

Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Ending violence against women and girls in Northern Ireland, HC 840

Wednesday 18 March 2026

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 18 March 2026.

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Members present: Tonia Antoniazzi (Chair); Chris Bloore; Claire Hanna; Simon Hoare; Mike Kane; Gavin Robinson; Robin Swann.

Questions 72 - 103

Witnesses

I: Jess Phillips MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Minister for Safeguarding and Violence Against Women and Girls); Gisela Carr, Deputy Director, Interpersonal Abuse Unit, Home Office.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Jess Phillips and Gisela Carr.

Q72 **Chair:** Welcome to the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee evidence session on ending violence against women and girls in Northern Ireland. Welcome to the Minister, Jess Phillips, and to the deputy director of the interpersonal abuse unit, Gisela Carr. Minister, what is your current assessment of violence against women and girls across the UK and in Northern Ireland?

Jess Phillips: My and the Government's assessment of violence against women and girls is that it is a national emergency. Specifically in relation to Northern Ireland, the data shows us that the rates of femicide—murder and domestic homicide—are higher there than not just other parts of the United Kingdom but quite a lot of the world. It is a national emergency. I could give you the data. About 10% of the population over 16—5 million people—reported suffering one of the many forms of violence against women and girls, which is a phenomenal number. Our assessment is that it is a national emergency and an epidemic.

Q73 **Chair:** So many levers are devolved.

Jess Phillips: Yes, a lot of this is devolved.

Chair: This is a UK-wide UK Government plan. Are you confident that you



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can have as much impact in Northern Ireland as you can have, for example, in England?

Jess Phillips: The vast majority of the violence against women and girls strategy is England and Wales, and even much of it is just England as well, because of the devolved nations. There are bits that are not reserved, so issues around immigration. One huge part of the strategy is around the online space and the safety of women online, and that is not devolved to Northern Ireland. We have a role in the world and that needs a global challenge.

I feel confident that the violence against women and girls strategy and the Government's plans on violence against women and girls in their broadest sense will have a positive effect on women in Northern Ireland. Undoubtedly, the kinds of levers that we, as Members of Parliament, get asked to pull, whether it is around funding for refuges or more police on the street, are all devolved. I do not see any less care or attention being given to this fact by the Northern Ireland Executive, and so I do not think that they will do less well because of the bits that are covered by devolution, because they have their own Executive who are responsible for those things.

Q74 **Chair:** You work with them. Since you have been in post, you have visited Northern Ireland. You have engagement with the Northern Ireland Executive. A UN committee in 2019, referring to the UK, said, "The devolution of government powers does not negate the direct responsibility of the state party to fulfil its obligations to all women and girls within its jurisdiction".

Jess Phillips: In 2019 we lived in a slightly different time. Thanks to many good people campaigning, the laws have changed in Northern Ireland with regard to abortion and the freedom of women regarding their own reproductive rights. That 2019 report by the UN was almost certainly talking about the fracture between the UK and Northern Ireland in that regard.

There is undoubtedly a difference in how we have policy around lots of different issues of violence against women and girls. I would say that England and Wales are far more coterminous, largely because of policing not being devolved within Wales. In both Scotland and Northern Ireland, there are differences in education and health policy.

Like you say, I have been over to Northern Ireland and met with Ministers over there, and our officials work with them very closely, regularly. I count some of the women's sector in Northern Ireland as some of the greatest informants, for want of a better word, on what we should be doing. Funnily enough, I remember that, while we were there, an issue came up that would never ever come up for me in Birmingham, or would likely never come up for most people: it was how one thing that they had to give out and supply to people was heating oil. That was something I had literally never heard of.



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Making sure that our policies understand how we have to respond to different vulnerable groups across the UK is really important. I do not fear that they do not care about it or are lagging behind in any particular area, but it is different in both Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Q75 Chair: Will you be able to provide regular updates on progress against the strategy to include Northern Ireland as well?

Jess Phillips: We have promised to do regular updates annually, and no doubt some of that will include issues that cover Northern Ireland, anything to do with online and how we know whether that is affecting the women of Northern Ireland. I have no doubt that that will form part of the data. Also, Northern Ireland women are included in the data gather. Halving violence against women and girls includes the women of Northern Ireland, so it is not like they are excluded from that particular data gather. Lots of the updates will be on progress on one of the 259 policies—the vast majority of them, I have to say—do not apply to Northern Ireland.

Q76 Gavin Robinson: Good morning, Minister. You have mentioned engagement with Northern Ireland officials and I know even personally you have been engaged with colleagues of mine, Carla Lockhart included. The Natalie McNally case going through the courts at the moment has garnered a lot of interest in Northern Ireland and been very topical over the last number of weeks, given some of the extraordinary issues at play in that murder trial.

When you have engaged with Ministers, or at least officials have engaged with officials—obviously your Government published their strategy after the Northern Ireland Executive strategy—do you see complementarity between them? Did you take any encouragement or initiative from the Northern Ireland strategy? Do they complement one another?

Jess Phillips: Yes. First and foremost, we went over to Northern Ireland specifically to talk to them about the building of their strategy, how they had done it and what outcomes they were seeking to pursue. Broadly, the outcomes map across. Prevention is the single biggest focus of both that aligns. We dream the same dreams and want the same things, but the journey is sometimes different. How you go about achieving that prevention is slightly different across the strategies, although not really. The focus on education is in both.

While I was in Northern Ireland, one of the most compelling sessions that I went to was with Women's Aid Northern Ireland, which had done a piece of work with children, who had talked about what they wanted to see in the strategy and what they wanted to be taught in education. It had been totally co-designed by children in Northern Ireland.

