

Women and Equalities Committee

Oral evidence: [Sexual harassment of women and girls in public places, HC 701](#)

Wednesday 4 July 2018

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Members present: Mrs Maria Miller (Chair); Tonia Antoniazzi; Angela Crawley; Vicky Ford; Jess Phillips; Mr Gavin Shuker; Tulip Siddiq.

Questions 215–317

Witness

[I](#): Victoria Atkins MP, Minister for Women



Examination of witness

Witness: Victoria Atkins MP.

Q215 **Chair:** Welcome to the Minister and to everybody who is watching in the Public Gallery and online. This is the sixth and final oral evidence session of our inquiry into sexual harassment of women and girls in public places. It has been a very wide-ranging inquiry looking at different contexts in which sexual harassment takes place, the social attitudes underlying sexual harassment, the legal framework, and the impact harassment has on women's lives. Today is an opportunity for us to hear more about the Government's approach to this issue. This will allow us to consider the recommendations we want to make for further action and to compile our final report.

Good morning. For the record, would you just like to give us your name and your position?

Victoria Atkins: Victoria Atkins. I am the Minister for Crime, Safeguarding and Vulnerability and the Minister for Women.

Chair: Wonderful. Thank you very much for being with us this morning. We are very grateful. We know you have a very busy diary. We have quite a lot of questions to ask you on this, and we are going to start off with Vicky.

Q216 **Vicky Ford:** Minister, there have been a lot of surveys on sexual harassment in public places by lots of different organisations, researchers and women's organisations. What data are the Government collecting centrally or otherwise?

Victoria Atkins: One of the main problems with assessing sexual harassment and its impact is that there is not a lot of consensus on what sexual harassment is. It can mean different things to different people. For my purposes, I take guidance from the legislation: it is unwanted conduct of a sexual nature. It is usually gendered, and the drivers behind it tend to be power, entitlement and control.

From all that, we are in a position where it is not collected centrally, but we are very, very much looking forward to not just the Committee's report but also looking at the evidence that will be emerging from pilot projects in places like the Nottinghamshire police force to see whether their approach gives us any better information as to the prevalence of this. The surveys we have, such as the YouGov survey last year, reveal that sexual harassment—whether one defines it as wolf-whistling or, at the other end of the scale, groping on a tube train—is prevalent. We have to ensure that we have a definition we can all work by to get to the point where we can start measuring it properly.

Q217 **Vicky Ford:** You are not collecting any data centrally, but you are



looking at pilot studies. Are you looking at other studies? We have had transport police; we have had university studies.

Victoria Atkins: Very much so because, again, at the lower end of the scale, if a woman is wolf-whistled in the street, she may or may not consider that to be sexual harassment. We know from the YouGov survey that younger women view wolf-whistling as sexual harassment or tend to view it as sexual harassment more than older women aged 55 and above. There is a tension there as to how we define it, but obviously, with the cases where there is explicit immediate harm to that person, such as on public transport, then that is more measurable. Indeed, British Transport Police have been doing great work to tackle that.

Q218 **Vicky Ford:** Given that the whole #MeToo movement exposed a level of harassment that had not been reported before, isn't now the time to say we really do need to start collecting the data? Otherwise we do not know whether or not it is getting better or getting worse. Shouldn't there be a more concerted effort to collect data at least to understand the starting point for the issues we are facing?

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to you for raising the #MeToo movement, because in the last 18 months—I would put it at as short a timeframe as that—there has been an awakening, as it were, of women in certain countries. Sadly, not all countries have the freedoms that we have in terms of women's rights, but in countries where we have liberal democracies, where women have rights set in law and expectations as to how those rights should be respected, we have had this sudden awakening. Women are increasingly saying, "Enough is enough. We are not going to put up with it." I am very mindful of that movement in the last 18 months. As I say, I look forward to the conclusions of the report, and I have a very open mind as to what more we should be doing to measure this in the future.

Q219 **Vicky Ford:** Right now, you are not collecting any central data.

Victoria Atkins: No. First, if we are going down the criminal route, it is police forces that collect their data. Not every police force records, for example, misogyny as a factor in criminal offences that are reported to them; 15 forces are doing that. I am very interested to see how that is progressing in terms of their treatment of women who have been the victims of sexual harassment.

