategy must embed the principle that children are not passive bystanders—they are rights-holders and survivors. This means listening to their voices in child contact decisions, it means trauma-informed training for all multi-agency professionals on a continuing basis, rather than a one-hour e-learning module, and it means centring the child's safety, not simply the parental "right" to contact.

Jess added as a third measure that the strategy must be attached so funding adding that survivors need long-term, sustainable support services and mothers cannot shield their children from abuse if they are unsupported themselves. Jess shared that she also recommends that specialist services for children who have experienced domestic abuse must be protected and expanded—not as an afterthought, but as a core part of the response.

To this point, Jess shared that she has amendments to the Victims and Courts Bill which would introduce a statutory duty to commission specialist services for women and children affected by domestic abuse and sexual violence, adding that victims of domestic abuse and sexual violence are faced with a postcode lottery when it comes to accessing support and this must end. She added that where domestic abuse services do exist, they are faced with a precarious financial situation, which is severely hampering the ability of victims to access the support they need and fewer than half of victims and survivors are able to access the community-based support they wanted. Jess highlighted recent research undertaken by the Domestic Abuse Commissioner which found that 27% of services are having to turn away children from vital support, often due to a lack of capacity.

Jess stressed that this is why herself and officials in Westminster must legislate to bring in a new statutory duty to commission services for both adult and child victims and that she has also laid an amendment to the Victims and Courts Bill to ensure the statutory provision of this.

The fourth measure that Jess outlined for the forthcoming strategy is to ensure strong accountability measures are embedded throughout. Jess stressed that strong monitoring and oversight of how the VAWG strategy is implemented across sectors is vital, particularly in how children's experiences are integrated. She posed the questions on how the strategy will track child survivors' outcomes, ensure their voices are heard, and seeking to safeguard them not only during, but also after abuse. Jess shared that she would like to see a commitment to an economic analysis of the cost of domestic abuse on children's outcomes. The Home Office previously did this and found that the economic impact is £66bn (more in today's prices). But at the time they said they couldn't do it for children – adding that it feels it's time to remedy that gap in information.

Jess concluded by stating that she sees the next VAWG strategy is an opportunity to close a dangerous gap and as the Government's chance to say that violence does not end when a relationship does, and that children are not collateral damage, that they are survivors and to accept that there is a responsibility to ensure their safety.

Jess stated that she thinks if this Government is serious about halving VAWG, which she believes they are, that she would urge a focus on the safety of women and children post-separation and that she does not think the commitment can be fulfilled without this.

Professor Shazia Choudhry, Professor of Law at the University of Oxford

Shazia opened by thanking the APPG, the previous speakers and outlining her role research and the aims to understand the experiences of survivors of domestic abuse in the family law proceedings; examine the knowledge and practices of key professionals in cases involving domestic abuse, including judges, lawyers and court appointed experts; to explore the structural and institutional barriers to justice for survivors; and to assess the role of human rights law and policy in shaping family court responses. Shazia added that this last point on the implementation of human rights law was an area of particular concern, and something raised by both the UN Rapporteur on Violence against Women and Girls and GREVIO.

Shazia then shared some key points about the methodology for her research (which is linked below). She outlined that the study covered six countries, England and Wales, France, Spain, Italy, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Shazia shared that the research team used

qualitative methods including focus groups with survivors and semi structured interviews with judges, lawyers and court appointed experts. The samples chosen for these focus groups aimed at depth of information, rather than focussing on representativeness; This was to ensure that they captured complex, high quality insights into the participants experiences. She added that the research adhered to strict ethical protocols and always prioritised survivors' safety and well-being, taking trauma informed approaches.

Shazia then outlined some of the key findings from the research. These included that in the family courts, domestic abuse was often minimised as mere 'conflict', with courts framing abuse as historical and irrelevant to child welfare decisions. This was particularly prevalent across England and Wales. The report also found that there was poor recognition of coercive control and post separation abuse across the jurisdictions. The researchers also found that survivors testimonies on their own were rarely seen as sufficient without corroboration, for example, criminal convictions, which, as we know, can be very challenging to secure and there is in England currently no specific domestic abuse offence.

Shazia added that from discussions with the focus group, the research also concluded that survivors experienced discrimination across the justice system. Survivors shared that although they expected protection, they felt that their children were left unsafe and that the abuse was unacknowledged. The research found that although court appointed experts reports were influential they often lacked quality or specialist knowledge. They also found that there was a large amount of stereotyping across the professionals, including discrimination against gender, class, race and migration status, which shaped negative assumptions about mothers and survivors. Because of these experiences of the justice system, Shazia shared that survivors felt bullied, blamed or pressures to reconcile with abuse is leading to secondary victimisation through the courts.