Absolutely, we took some of what they were doing. Also, we wanted to see an alignment. It is no point them having a strategy that says, "We are not going to bother with prevention," which would be a weird strategy



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to write. I would have some questions for them. We want to align, but recognise that situations and institutions are different across the nations.

Q77 Gavin Robinson: Was there anything in the Northern Ireland Executive strategy that you thought would not work in England? Are there things that you have decided to proceed with that perhaps the Northern Ireland Executive strategy did not include because they did not have the courage or the work done to proceed?

Jess Phillips: I would not say that there was anything I disagreed with. I would really give credit to the Northern Ireland Executive and those who built the strategy for making it incredibly victim-centric and working with the voice of victims to build the strategy. Where I think that they differ is just in the policies proposed to get on the same journey. No, there is nothing in the Northern Ireland strategy that I disagree with.

It would be remiss of me not to say that what I heard from the organisations on the ground, whether that is for Women's Aid or the families I met of those who had been victims of femicide, is that making sure that the nice words mean anything is always the critical thing. There is nothing that we disagree with.

Gisela Carr: I can say a little bit more about what we are doing with officials in the Northern Ireland Executive, if that is helpful. We meet regularly as a five jurisdictions group, including the Republic of Ireland as well, given the cross-border nature of some of the issues. We met with that group regularly during the development of the strategy and we have since met with them. I think that the last meeting was on 5 February.

One thing we really want to do there is think about how we are working across all the devolved Governments to align our strategic approach. I think that my Welsh and Scottish colleagues would not mind me pointing out that they have asked us to wait until they are through their pre-election period ahead of elections in May, and then regroup to think about what our co-operation structure looks like going forward. There is certainly an intention to continue that in a way that works across all of the devolved Governments.

Q78 Gavin Robinson: I know from time that I spent behind the scenes in government that there are joint ministerial committees coming out of the Cabinet Office's ears, but there is not one on ending violence against women and girls. Do you think that it would be useful to have a ministerial co-ordinating group across the devolved nations, rather than assuming that it is your responsibility to check in from time to time with devolved nations while also managing your own?

Jess Phillips: We have an inter-ministerial group on violence against women and girls. I do sometimes feel like such groups are coming out of my ears though.

Q79 Gavin Robinson: Is that in England, Minister, or across all the devolved nations?



Jess Phillips: It is in England. Because we have meetings coming out of our ears, I do not want people coming to a specific meeting about education if it is completely devolved, for example. In the last inter-ministerial group we had on child sex abuse online, for example, the Ministers from Scotland were on the inter-ministerial group. They are completely entitled to be, should it be relevant. For example, on stuff around immigration and online activity that crosses the borders, we encourage Ministers from devolved Governments to attend either the inter-ministerial group on violence against women and girls or the inter-ministerial group on child sexual abuse.

Q80 **Gavin Robinson:** Finally, I wonder how granular this becomes, from thinking of a case in my constituency—that of Rachel Simpson, who was murdered by a family member. I am not sure it will come to trial. It could come to trial. Throughout my involvement with the family, before her death and since, it is clear there are a huge number of feelings that are all part of a serious or sensitive report which will be published at some stage. It will alarm, depress and startle anyone who takes time to read it, because of the number of Government Departments that failed, leading to this ultimate tragedy. It is a tragedy for the family still, because there is still a loved one who is now in a hospital setting.

That is obviously very specific, but every case where we talk about this sometimes—

Jess Phillips: They are not that specific, yes.

Gavin Robinson: Every case has its own individual elements. Whenever I am given an example of a case in my constituency that is going to have very specific feelings, I ask: are there lessons to be learned for those who have failed, not just locally but also across the nation, so that you can take account of failings and see whether there is a direct application of change that could benefit people in England, Scotland or Wales?

Jess Phillips: You make a really important point. We have what was called the domestic homicide review system in England. Wales is, incidentally, doing something slightly different, but it is in line with the Government in England. We have DHRs that are done. In Northern Ireland I think there is a similar DHR system which is slightly narrower than our DHR system, which has been expanded to include all domestic abuse-related deaths, including suicide. In Northern Ireland, since 2020, I think it is still focused very much just on your classic domestic homicide.

We have identified a lack of co-ordinated learning across what is done in England and Wales. I think that they are about to start, but they do not actually have a domestic homicide review system in Scotland, so there is a patchwork across the nations in this regard. When I spoke in the House on Thursday, I said the Government are committing to having an oversight mechanism of those reviews to ensure that actions are taken in



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the local areas or institutions, but also to make sure that learning can happen across the board.

That system will work alongside the Welsh system. There is not a similar system in Scotland. It would be up to the Northern Ireland Executive to decide to have a similar oversight function. Any learning that we can have can only be a good thing. As we set up what the oversight mechanism looks like, we will absolutely take that away.

- Q81 Claire Hanna:** Minister, Gavin touched on the inter-ministerial group opportunity. In your correspondence to our Committee last year, you said that you would welcome more mechanisms for engagement. Do you have the space to engage on an ongoing basis with the Executive and others as well? Women's Aid is at the centre of a lot of positive change on a number of issues in Northern Ireland. I know you have a history and a relationship with them. Do you have the mechanisms that you need to be able to engage with Women's Aid, businesses, the public and whoever you need to in order to deliver the strategy?

Jess Phillips: If I say to officials in the Home Office "How is this in Northern Ireland?" I do not feel that there is any barrier to ensuring that we can communicate with either the Executive or the people in Northern Ireland. I have to say—I am not just saying this because you are questioning me and you are all here—that the representatives here from Northern Ireland do a really good job of coming to me with cases in their constituencies and speaking to me about the issues and barriers that they may be facing. I have found that to be the case with all the political parties in Northern Ireland.