Q220 **Vicky Ford:** From the evidence that we have heard and from what I have read into that evidence, I would not expect sexual harassment of the nature that we have heard of to necessarily be reported to the police.

Victoria Atkins: Absolutely.

Vicky Ford: But it is highly prevalent, and one needs to have a view as to the position today in order to be able to work out whether or not policies that you are taking in the future are effective. We have heard that again and again.



Victoria Atkins: I think that is a very fair observation. On the subject of surveys, if I may, I must just clarify a point that I made in the previous hearing two weeks ago. I was asked about, if I recall correctly, the civil service, or I gave an answer in relation to the civil service's survey on harassment in the workplace. In my answer, I gave the figure of 11% of respondents having experienced bullying and harassment at work. May I clarify that that is harassment including sexual harassment but not restricted to sexual harassment? I just wanted to correct that on the record.

Q221 **Vicky Ford:** You have that survey in the workplace, but you do not have a survey of evidence of sexual harassment in a public place to try to get that baseline?

Victoria Atkins: I fully accept that. We know that YouGov and Girlguiding, for example, have done a survey recently as well, but I accept that we have not done a survey yet on this. It is something we will look at.

Q222 **Vicky Ford:** Who is advising you on policy in that area at the moment?

Victoria Atkins: With both my Home Office hat on and my GEO hat on, I have the joy of being advised by pretty much every powerful woman in the women's sector. I know you took evidence recently from Marai, who is behind Imkaan. I met her a few weeks ago. I have seen Sandra Horley from Refuge very recently in their headquarters. We, I promise you, speak and listen constantly to the women's sector on this and on violence against women and girls generally. Indeed, we have a specific inter-ministerial group drawing together all the Departments across Government where this is relevant. We had the first meeting last week chaired by the Home Secretary, for whom this is a priority as well.

Q223 **Chair:** The inter-ministerial group is which one?

Victoria Atkins: On violence against women and girls. They met last week—the first time being chaired by the current Home Secretary. Last year, I was not at the meeting—I think it was before my appointment—but we invited the women's sector in to give a presentation to the inter-ministerial group on violence against women and girls.

Q224 **Vicky Ford:** But you do not have any particular civil servant that you can point to as the person who is working on co-ordinating a strategy on sexual harassment in public places and a Government co-ordinating—

Victoria Atkins: I have a wealth of civil servants who advise me on violence against women and girls. I would be cautious about having one single person concentrating solely on sexual harassment. I am constantly fighting against the idea of siloing: one unit doing their little piece of work—very importantly—and another unit doing their little piece of work. What I am trying to do in all this work is draw together all of these different teams of civil servants, not just in the Home Office but across GEO, so that they are all thinking about sexual harassment when it



comes to, for example, gangs and how we are tackling gang crime. They are thinking about violence against women and girls in all of those subsets so that it is not just relying on one person doing the hard work.

Q225 Jess Phillips: Turning to the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, CEDAW, the UK is currently in its eighth periodic review under the process. What is your understanding of what CEDAW requires the UK to do to tackle sexual harassment?

Victoria Atkins: We submitted the eighth periodic report in 2017. We are preparing for our oral hearing in Geneva early next year. The reports are showing that, with the progressive implementation of CEDAW, we have seen an increase in women being in work, more women leading businesses and more women on FTSE boards. We strongly support CEDAW, and we value its role as a monitoring organisation or body to promote and protect the human rights of women and girls around the world.

Q226 Jess Phillips: Specifically, do you know what will be required of the Government around sexual harassment?

Victoria Atkins: With sexual harassment—I am looking desperately through my notes because I have been briefed on this, forgive me—there are a number of areas where, obviously, CEDAW has dealt with our strategy. We are clear that we want to introduce regulations, particularly in the workforce, but also strengthening our violence against women and girls strategy.

Q227 Jess Phillips: So regulations in the workforce. The UK report to CEDAW only mentions the phrase “sexual harassment” once, and it is specifically in relation to universities. You are saying that the UK Government will be putting things into CEDAW around regulation to do with the workforce?