Another area of concern that Shazia's research highlighted with the barriers to justice. Poor coordination between family, child protection and criminal courts which meant that there were often delays and victims would have to repeat their stories several times. This was particularly evident in France, Spain, Italy and Bosnia Herzegovina. Legal aid is another key barrier to justice for survivors in the family justice system. Legal aid is often inaccessible due to the strict means testing and cost barriers, and there is also a lot of inconsistency in the availability for this. Lastly, Shazia emphasised that long waits for experts, reports and case less resolutions which sometimes dragged on for years also increased the barriers to justice for many survivors.

Shazia then went on to discuss the issue of parental alienation, which was raised as a key area of concern in the research. Parental alienation is a pseudoscientific concept with no evidential basis and is used in the family courts to rebut, obscure and distract from allegations of domestic abuse, with survivors being accused of alienating when they raised concerns over the safety of contact between perpetrator and a child. Shazia's research found that parental alienation was often used to deflect from abuse allegations and justify custody or contact with the recent fathers, and that despite formal discouragement by the courts and legislature in France, Spain and Italy, the concept continued to influence practice, sometimes under different names, disproportionately targeting mothers.

Lastly, Shazia framed the research within the context of human rights law, acknowledging that human rights law was often seen as background context and rarely used proactively in family court cases. Article 8, which is on family life is the article that was most often invoked and that this was typically used in favour of fathers' contact rights. The research found the Articles 2 and 3, which are the right to life and the protection from inhuman and degrading treatment, and Article 6, which is the right to a fair trial, were rarely mentioned, despite their significant relevance to these cases and to domestic abuse.

Shazia added some key findings from each of the six countries finding that:

- In England and Wales there was a strong contact at all costs culture, coercive control was poorly understood and parental alienation claims were very common.
- In France, contact was often prioritised, claims of 'parental alienation' persists despite official discouragement, and there is weak coordination between courts.
- In Spain, while gender violence law exists, the application of this is inconsistent. Delays are common and the concept of parental alienation is still very influential.
- In Italy, the courts were slow to restrict abusive fathers' contact. There was a heavy reliance on discredited concepts like parental alienation. Shazia added that there is some reform underway, but the implementation of this is very early on.
- In Bosnia & Herzegovina The legal frameworks were fragmented. Mediation is still used in most domestic abuse cases and the best interest of the child was interpreted as requiring joint custody even where abuse has occurred.

Shazia then outlined five key recommendations that were made in the research that could apply across these jurisdictions. These recommendations included:

1. The mandatory, high quality, regularly updated training on domestic abuse and gender stereotyping, including secondary victimisation and human rights be given to all family justice professionals.
2. That the courts require stronger professional standards, including demonstrable expertise in domestic abuse.
3. That the courts undergo structural reform, including hiring specialised courts and judges and improved coordination between the criminal, family and child protection systems.
4. That legal aid becomes accessible to all survivors so that they can engage effectively with the proceedings.
5. And that all courts end the misuse of parental alienation narratives and ensure that children's voices are meaningfully heard.

To conclude, Shazia shared that the report that they produced show systemic failures across six jurisdictions where survivors and children are left unprotected and abusive parents rights are prioritised over safety. She added that reform is urgently needed to align family law practice with human rights obligations and to end state complicity in post separation abuse.

Shazia then shared a short video which outlined findings from the research with members in the room and a link was shared online for the online audience. You can find the link to this with the references at the bottom of the minutes.

Contribution from Lord Simon Russell, member of the APPG

Lord Russell said he was pleased that the APPG was convening on this issue and that there are experts in the in the House of Lords, who have judicial experience in the family courts that he knows are keen to work on this. He highlighted Baroness Butler-Sloss and Lord Meston as two key figures that the APPG should engage with and who are keen to work on this issue. Lord Russell added that he believes that there is less expertise in the House of Commons at present and so would be keen to build the work in both houses and share knowledge.

Sophie Francis-Cansfield responded that Kate Kniveton, who lost her seat at the last election, was a powerful ally and representative in House of Commons and it would be good to discuss with MPs what opportunities there would be to continue her work and her find out more information on her upcoming documentary.

Q – From Surviving Economic Abuse (SEA)

“Victim-survivors share with SEA again and again that abusers will continue to coerce and control them through divorce and financial remedy proceedings, which often result

in unfair outcomes for victim-survivors, who often cannot benefit from legal advice or representation due to barriers to accessing legal aid. This is even more difficult for cohabitating victim-survivors who have no legal rights or remedies based on their relationship status. How can the VAWG strategy recognise and address abusers' use of divorce and financial remedy proceedings as a tool for economic abuse and ensure that promised cohabitation reforms reflect the needs of victim-survivors?"

Apsana thanked Surviving Economic Abuse for sending in the question and for their work with survivors noting that economic abuse is particularly important in discussions on post-separation abuse because of the lasting impacts that it can have on survivors ability to not only flee, but stay fled.