I would be more concerned that they feel that they can reach me. It is not whether I can reach them. It is whether they feel that they can reach me. As anybody will know, when you are a Member of Parliament, people get in touch with you in real dire need or with really important things that they want to raise, but you do not have the power to deal with them. I worry that what is and is not devolved means that, if, say, Women's Aid Northern Ireland comes to me, I have to say, "That is not for me." I do not want that to create a relationship where they do not feel part of our strategy. That would be a question for them. I would want to make sure that they felt that they also have those in Westminster, although I do not consider myself from Westminster—west midlands and half of me is from Northern Ireland—looking after them.

- Q82 Claire Hanna:** You mentioned education. Obviously education policy is devolved. Are there are there good practices on relationships and sexual education that you think are useful in tackling this issue that maybe are not in place in Northern Ireland? Is that something you have had an opportunity to explore?

Jess Phillips: The answer to that question is that I do not know, which is a rare thing for a person to say. There is brilliant practice and evidence-based practice that goes on across the United Kingdom, but I do not



know. Some places in Northern Ireland may also have, usually, good local services coming up with schemes around healthy relationships. This is one thing that the violence against women and girls strategy commits to, although education is devolved. In fact, yesterday I was meeting with groups of European countries, and I hope it benefits lots of people.

There is a level of research into what works in a universal sense of healthy relationship education, but also targeted on both victims and those showing early signs of perpetration. We are going to have to do some of that work because there is not a huge body of evidence that says, "You give kids this." With maths or English, you would say, "If you do this, we know that, in 10 years' time, this many people will have an English GCSE." There is not the same here. There is far more learning, for example, on youth violence and knife crime because of investment over the years into studies in that. We have to find out.

I could say from my own anecdotal experience that I can think of brilliant schemes operating in schools that I really think work. I am happy to suggest some that might be good for Northern Ireland, but actually it is the job of the Government to look at what really works. We have rewritten the curriculum for English schools, and I think Wales had done it already. Making sure that schools are being tested against that curriculum is really important. Those two things are for the Northern Ireland Executive.

We are about to do the work, finally, to find out what actually works. I do not know that any of us will live to see the outcomes—not live literally, but politically. I do not think that we are all going to die straight away. We will not get the benefit of this, or know whether these things have worked, for quite some time. If you stop boys turning into violent perpetrators, that is a longevity study.

Q83 Claire Hanna: It is longevity, but is the education and the things that we are doing in schools now with young people a big part of the strategy? That is what I am trying to say.

Jess Phillips: It is a huge part of our strategy. It is a big part of the strategy in Northern Ireland as well, notwithstanding the difference in complexity—although not always that different, I know, as somebody who has had people campaigning outside the schools in their constituency—around the education system in a post-conflict society.

Q84 Gavin Robinson: This is about role models. I may be stealing somebody's thunder here—I do not know about prepared questions and all the rest. When we did a visit in Northern Ireland, we went to Larne Football Club. There was this white ribbon campaign and there were some wonderful opportunities to encourage young guys through role models and footballers they admire and look up to. I think that that has been replicated in the GAA as well. We are seeing it very much.

I was going to ask you about the role of role models. How important do



you think it is to have people who young fellows look up to and get inspiration from? You can set it beside this manosphere documentary I watched last week with Louis Theroux and some TikkyTokky idiot. He was a balloon, but they were all balloons. There are guys like that who are inspirational to young fellows, sadly, but there are also these great initiatives that we saw at Larne Football Club and other sporting organisations. How useful do you think they are?

Jess Phillips: I am going to Sky Sports tomorrow, so that will give you an idea. Believe you me, I hope they are not going to ask me any questions about sport. It is very important and a huge part of the Government's strategy, especially when you are talking about post-16, really, and opportunities for congregation. We do not just want to educate and prevent it happening in the future; we also have a problem in society today, so it is about trying to reach congregations of people. Maybe in Northern Ireland you have other sorts of congregation that are less frequent elsewhere.

Sport is a really important element of workplaces where lots of groups of men congregate. A huge part of the initial Enough campaign that was launched on the same day as the strategy was about sporting role models. It had Luke Littler and people in it. I did not see it, but my husband saw it absolutely loads, because it was targeted at talking to men about what was and was not abuse, and how they could model good behaviours as well. It is really important.

Part of the strategy is working with DCMS in partnerships around sports facilities and sports events. The FA has been part of it. If I sound like I do not know what I am talking about, it is because I know nothing about sports. It is always me who comes to talk about the strategy and the point is that it should not be me. It should be DCMS here talking about exactly what it is doing with regard to violence against women and girls in sports. Its part of the strategy is entirely about this role modelling issue that you have talked about.

Gisela Carr: To clarify on some of the points the Minister mentioned about those comms campaigns specifically, the Enough campaign is primarily England and Wales, but the partnership the Minister mentioned that we did with Sky Sports, which was very visible over the Christmas and new year period—

Jess Phillips: Not to me, but to others.

Gisela Carr: —was UK wide. We worked with our colleagues in the Northern Ireland Executive on the comms side to make sure that they had full visibility of the plans and could link it up with their own comms campaigns as well. It is certainly an area where we would be really happy to do even closer join-up.

Q85 **Chair:** One of the events that I went to, I was invited by Ulster Rugby and I accompanied Gavin Robinson. It was really inspirational to see how



it had been spending UK Government funding on creating spaces for girls and the extra changing rooms they wanted, not just for girls and women, but to be able to play and all be there together on the same day. They had enough pitches; they did not have enough changing rooms. There are numerous clubs that are embracing this, so that it becomes a family affair. Men can play at the same time as their sisters. That is a cultural shift. To see that cultural shift in sport changes and improves relationships between men and women, and really sets a good example.