Victoria Atkins: I am conscious that it has mentioned it in that one respect. I am going to be asking questions as to why it was just that one reference because, of course, we know that there is more to sexual harassment than just in—

Q228 Jess Phillips: I am really pleased to hear that you are going to suggest things about regulation in the workforce.

Victoria Atkins: Just so I do not inadvertently mislead, I am asking why we are just looking at universities, because it seems to me there is much more to this than universities. Although there has been progression in universities, I certainly take the point that there is much more work to be done in this field in public places.

Q229 Jess Phillips: You think that it should go beyond sexual harassment just in that context?

Victoria Atkins: In universities, I think so. As I say, I think that we are waking up to the prevalence of sexual harassment and the forms it can



take, the effect it has on girls as well as women, and I would want us to reflect that in our representations to CEDAW.

Q230 **Jess Phillips:** Moving on to another international treaty, the Istanbul convention requires parties to take the necessary measures to ensure that any form of unwanted verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature with the purpose of affecting or violating the dignity of a person—honestly, they should employ somebody else to write these things—is subject to criminal or legal sanction. Will the UK be compliant when it ratifies the Istanbul convention?

Victoria Atkins: We take our international obligations very, very seriously, and we can only be compliant when we ratify. In other words, we cannot ratify if we are not compliant. As our first progress report before Parliament at the end of last year showed, we are complying with or indeed going beyond what the convention requires in virtually all respects, with one exception: extraterritorial jurisdiction in relation to certain types of sexual violence and domestic abuse. As you know, Ms Phillips, that is going to be in the draft Domestic Abuse Bill, so we have a clear pathway to ratification.

Q231 **Jess Phillips:** The ratification presumably will happen once the Bill has gone through Parliament?

Victoria Atkins: Exactly, yes. There is an issue with devolved Assemblies because, obviously, some criminal law is devolved, but clearly the devolved Assemblies or Parliaments will want to be helping on this.

Q232 **Jess Phillips:** Okay. We look forward to that ratification. For us to be compliant, then, the Government will make available criminal and other legal sanctions for cases of unwanted verbal and non-verbal or physical contact?

Victoria Atkins: We consider that we are compliant. There is law on that at the moment. We consider that the missing piece of the jigsaw towards compliance and, therefore, ratification is extraterritorial jurisdiction in these specific offences, but we have legislation in place. I may be speculating, but it may be that the Committee will help us in the report to understand where the law could be improved on this. We do, none the less, have a structure in law at the moment to deal with, for example, verbal abuse under the Public Order Act.

Q233 **Jess Phillips:** Do you feel confident, then, Minister, that if a 16 year-old girl is waiting at a bus stop, wearing her school uniform, and somebody drives past and shouts that she has “nice tits”, she would have a legal or criminal sanction at her disposal?

Victoria Atkins: If she felt harassment, alarm and distress, then that is an offence under the Public Order Act. As I say, it may be that the Committee will help guide us as to how it feels the legislation can be improved, but at the moment there are criminal offences available.



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Q234 **Jess Phillips:** I would just like to appeal to all young women who would like me to help them get the Public Order Act—

Victoria Atkins: Absolutely right.

Q235 **Jess Phillips:** Call today, I will help you take these people to court. I should imagine it would be few. The ratification, you are saying, will happen post the Bill passing through Parliament—post the DV Bill. Do we know when that will be?

Victoria Atkins: The draft Bill will be presented to the House by the end of this Session, so I think April next year, and then the Bill itself will form part of the next Session's legislation.

Q236 **Jess Phillips:** So, around the end of next year, all being well?

Victoria Atkins: I have given up trying to guess the legislative timetable of Parliament, given all the pressures we are under.

Jess Phillips: You might think there was something else going on that was taking up time.

Victoria Atkins: Please don't mention that word.

Q237 **Jess Phillips:** Okay. Under goal 5 of the sustainable development goals, the UK has committed to eliminating all sexual and other violence against women, including sexual harassment, by 2030—a noble goal indeed. Are you confident that we will have achieved this by then?