Professor Shazia Choudhry agreed that there is a need to ensure the access to legal aid is available and that this was an area that came up across the jurisdictions in her research. She also noted that reforms and guidance on cohabitation throughout court processes have been long awaited and much needed, especially given the growing prevalence of cohabitation post separation.

Q - What do panellists think about moving towards the term 'violence against women and children' instead of VAWG?

Kerry mentioned that as she outlined in her speech – she also prefers to use the term 'children' rather than 'girls' and shared that her son does not feel seen within the VAWG wording and this is something that should be considered if we are hoping to recognise all children as survivors in their own right.

Sophie noted that the VAWG framework is used mostly in the sector as it aligns to international best practice like the Istanbul convention, but that a focus on girls alone does not align with statutory definition in Domestic Abuse Act 2021. She also noted that a focus on children rather than girls would address issues highlighted by Jess Asato MP around child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation being separate to the VAWG strategy. Sophie added that that while the gendered nature of VAWG should play a part in how we assess and respond to the issues, that Women's Aid works for the women and children who experience domestic abuse.

Professor Shazia Choudhry noted that for her own work she would need to consider the implications of this more broadly, in terms of how it would work with international best practice, but that the need to recognise children broadly and not girls supports the need for a separate strategy on the family courts specifically, in addition to the forthcoming VAWG Strategy.

Q – Should the Victims and Courts Bill change the rule that the Family Court does not admit evidence from a criminal trial or evidence of financial abuse – even when verified by another court?

Professor Shazia Choudhry pointed to the need to make access to legal aid more consistent, alongside the need for statutory bodies to work together including the family courts, the criminal courts and social care systems. Shazia referred to this as the three planet model.

Kerry added that there are challenges with litigation being in person and how survivors could be protected in this, if evidence is able to be admitted across courts. Kerry also pointed to the siloed nature of the courts, following Shazia's point and adding about how to prioritise survivors when improving cross-system communication.

Q – Why are the same protections not in place for a perpetrator's own children when they have been banned from working with other children because of his abusive behaviour?

Sophie Francis-Cansfield noted the cases from Women's Aid's Nineteen More Child Homicides report which evidences how much of an issue this is, and how legislation/guidance does not reflect the modern reality of families, which is too often still thought of in terms of the nuclear family model. Sophie added that the report also points to the need to recognise how perpetrators will have children with multiple women as a tool and technique for targeting vulnerable women

Sophie added that the government have an opportunity through their choice of metrics for measuring success of the VAWG strategy to capture experiences of all children in the household, not just those who have 'seen or heard etc' the abuse.

Q – What measures of accountability are in place for statutory agencies who are currently choosing to ignore abuse

Sophie Francis-Cansfield reiterated the point on the opportunities in the upcoming VAWG strategy and the need for this to be very clear on the metrics used.

Q – How can a government be serious about tackling VAWG when there was no mention in the recent budget?

Apsana Begum MP responded that this is an area where the VAWG strategy should raise specific measures as to how the strategy will be funded and that members of the party are keen to press on this.

Professor Shazia Choudhry raised that there are lots of economists who have evidenced that investing in victim support services actually saves money and has long term benefits and that this research should be highlighted and shows relatively little spending is needed in terms of over all government spending.

Sophie Francis-Cansfield talked about how the VAWG commitment sits within the safer streets mission but it is important that there is a whole system approach and that the strategy does not lean too heavily on the criminal justice metrics and reforms to the justice system. Sophie added the importance of the delivery being met with engagement with the specialist VAWG Sector, but that without funding, this will face the same problems arising that we highlighted by the NAO.

Q – How can the forthcoming VAWG strategy ensure that rural-specific dynamics are recognised and addressed – generally but also specifically in efforts to reform the family courts and protect children as direct victims of abuse?

Professor Shazia Choudhry talked about how this is an issue of intersectionality and again speaks to the resourcing of holistic services and looking at where abuse is perpetrated and taking a trauma-informed approach to planning for a whole system approach. Shazia shared an example of a rural area where there is only one commuting bus service and so survivors are forced to share a commute with the perpetrator.

Q – What more can be done legislatively and through education to protect mothers who have crossed borders to flee abuse, in particular how to ensure that their children are not sent back to a perpetrator?

Apsana Begum MP reflected that this something that comes up regularly in constituency work and balancing accusations of abuse with accusations of kidnapping and with what is in place legally to protect women.

Kerry noted the firewall that is in place with her local police so that survivors can report without fear of their details being passed on to immigration services.

Professor Shazia Choudhry raised that due to the nature of the Hague Convention and the UK being a signatory, that the laws on this issue can be quite inflexible. Sophie raised the ongoing and important work of LAWRS and Southall Black Sisters who do lots of work in this area and the importance of being led by the expertise of these specialist services.