Jess Phillips: One of the most important things that I want to achieve with the strategy is the idea that it is your business. It is important for sports clubs to recognise that, for young women, having to use the same changing areas as men after them immediately creates a barrier of, "I don't know whether I can go there because I don't feel safe," whether it is conscious or otherwise. I pay absolute tribute to institutions for recognising their responsibility, doing something about it and undertaking that work. We want to be thought about. We want them to remember that we exist and that our safety and security feels different.

I can imagine that rugby clubs up and down the country have made it so that, if fights break out in the bar—that is not to cast aspersions; I know, Chair, that you are very close to the rugby community—they have given a lot of thought to the safety and security of men's behaviour with regard to other men, but they need to be thinking about men's behaviour towards women and how you can just do a few small things that make things safer for everyone. It is about trying to make a cultural change.

The way it is manifested in Government is to make a cultural change in different Government Departments. It is to say, "Hang on, no, this is your responsibility. You take this away and you come up with what needs to be done." The thing that will change this in the long term is a changed culture and not just thinking, "It is the police's issue. It is the police's responsibility to pick up the pieces afterwards." If we can keep people safer and prevent things from happening in the first place, that would be much better.

Chair: It is a collective responsibility.

Jess Phillips: Good old Ulster Rugby.

Chair: They were excellent.

Jess Phillips: I shall try to visit.

Chair: Ballynahinch and Lisburn is where we went.

Gavin Robinson: Ballymoney this Saturday, Minister.

Jess Phillips: I shall start supporting them. I have no allegiance elsewhere in this sporting game.

Q86 **Mike Kane:** Thanks, Minister. It is great to have you. Thanks for being here today. I do not look at Twitter very often, but one of the accounts I



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do look at is Counting Dead Women. Anam Rafay, one of my constituents, was added to that list just the other month. In all my time in public life, either as a councillor or an MP, I have seen huge changes in attitudes by the authorities in how this is dealt with. I was wondering, working with police authorities, whether some have grasped the nettle better than others. Have you found, with the new Government, that it is still a little bit like herding cats when it comes to this policy area of work?

Jess Phillips: Yes, of course. People have a million priorities, and I would be lying if I said that sometimes it was not challenging to make this be the priority that I would want it to be. The greatest ally in that has been the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister really understands and cares about violence against women and girls because of his hinterland in prosecuting cases and changing systems to seek to prosecute cases better, certainly with regard to sexual violence.

I recognise that, in health, there is a meningitis outbreak and people's attentions can be very fractured. Fundamentally, from the centre, there was a real push for violence against women and girls to be made a priority in every single Government Department and that is what has happened. While it is maybe not herding cats, it is herding sometimes unruly puppies.

Q87 **Mike Kane:** We have spent some time with the Police Service of Northern Ireland in recent months and I have been impressed with the chief constable's language on this.

Jess Phillips: Yes, me too.

Mike Kane: From your perspective, how do you think they are doing?

Jess Phillips: I have met Jon Boutcher a number of times and spent some time with the PSNI while I was over there. I was very impressed with some of the really specific targeted operations that they were doing around sexual offending online and others. Very early on in my tenure, Jon Boutcher asked to speak to me. I had a meeting with him very early on about good practice. For example, Operation Soteria is a really good example of England and Wales police force operation. He wanted to make sure that they were keeping pace, if not advancing.

I agree with you. The police are completely independent of the Home Office, and the PSNI seemingly even more so, being as they are under the auspices of the Northern Ireland Executive. However, I call a spade a spade. I find him a decent man who cares about the right things.

Q88 **Mike Kane:** I concur, Minister. I have a general question and a specific question, if that is okay. One is around whether the PSNI has the resources. All police forces are struggling in some sense or other with resources. Does the PSNI have the resource it needs? Your correspondence to us in September did not commit to ringfencing the funding for early intervention support services in Northern Ireland. What was your thinking behind not doing that?



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Jess Phillips: To the first question, the PSNI budget—it is seemingly a cop-out—is decided by the Northern Ireland Executive. On your broader issue around police funding, I would like the police to have the moon on a stick, with safeguards attached. Policing funding, certainly in the UK and England, has been increased by over £1 billion, and I believe that there were also increases for the PSNI, although that is not my responsibility.

With regard to ringfencing, I do not think that you will find as an issue that people do not wish to be ringfenced by the UK Government when funding is sent or redistributed back to Northern Ireland, Wales or Scotland, but it is devolved. It is not for me to make the decisions on where funding is spent in Northern Ireland. It is for the democratically elected representatives to make that decision. Believe you me, I would like as much control as possible. I feel very uncomfortable saying what I am about to say, but I do not need to start anything in Northern Ireland. I would like to tell Birmingham City Council what to do, but they are elected by the people in the area. If we do it with VAWG and care leavers, eventually Westminster is just running Northern Ireland, or Scotland, or Birmingham City Council. It is very difficult to know where you begin and end when you start ringfencing things.

Northern Ireland is run by two women. I do not doubt their desire to spend money on violence against women and girls, and their commitment to it, having interacted with them both on this issue. I suppose that that is a broader point about devolution. Do not get me wrong: I think that many of the systems in our country should just be me sat in a chair, telling people what to do, but I am not entirely sure that the nation would agree with you.

Chair: I don't know about that.

Jess Phillips: Just for a day.

Q89 **Robin Swann:** Thanks for coming along, Minister. This ties in with your closing point. You have mentioned other Government Departments' role in your strategy, but also recognised the devolved nature of things. You referred to the post-conflict influence in Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Executive Office report, *Every Voice Matters!*, said that the conflict in Northern Ireland continues to create an undercurrent of violence, which often filters down to how women are treated. That reflects your earlier comments and reflects back to the prevalence of violence against women and girls that we see.