Victoria Atkins: It is our objective, and we are working hard to make it happen. We have, as you know, a great deal of work to do in terms of changing social norms, educating boys and young men that it is not acceptable to shout the sorts of things you have just referred to, but that is absolutely our objective. Any help the Committee can give us on achieving that would be very warmly welcomed.

Q238 **Jess Phillips:** Do you think that the Government take their global goal 5 commitment seriously or do we just sign these things. This is not a criticism of this Government, but it feels to lots of people that the signing of these documents is the beginning and end, a lot of the time, of the actions to actually achieve these things. Do you think that that is the case, or do you feel that every fibre of each and every Department that has a responsibility to half the population is straining to do something about this?

Victoria Atkins: I do believe that when a Government—of any colour, in fairness—signs up to these international commitments, it must do so with great seriousness and a full intention of implementing the terms of those international agreements. Our international reputation is very important, and we take it very seriously, which is why, with the Istanbul convention, we have been working methodically to ensure that we are complying with or going beyond what the convention expects of us.



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In terms of Government Departments straining at the bit to help on any topic in relation to gender equality, I think that should be absolutely what Departments are doing. I think that every Minister should feel a responsibility for that, and I welcome again any help the Committee can give in terms of reminding Ministers of that.

Q239 **Jess Phillips:** Who is the overall overlord of global goal 5—the SDG5? Who is actually responsible for making sure that happens now in Government?

Victoria Atkins: In our Government?

Jess Phillips: Yes.

Victoria Atkins: Ultimately, the Prime Minister, obviously, is the outward-facing person.

Jess Phillips: She has quite a lot on, though, hasn't she?

Victoria Atkins: From that, I would not wish to create a hierarchy among Cabinet Ministers, but I would hope—and I know that you saw the Secretary of State recently—this is absolutely at the centre of Government. I know that, in fairness, Cabinet Ministers—

Q240 **Chair:** Which Department is responsible for it?

Victoria Atkins: This Department, so the Minister for Women and Equalities.

Q241 **Chair:** No, which Department is responsible?

Victoria Atkins: Oh, DFID.

Q242 **Chair:** Still?

Victoria Atkins: Yes.

Q243 **Jess Phillips:** So DFID is responsible for the domestic changes to UK policy?

Victoria Atkins: DFID has international responsibility. The Secretary of State is obviously now also Minister for Women and Equalities, and therefore she has responsibility through that role. I would say that every Department—every Secretary of State—has a responsibility to ensure that the Government meet their international obligations.

Q244 **Jess Phillips:** Okay. Dr Purna Sen is the sexual harassment lead for UN Women, and she came and spoke to us. She told us that the CEDAW Committee recommends that CEDAW is domesticated into law by Governments. Do you think that incorporating CEDAW or the Istanbul convention into domestic law would provide more protection for women and girls from sexual harassment and sexual violence because they could enforce their rights directly in domestic courts? I know that the Government are very keen to take back control of their laws.



Victoria Atkins: In terms of placing international agreements into domestic law, the value of these international agreements and conventions is that they set out expectations of what countries will do domestically and they also recognise that different countries have different legal systems. In relation to the Istanbul convention, we have, through a programme of work, met pretty much every obligation with the exception of extraterritorial jurisdiction. That is already in our law. That is our response to the convention and CEDAW. We are bringing that into our law—within our own legal system.

Q245 **Jess Phillips:** The Government do consider it is better to protect women with our own domestic laws and bring these laws into the domestic law.

Victoria Atkins: Yes.

Q246 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** You are both the Minister for Women and the violence against women and girls lead. Research suggests that sexual harassment is the most common form of violence against women and girls. Why does the violence against women and girls strategy have so little to say about sexual harassment? There are only brief references to work by Universities UK and some work on public transport.

Victoria Atkins: I think that it goes to the point we were talking about earlier—the sudden awakening in the last 18 months of women as to their rights and also, frankly, getting fed up with being treated like this. The strategy itself—the current version—was published in 2016. We have run the domestic abuse consultation this year. We are going through the 3,200 results at the moment. We have recognised from the results of that consultation, and also from all the work we have been doing through roadshows and the consultations with experts and so on that we have had in the run-up to the consultation, that the Domestic Abuse Bill must sit alongside a package of non-legislative measures to deal with domestic abuse and also a refreshing and strengthening of the VAWG strategy.

Q247 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** Do you think that it is a gap in the strategy that sexual harassment of women and girls in other public places, such as streets, bars, clubs and at night, is not included?

Victoria Atkins: I do. In fairness though—and I appreciate you would have to navigate various strategies to discover this, and this is why I would like the strategy refreshed and strengthened to address this point—there is a great deal of work that we are doing, for example, in public places, the night-time economy, bars, clubs, et cetera. There is a great deal of work we are doing through both the modern crime strategy and also the alcohol strategy. We are revisiting the alcohol strategy at the end of this year, but in the meantime we are doing a lot of work with local alcohol action area programmes. They are pilot programmes, but there are Drinkaware crews in places such as Nottingham, where they focus on sexual harassment of young women when they are in the night-time economy. There has been a great deal of work going on on that.



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Although it is not in that strategy, we are not for a moment blind to it. I appreciate it should be in the next strategy, but it is there, and work is being done on it in the meantime anyway.

Q248 Chair: Minister, you talk about a sudden awakening 18 months ago of people to the issue of sexual harassment. There was a sudden awakening in the International Labour Organisation three years ago, and they are now proposing an international convention against sexual harassment, particularly in the workplace. We did a report as a Committee two years ago on sexual harassment in schools, which absolutely directly pointed to the consequential impact of sexual harassment in universities and sexual harassment in the broader workplace. Why, oh why, has it taken longer for there to be an awakening within Government, when other organisations, even international organisations like the ILO, have woken up to this significantly sooner? What are you going to be doing to make sure you are more sensitised to this in the future? This Government should be ahead of and not behind the curve.

Victoria Atkins: I appreciate that and, indeed, I am grateful to the Committee for that work, not least because Government very much took on board the observations of the Committee in relation to schools and universities. There has been a lot of work in relation to universities, but we are also—

Q249 Chair: How are you going to sensitise yourself so you do not get left behind again and simply rely on Select Committees to pull you up on this? We are here to scrutinise what you are doing, not to do your work for you.

Victoria Atkins: No, absolutely. I hope that the example I have just given of the domestic abuse consultation and our intentions to strengthen the VAWG strategy alongside it shows that, as I say, there has been a great deal of work going into that particular consultation over the last year or 18 months. Although I appreciate there are gaps in the current strategy, we are addressing those, and it does take a bit of time for Government to consult, to draw up policy and so on.

Chair: You might want to take a leaf out of the International Labour Organisation's book because they perhaps have more of a reputation for being bureaucratic, but clearly not as bureaucratic as we are. Anyway, sorry for that intervention.

Q250 Tonia Antoniazzi: That is absolutely fine. Minister, you spoke earlier about the siloing of sexual harassment across all Government Departments. Can you tell us what Government resources and staffing are dedicated to tackling sexual harassment of women and girls in public places?

Victoria Atkins: I would go a little bit further back than that. Government have a role in terms of educating young people, because we know that attitudes that are formed during our younger years, although they do not necessarily stay exactly the same, can none the less set



people into a pathway of thinking in a certain way towards women—and vice versa—and about how they should be treated. Government have a real role to play in terms of education. Indeed, we have the programme of relationships education in primary schools and relationship and sex education in secondary schools. It is an intention of the DFE to bring that form of education into being in our schools.

There are all manner of public places, and I think that, as has been shown through the work with schools and universities and also, in fairness to the Department for Transport, with public transport—with the role of the British Transport Police on that—we should not, frankly, allow Departments to get away with not thinking about that. They should be thinking how we can make public places an environment that all people—it does not need to be on the basis of gender; it should be about disability and all the characteristics that we are concerned about through the Equalities Act—see as accessible and comfortable places for them to live and work.

Q251 Tonia Antoniazzi: Within each Government Department, do people have a brief or job description that this will be included in?

Victoria Atkins: I am not familiar with the job descriptions across Whitehall—you will have to forgive me. Certainly, we at the GEO expect Ministers to have that in mind. It is why things like the inter-ministerial group on VAWG—violence against women and girls—are so important. Last week the Home Secretary was there asking each Department to explain what it has done to prevent VAWG, to support women and to support girls. It is through those sorts of mechanisms. I suppose it is peer on peer scrutiny, if you like, between Ministers.