In Northern Ireland, a study by Queen's University said that the norms that are permissive of violence before a conflict will perpetuate violence after the conflict has ended. Simon referenced in our earlier session work that the previous Committee had done about how women were treated during the Troubles, especially the coercive nature of being forced to support paramilitary, support violence, provide cover, carry ammunition and all those things that are perpetuated down through into Northern Ireland society currently. How do Government, your role and your



strategy account for the legacy of Northern Ireland's past in your violence against women and girls policy and strategy?

Jess Phillips: It is a really important point. It was one that, while I was in Northern Ireland, was raised with me on a number of occasions with regards to the continued influence of paramilitarism over women in Northern Ireland and the ability to trust—I use the word now purposefully—and inform, almost. It is the culture of being concerned about keeping people safe more broadly if you speak up about what has happened to you. It is also a cause. When women are part of a cause, it is very easy for the cause to matter more than anything else. You see that across various different manifestations.

Because so much of the strategy does not apply to Northern Ireland but the bit that does is the online element of it, that undoubtedly will have a different flavour as well in some of the abuse, violence and aggression, although, as Gavin pointed out quite clearly, the manosphere is everywhere. We need to make sure that that is taking account of some of the concerns around, for example, freedom of speech and being able to have close contact. Those sorts of things will have to be taken account of in a completely different way in Northern Ireland. People's feelings there about different controls are different. They just are, because people have lived under different controls that we take for granted as if it is nothing here. So much of what you would try to do in those cases would be around police, justice and education. Those things are devolved to the Executive.

Funnily enough, when I was in Northern Ireland, as somebody who comes from an area where I have dealt with lots of forced marriage and, for want of a better word, community-related and alleged cultural practices, I was aware of the crossover between the experiences that the women spoke to me about and the shame, the need to protect families and those sorts of things. I could have been talking to some of the women I have worked with who have been forced married or victims of honour crime.

We need to make sure that, when we talk about honour crime, we do not just think of it as being one community. Honour-based abuse definitely translates over to the situation in Northern Ireland, undoubtedly, because the issue about not speaking up because of political allegiances is about honour. It might not be the honour of your family, but there are so many echoes of the same sorts of levers that are used over women.

Q90 Robin Swann: To explore that a bit, what engagement are you having with the Northern Ireland Executive and Northern Ireland women's organisations? I am thinking of the Training for Women Network and people like that. That message is very important in Northern Ireland. There was a campaign in regards to combating loan sharks with regard to school uniforms and Christmas presents. It is all that, but, again, the loan sharks are controlled and managed by paramilitary organisations. Who are you working with on getting the subtlety of your message translated



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into a Northern Ireland-sensitive voice?

Jess Phillips: The reason I know about the issue of the paramilitarism is because I went to Foyle Women's Aid and was presented with the research piece that it had undertaken with women in the community. I said to them exactly what I say to you here about looking at some of the strategies that we maybe have used in honour issues to try to tackle some of these. I am not saying that it is exactly the same, but I am saying that it felt very much like it had carryover.

I speak to the women's organisations and then I take those conversations into our conversations with the Executive and officials. Like you say, you have to have a Northern Ireland sensitivity. I hate saying this because it feels like a cop-out, but it is the responsibility of the Northern Ireland strategy to make sure that it is taking account of that, and I have no reason to believe that it is not. The strategy alludes to the post-conflict issue quite regularly.

Q91 **Robin Swann:** You will know that I have asked you in the Chamber about the legacy Bill that the Northern Ireland Office is bringing forward and the fact that sexual offences are not specifically listed as one of the crimes that the commission will look at in a historic nature. The work of the Committee here has actually recommended that it should. Could I ask your opinion in regard to, especially in the earlier session there, how coercive control, sexual control and rape was actually used as a weapon during the Northern Ireland Troubles? Do you think it should be included?

Jess Phillips: In a conflict society, it would be more of a surprise if sexual violence was not used as part of it, in my experience of conflicts around the world. Of course, anyone who suffered sexual violence because of conflict should be taken account of. In all my years of dealing with cases of sexual violence, I know that these cases are not simple and do not have a linear storytelling applied to them. It needs to be as sensitive as it can possibly be. I never want to set up—I have seen it happen—systems that retraumatise people to no end. Do I think that those women or men who suffered sexual violence as part of conflict deserve to have that story told and writ large? Absolutely, I do.

Q92 **Simon Hoare:** I wanted to echo what Mr Swann was saying, but to pick up particularly on women from minority ethnic groups in Northern Ireland. There is not a long-standing tradition of their presence in Northern Ireland. It is relatively recent as a result of Syria and other things. As a predecessor Committee, we did quite a bit of work on this. There was no doubting the interest from the Northern Irish authorities and policy makers to do as much as they could, but there was not a great bedrock of practical experience from which they could draw, given the novelty, if I can use that phrase, of those communities being present within Northern Ireland. I was wondering whether you might be able to say a word or two about your understanding of how they are currently assessing that and the appetite of those in Northern Ireland to reach out to policy makers and service deliverers in communities in GB that have a



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much longer tradition and history of doing it. There is no need to reinvent the wheel.

Jess Phillips: Come to Birmingham for the week.

Simon Hoare: You could go to Birmingham, Cardiff, Wolverhampton or Coventry. You could go to a whole variety of places to say, "These are the things you should be looking out for. These are the questions you should be asking. These are the signs." You do not have to start from ground zero.

Jess Phillips: On my broader knowledge of how well, in the broadest sense, having new migrant communities in Northern Ireland is going, I would have to say that I am not sure. I can talk about the things that I am responsible for in that regard, including things that are in the violence against women and girls strategy. I should just breach beyond the border of that and say that the modern slavery contract also sits under my auspices. While I was in Northern Ireland I visited one of the providers of modern slavery services in Belfast.

The migrant women's domestic abuse schemes operate for the whole of the United Kingdom. The Home Office directly puts money into the Women's Aid partners there on the ground to provide settlement support for migrant victims of domestic abuse within that. As best I know, from visiting it and visiting Foyle Women's Aid, it seemed to be operating incredibly well.

To your point also, it is run by a national partner that has a number of nation and regional partners. Where I live, it is Birmingham and Solihull Women's Aid, but it is run by Southall Black Sisters. Let me tell you, if you want to talk about a hinterland in race relations and making sure that people are working with migrant communities well, it would be one of the organisations that you would definitely call upon. I know that it works with Southall Black Sisters on that contract, so those connections do exist.

Similarly, the modern slavery contracts that we operate are operated across the nations and regions by the Salvation Army. It works with lots of different partners. I am not speaking as a Minister; I am speaking as a person who used to run that contract in my local area. We all worked together around the commonality of things that we were seeing and learning.

When I was in Northern Ireland and talking to a group of trafficked or abused migrant women—I spoke to two separate groups—I felt, coming away from it, that they had more positive stories to tell than I might get from the same average group anywhere else in the UK, but that could just be like when Ofsted comes and you send the naughty kids to Blackpool. I might have just got the cheeriest women who they had brought along. I am only too aware that, as a Minister, sometimes you get sent to see things that look good.



I investigated with the women around the hotels that they were living in or the accommodation. I know how to ask the right questions. I would say that, if anything, they had felt welcomed. Of course, these things are often fractious, but I got a sense that an Irish welcome was what they had felt, and I felt pleased.

Q93 Simon Hoare: That is encouraging to hear. This is the final thing from me. We all know that it is much easier to deliver services and support in our urban areas with denser populations. Notwithstanding the reserved and devolved balance, have you given any thought to an assessment to the levels of needed support and provided support for Northern Irish women in the rural areas, not just the Belfasts and the Derry/Londonderrys?

Jess Phillips: I suppose that this is one area where you could really learn from what the Northern Ireland Executive may have done, because, like you say, there are lots of very rural parts of Northern Ireland. This is what it comes down to. When you push for changes on needs assessments, in the way that the strategy is built, whatever it is that gets devolved to whatever, whether it is a region or a nation, your police and crime commissioner or your Northern Ireland Executive, the expectation is that it is done on a needs basis of that area. To me, as somebody who comes from an urban area, the needs basis becomes very quickly obsessed and targeted at things such poverty rates or migrancy rates. I would think that, wouldn't I, because of where I live and my experience of operating services.

We are doing a huge piece of work with regard to the commissioning of victim services that is committed to in the strategy. Need for some people in less poor areas, notwithstanding that quite a lot of the areas you are talking about in Northern Ireland will be poor as well, does not just mean the incidence of domestic abuse in your area. It also might mean that you need a bus. I still remain flabbergasted by people telling me that, for example, on the Isle of Wight, to go to a sexual assault referral centre they have to go on a ferry. To me, that is absolutely alien.

When we set up the commissioning frameworks here—obviously in Northern Ireland they are responsible for the commissioning of those things—we need to think about rurality as a need that has to be part of a needs assessment. So much commissioning that is done in local areas is led by what Governments have written as being their strategic document. It is good, because I would not know that, would I? My constituency is not even four square miles. That will be a need.

Simon Hoare: Mine is 440.

Jess Phillips: Greedy.

Q94 Chair: I am very aware of time. I have some questions on data that I want to ask you and then the online stuff is something we wanted to dip into as well. We talk about data about male violence against women and



girls and the lack of equivalent datasets covering all four UK nations. Is the Home Office looking to address this on all four nations having that oversight? Is that something that you are doing?

Jess Phillips: The datasets are different and the overall strategy is assessed on the crime survey for England and Wales. I stress that it is of England. This is not necessarily even a devolved issue. It is that different nations ask different questions for their own needs, so I suppose that that is about devolution. I also recognise that people ringing up people and asking them certain questions about crime they might have suffered in a place such as Northern Ireland, because of what we have discussed, may be a slightly more complex undertaking.

We need to make sure that Northern Ireland women are included in the reduction. I do not want to just reduce it everywhere else and show no progress in Northern Ireland. Actually, it is a relatively small population and would not dent my statistics that badly if all I was driving at was statistics, not outcomes. We need to make sure, when we are reporting against the overall target—there are sub-metrics that sit underneath it within the strategy—that there is an equivalency that we can do in Scotland and Northern Ireland. We are working with our counterparts over there to try, but it will never translate over exactly.

Q95 **Chair:** I was wondering as well whether the Home Office has methods that sufficiently capture data for under-16s as well?

Jess Phillips: No is the answer to that question. Prior to this, the crime survey for England and Wales looked at domestic abuse, sexual violence and stalking. We have asked the ONS to do a piece of work that puts violence against women and girls into a category of all of those things together, so that it can be monitored. The crime survey for England and Wales, unsurprisingly, does not capture those under 16, so you have to look at other sub-metrics. You have to then go to issues around crime reporting and educational statistics.

We are making Government Departments sweat their analytical teams about what data they gather, so for example, off the top of my head, what schools data is gathered around young people who might be in relationships themselves. Also, there is a thing called Operation Encompass, which is a data source that for any domestic abuse incident will tell you about the children in that house and inform the school. Has that data ever been used to show how many under-16s are living in domestic abuse settings? Not to date.

It is about looking at the data that Government already collect, whether that is here or in Northern Ireland. I do not want to juke the stats. This is not about the overarching thing being made to look like it is halving more quickly. It is about genuinely trying to find the different data sources that will help us make the policy that needs to be made. That is not uncomplicated in England and Wales, where we have two nations that collect data completely differently.