Q252 Tonia Antoniazzi: I just wonder how that is then looked at, in terms of the public looking in, to see if it is being done with the same continuity and the same depth across all Departments, but I suppose that is your job.

Public bodies have obligations under the public sector equality duty and the Human Rights Act. What do these obligations mean in practice for public bodies that might have a role in addressing sexual harassment, such as local authorities or the EHRC?

Victoria Atkins: A public body is as accountable to the law as a private individual when it comes to their treatment of citizens. If there are examples where they are not meeting the expectations of legislation, then I will read the report with interest and act on it. That law applies to them just as much as it applies to you or me.

Q253 Tonia Antoniazzi: Do you know whether the Equality and Human Rights Commission is taking action on sexual harassment outside of the workplace?

Victoria Atkins: I have to confess I don't. I have not had that conversation with the commission's chairman or chief executive.



Q254 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** Who within the Government is leading conversations with local authorities or transport providers about their responsibility for creating safe environments for women, and what more can be done?

Victoria Atkins: That will be the Department for Transport, and I apologise that I am not assisted by a transport colleague at the moment. I will not name someone. I think that I know who it should be, but I would not wish to speculate. If I may, I will write to the Committee or get the relevant Minister to write to the Committee about that.

There has been, in fairness to DFT, a great deal of work done on public transport, because we know, sadly, it is a place where people seem to think it is an opportunity to behave disgustingly—not lots of people, but some people. There is a great deal of work going on with British Transport Police, who are the police force that police public transport, to help victims of sexual harassment, or indeed sexual assault, to report it and to support them through the process of reporting it.

Q255 **Chair:** Minister, we would be very grateful for your help on this. When we as a Committee approach the relevant organisation, which I think is the parliamentary liaison team, to say that we require a Minister to come in or that we require the Government to respond to a report, the Committee is not allowed to specify which Ministers attend. That is determined by the Government, not by my Committee. We are immensely disappointed if, in being in front of us today, you are not able to deal with all of the issues that need to be dealt with. As a cross-cutting Committee looking at cross-cutting issues, we would normally be used to having more than one Minister in front of us when we are discussing a paper.

Could you undertake to go back to your parliamentary liaison people to ask why we are consistently not getting Ministers with the relevant experience before us and perhaps also explain to your ministerial colleagues that it is not down to the Committee to ask? We are not allowed to do that. If Ministers are not happy about that, obviously I can talk to the parliamentary liaison committee to see whether we should change the rules.

Victoria Atkins: May I thank you, Mrs Miller, for that very strong indication? Not only do I undertake to speak to my parliamentary liaison team and to ministerial colleagues, but I will also undertake, if I may with your leave, to quote what you have just said and send that letter to the relevant Departments, to the permanent secretaries or the appropriate person, to ensure that private officers understand the courtesies and the expectations in respect of this.

Q256 **Chair:** We would hate to be under any impression that the Government do not take seriously the work of this Committee.

Victoria Atkins: No, very much so, and I hope the Committee senses my commitment and, indeed, I have to say, my enjoyment—perhaps I am going too far—of appearing before this Committee. Certainly, I will very, very happily take that on and ensure that the right people know.



Q257 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** We have heard about the inclusion of misogyny within some police forces' hate crimes policies to tackle sexual harassment in the street and the community. What do you think, Minister, are the pros and cons of dealing with sexual harassment of women and girls in public places as a hate crime?

Victoria Atkins: This is a really interesting topic and, indeed, the Honourable Member for Great Grimsby secured a debate in Westminster Hall a few months ago, which I had the pleasure of answering. I was horrified to discover that, in the process of securing and holding that debate, she herself received extraordinary levels of online abuse. I know it is something that members of this Committee have to endure on a daily basis.