Q96 Chair: Talking about data, Counting Dead Women has already been brought up. The Femicide Census is something I know you know well. What concerns me is that in the 2000 census matricides—when sons kill their mothers—were 9% of the 2,000 women killed in the UK. It was on a par with stranger killings. Northern Ireland matricides are higher than stranger killings and, as a proportion, are higher than the current average. I find that deeply concerning. Does matricide feature in the violence against women and girls strategy?

Jess Phillips: As somebody with two children, neither of whom are children, I have ensured child-to-parent violence absolutely features in the violence against women and girls strategy. It was one of the biggest calls from the engagement that we did prior to writing the strategy. Certainly, over the years, I have seen a growing call on this, notwithstanding the seeming uptick in matricide within the femicide data that you alluded to, which is alarming.

There is also the age range of those whom the Femicide Census records. In most people's heads, the average victim of domestic abuse, for example, is a 30-year-old woman with a couple of kids because that is what you see on "EastEnders" and things. Actually, it is at the extremities of those ages, both the young and the old, where the Femicide Census brings the issue really heavily to light. I really thank them for their work on highlighting those particular issues.

It is absolutely in there, but to be perfectly honest, there are hardly any services around the country. You cannot go to a refuge from your kid very often. Most people do not want to put their children, if they are still children, into a care setting if they feel that they cannot cope with them. Where they are adult children, people do not want to criminalise their children. That is a totally and utterly reasonable thing.

Working with partners such as Hourglass, which deals with the older domestic abuse and abuse cases, to look at what needs to be done in this space, for both those living with violent and abusive children who are minors and those at the other end, is absolutely part of the strategy.

Q97 Claire Hanna: Minister, my colleague is going to pick up with you actions that the UK Government are taking to keep people safe online, but I wanted to ask about your assessment of online violence against women and girls in Northern Ireland, links you see between the online and offline worlds, and the statistics that you have spoken about.

Jess Phillips: On the links between online and offline violence against women and girls, the first thing I would say is that you do not need to prove there is a link to know that, for example, child abuse online is child abuse. It is no less of an abuse. The most famous case of this was a case in Northern Ireland. There was a perpetrator in Northern Ireland abusing girls all over the world, including in Northern Ireland and here in England, forcing them to perform sexual acts. In that case, one little girl took her own life.



Just to make it really clear, especially for teenage girls who are victims of online sexual abuse and the sharing of images and videos of them, even if no one has ever laid a finger on them IRL, they are victims of child sexual abuse. Overcoming that and looking to the strategy and the work that we do on child sexual abuse in order to get schools to recognise that this is a victim of child sexual abuse, not a criminal, which has happened in lots of cases, is really important.

It is a harm. It is illegal. I am not here to defend how agencies respond to in-real-life rape. However, we have a long way to go. I work with our Children's Minister Josh MacAlister very regularly, looking at our sexual assault referral centres. The strategy has a huge part around child sexual abuse centres being opened, I am sorry to say, in England, not even Wales in that regard.

To the online harm bit of it, there is no doubt that online behaviours have led to real-world harm. If you look at surveys around strangulation, for example, and the number of women under the age of 30 who cite being strangled in their sex lives—it definitely does not say this in my briefing pack—that did not exist when I was under 30. That is not normal. Women talk to each other. That was not normal occurrence. I do not have the empirical data to say that strangulation pornography being quite so readily available has led to now 30% of women saying that it has happened to them or whatever, but I am not an idiot. It seems like that is the likely outcome. The Government have to look at the kinds of behaviours that it sees online and seek to stop them. The criminalisation of strangulation pornography was done for that exact reason. It definitely leads to real-world harms, but it is in and of itself harmful and it is costing nations billions of pounds.

Q98 Claire Hanna: Do you see a link between online abuse and a lack of consequence for that? Do you see a higher level of that in Northern Ireland that would correlate with the higher levels of violence?

Jess Phillips: I could not say whether I see a higher level of it in Northern Ireland, but I have not noted a place in the world where it does not exist. That is why you have to do two things and that is why the strategy sets out to do two things, one that will have a very direct impact on Northern Ireland and one on which Northern Ireland will go its own way but is also undertaking.

First, you have to have an education piece. That is not just, "Don't look at horrible misogynistic men in the manosphere," but, "This lack of consequence is not real. There is a consequence." When you go to work, there is going to be a consequence for you. There needs to be an education piece that is done to contextualise an online world.

That is why the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, as part of the strategy, is putting in place technical education—not "technical". "Technical education" makes me think of drawing with a ruler when I was at school and doing woodwork. I am not sure they do



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technical drawing any more. They are not making draftsmen any more; they just do it on AI. It is about making sure that parents and young people understand and can contextualise what they see online. That has to be, fundamentally, part of what we do in the education system.

At the same time, you have to try to stop these things being consequence-free. They are not consequence-free for the victims of those crimes.

Q99 Chris Bloore: First off, I just want to say thank you for coming. I do not want to underplay the amount of abuse that you get online as a given for talking at Committees such as this and the action you have taken. Thank you for coming in today.

Jess Phillips: You are welcome.

Chris Bloore: I watched the manosphere documentary and what struck me was how evident it was that the individuals covered sometimes did not even believe what they were saying. It was grifting and it was an ability to make money. It terrified me. The radicalisation of the young people I meet is happening every day. They see these men as idols. The Online Safety Act already feels out of date to me, having watched what I watched and seen what I have seen. My question was meant to be about how effective the Online Safety Act is going to be at reducing violence against women and girls, but my question now is how quickly we need to update it and when we need to do that.

Jess Phillips: It needs updating all the time and it is updated. We have the power to update it. You can change the priority offences within the Online Safety Act already, and the Government have sought to do that on various different issues around naked images—what used to be called revenge porn; unsolicited, unwanted, non-consensual images of people, whether they are AI or not AI. The Government have the ability to create those priority needs and put the onus on the platforms to do it. Where there are gaps, we will always fill them. You are right. It is a bit like whack-a-mole because they will just invent a new harm.

Q100 Chris Bloore: How do we rate our success though, Minister? How do we know whether it is making a difference?

Jess Phillips: Genuinely, if it were me, I am a maximalist. Don't get me started. I would switch the internet off, apart from Vinted. That is not a policy of the Government. I could not live without Vinted, though.

Simon Hoare: As long as you keep eBay, I agree with you.

Jess Phillips: You can amend my law and put in eBay. The responsibility sits with the tech companies and the state. How successful have we been? It is an interesting question because I would always want more. However, when I travel to other parts of the world or speak to our counterparts in other parts of the world, you get a ticker tape parade for having the Online Safety Act. I know. It is shocking. I am often there to



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be the person who says, "We need to go further faster," and people are like, "Well, it is nice that you have that."

When I look at some of the successes of the Online Safety Act, I genuinely doubted that they would come about. I look at the 77% reduction in traffic to Pornhub post age verification and I cannot help but think, "Great, well done." I did not expect to see that quite so fast. Of course, then you get the VPN issue so the Government have to legislate on the VPN issue.

We are always going to be playing catch-up until tech companies make it so that violence and the abuse of women and children does not, as you say, make a gift for somebody, until it does not make money. Essentially, we have to demonetise the abuse of children. I feel bad for womankind because it is always, "Let's get it done for children first and then we will get on to women," and we never get on to women, but the amount of monetisation that I have seen of the worst ravages of paedophilia and child abuse would shock you. Everybody needs to get their house in order and make sure that our laws are as robust as possible so that that can never happen to a UK child. The violence against women and girls strategy commits, for all the women in the UK, including Northern Ireland, to making it impossible for children to take naked images of themselves, send them and receive them.

Q101 Chris Bloore: I just have a quick question specifically about Northern Ireland. A lot of the responsibilities fall with the UK Government, but you have talked very clearly about not wanting to take complete control of the issue. There are actions and strategies being implemented on a local level by the devolved institutions. Without being overbearing, how do you make sure that is happening in a co-ordinated way?

Jess Phillips: I am happy to take advice. I am not sure I have ever not been overbearing in my entire life, but I will give it a whirl. It is funny, isn't it? I have definitely been overbearing on other Government Departments, to Mike's question earlier. I have definitely been overbearing and intolerable at certain points.

On the devolved Administrations, it is almost like they are another Government Department that I would be overbearing on, saying, "Well, you are not doing enough." It is not the same. It is not the same relationship and nor should it be, because one is democratically elected by the people of those areas. It is not for me to tell them what they should and should not do.

On the issues where there is crossover, if anything, my experience is that they come to us. The domestic abuse protection orders are a really good example of this. It is in UK legislation. It is also in Northern Ireland's legislation. I do not feel like I should be going, "Well, you should be doing the DAPOs. Do them quicker", recognising their court delays, their policing issues and that things are different. Actually, the alternative is true. They come to us and ask us to set up things so they can come and



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learn. I do not know whether they think I am overbearing; you would have to ask them.

Q102 **Chris Bloore:** Can I just give one example and then I will finish? You mentioned in your evidence to the Committee via letter about trying to extend the Revenge Porn Helpline to Northern Ireland. Is that an example of where progress is being made?

Jess Phillips: I am going to turn to Gisela.

Gisela Carr: At the moment, the Home Office funds the Revenge Porn Helpline to provide services in England and Wales. That means it does not advertise its services in Northern Ireland because the funding is linked to England and Wales. Because of the devolution arrangements, it comes from the Home Office. However, if a victim in Northern Ireland finds the number of the helpline and rings it, the helpline will provide them with support.

Jess Phillips: It is the same service.

Gisela Carr: It is worth saying that we have seen an increase, as you would not be surprised to hear, in demand on the Revenge Porn Helpline. We uplifted its funding to try to meet some of that demand. It is certainly an area where we would welcome the opportunity to have conversations with our colleagues in the Executive about how we might extend the funding provision for victims across the whole of the UK. At the moment, that is how the arrangement works.

Q103 **Chris Bloore:** That is really interesting. If they find the number, they can ring it and get support.

Jess Phillips: It is not hard to find.

Chris Bloore: But we do not actively go out and promote it. There were 100-odd cases with the PSNI. We do not actively promote it within Northern Ireland.

Jess Phillips: No, we do not. To be clear, as somebody who the Revenge Porn Helpline has taken down images of, I assure you that nobody is going to say, "No, we are going to leave your images on the internet because you are from Northern Ireland." That is not how these institutions were formed.

There will need to be broader conversations with the devolved Administrations about how we might put that on to a much stronger footing with the commitment to a 48-hour takedown of those images, for example. Those images can be hashed so that it is not just a one-off takedown of an image after 48 hours. The system is about to get more advanced, so broader conversations will have to be had about how we are going to make sure that we fund that across the piece. Funnily enough, for child abuse it is not government-funded, usually. It is polluter pays; it is funded by the tech companies.



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Chair: I do have additional questions, Minister, which I will put to you in writing.

Jess Phillips: Or in the tearoom.

Chair: Absolutely. I would like to thank you for the work that you have done since being in post with agencies in Northern Ireland and with the Northern Ireland Executive. While a lot of things are devolved, we appreciate that this is a UK-wide strategy and we thank you for your work.