I absolutely understand and am sympathetic to the issue of women in public places being treated disgracefully. There is a debate, though, as to whether the hate crime legislation as currently drafted is the right place in which to deal with that. Leading academic Professor Liz Kelly has asked whether the hate crime legislation, given that that tends to be through the lens of hostility towards the five protected characteristics, is wide enough for sexual harassment, when we know sexual harassment tends to be because of power, because of a sense of entitlement, because people are allowed to do this, because "It's just a joke"—all these sorts of attitudes. Whether or not we use the specific legislation for that, I do not know at the moment, but it is something I have a very open mind on.

I am watching with interest the evidence that will be coming, I hope, shortly from various police forces—the 15 police forces that are recording this, and particularly Nottinghamshire—as to how it has had an impact for victims, most importantly, and how they feel their treatment has been with this policy in place, but also what impact it has had on the police workforce. Has it opened their minds to this sort of conduct in a way that perhaps would not have been the case before the pilots? I should record my thanks to the former Chief Constable, Sue Fish, for piloting this, because I think it is a very interesting piece of work.

Tonia Antoniazzi: Definitely.

Q258 **Tulip Siddiq:** I think that you have covered this, Minister, but I will just ask. What is your understanding of why sexual harassment of women and girls happens?

Victoria Atkins: As I said, if we put to one side the strict definition of it in terms of whether young girls or older women view wolf-whistling as sexual harassment, to me it is unwanted conduct of a sexual nature, and it is driven by, or tends to be driven by, power, control, entitlement, "It's just a laugh"—that shrugging-off behaviour that does not pay any attention to the impact it has on the person who is at the receiving end of it. I am conscious that I have talked a lot, as I tend to, about women and girls. Of course, men can be victims of sexual harassment, but we know from anecdotal evidence that it tends to be women who are victims.



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Q259 **Tulip Siddiq:** In the violence against women and girls strategy, it says, “We will continue to challenge the deep-rooted social norms, attitudes and behaviours that discriminate against and limit women and girls across all communities.” What do you feel you are doing to address these social norms?

Victoria Atkins: There is a whole host of work going on and, again, it is cross-governmental. It has to be. It cannot just be Home Office or GEO. It has to be across Government.

If we start in early years, we have the DFE’s commitment to relationships education in primary school—age-appropriate education—and then the secondary school equivalent, which is relationship and sexual education. I think that will be very important. If a child is growing up in a household where parents or the people within the household are not treated with the respect that we in wider society would expect, then that could influence that child’s attitude in later life. Having school setting these boundaries very clearly will help.

We also accept that it can have effects on the way in which boys and girls as teenagers start relationships. We have, in recent years, invested heavily in a programme called Disrespect NoBody, which focuses on how boys should treat people they love and how girls should expect to be treated by people who love them, if I can put it that way. That, we understand from our sounding-outs, has had some success as well in showing girls, usually, as I say, where they are subjected to unacceptable behaviour.

In wider society, we know that there is a great deal of work to be done with the media and with, for example, music videos. You look at how women are depicted in some music videos and it is offensive. How we persuade companies who produce those videos to work towards reducing or stopping that is a huge piece of work, and it has to come, I think, from society as much as from Government.

The #MeToo campaign is an example of a campaign on social media created by members of the public, and it has an incredible amount of attention and support. Equally, there is Gina Martin’s campaign on upskirting: a very specific issue, but it has an incredible amount of support and is causing Parliament to legislate accordingly.

There is a lot of work. I have not touched on online life as well. Of course, pornography online has exploded exponentially in the last decade, and I think that is presenting us with very worrying challenges as to how women are viewed in healthy relationships and what boys expect of them and what girls expect of themselves.

Q260 **Chair:** What are you doing to address that, other than, which we are very aware of, your attempt to try to restrict viewing by under-18s? What else are you doing to address that?



Victoria Atkins: I am in the process of commissioning research on the impact of online pornography on attitudes towards women and girls. I am doing this for a number of reasons. At the most heartbreaking end of the range of reasons, in my Home Office work working to tackle gang crime, I know from the charities and the youth workers that I speak to that they are increasingly having to provide help with harmful sexual behaviours.

Q261 **Chair:** We already have evidence that has been given to us that shows that exposure to pornography among children does negatively change boys' attitudes, so we already know that. It is great to hear you are doing the research. What are you doing now? Given that we take a precautionary approach in these areas, what are you doing now to stop that continuing to cause the damage that you are acknowledging happens?

Victoria Atkins: We have to be careful about the research, which is why I have commissioned this research over and above everything that has gone before. We have to acknowledge the fact that the Crime Survey for England & Wales has shown a reduction in sexual violence since 2004-05, while online pornography has exploded exponentially. I have to bear that in mind in terms of what we are doing, which is why I want thorough research looking not just at gang criminality, frankly, but also at how this affects people forming healthy relationships in adult life. There is a great deal of work to be done on this, drawing in all of the work that may have gone before. I know the Children's Commissioner did some research in 2014 that showed some evidence, but I do not think it could be described as being unequivocal in the links between these things. I would like to be entirely clear on that.

Q262 **Tulip Siddiq:** Do you think it was a shame that it needed a campaign like #MeToo to raise issues that everyone knew already existed?

Victoria Atkins: The value of campaigns like #MeToo and Gina Martin's campaign is that it showed that when a person was suffering sexual harassment or upskirting, it was not just them. That is awful, but the value of those campaigns was joining those dots together.

Q263 **Tulip Siddiq:** Obviously, #MeToo was not a campaign headed by Government or politicians, but you have mentioned early intervention and working with teenagers and media, all of which I agree with. What evidence do you have that that kind of work that you have outlined has had the desired effect and has prevented sexual harassment? What is the evidence base for that?

Victoria Atkins: The relationships education programme obviously has not yet been introduced. DFE is working on that. In a way, I cannot give you firm evidence on that, but we know from the Troubled Families programme, et cetera, that early intervention can be very, very key in helping change life chances and attitudes.

In terms of the media, again we are at an interesting point in history where we have enjoyed the internet for, let's say, a decade—perhaps a



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bit longer—and we are only really now beginning to understand the downsides of the internet and how certain tech companies have behaved, how they have gathered our data and what they are permitting to be shown on their platforms. I think that is a great challenge not just for the UK Government but for Governments across the world as to how we tackle that, not just in sexual violence, but in lots of other worlds as well—gang crime, counter-terrorism and so on.

Q264 Tulip Siddiq: My next question is about compulsory RSE in schools. Do you think the delays in introducing compulsory RSE in schools will affect efforts to address the social norms that support sexual harassment?

Victoria Atkins: I think that, in terms of anyone who wants to help children form their views of society, their place in it and other people's places in it, we want to give great teachers, who are already doing that, more power to their elbow, as it were. In terms of the introduction of this programme, I understand that while many schools are going to be able to adapt their teaching skills quite quickly to bring this programme into being, not every school will be in that place. We need to give them sufficient time to do it properly and to prepare their staff. DFE is intending to launch a consultation on the draft regulations and statutory guidance shortly and will say more about the implementation timetable at that point.

Q265 Tulip Siddiq: Do you think the delay is having an impact on the work that you are trying to do?

Victoria Atkins: I am by nature impatient and would like all sorts of things to happen yesterday—forget tomorrow—if I can put it that way.

Q266 Tulip Siddiq: Very diplomatic. We received evidence calling for public awareness campaigns to tackle sexual harassment that are similar to drink driving and road safety campaigns. Do you think campaigns like this would be effective in preventing sexual harassment?

Victoria Atkins: I think that, in certain circumstances, they could be very powerful. I am thinking now of the tube and having a campaign on tube carriages—"Please don't think that this gives you the right to grab someone." That could be very effective because when you are all standing up, pressed together and looking at the advert, you cannot avoid it.

I also think that there is a role here not just for Government but for activists and campaigners to do their thing as well. #MeToo, as you have just said, was an incredibly effective campaign not led by a politician. I do not know, but it may have had a little bit more power and attractiveness to young people because it was from the ground, as it were—it was from activists.

I would be very interested in a campaign. With all our campaigns that we do, a great deal of work goes into how we target those campaigns. For example, at the beginning of this year we launched a #knifefree



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campaign to try to reassure teenagers that it is not normal to carry a knife. The work that went into targeting where those ads were placed was very, very intensive. You may not have seen it because, with the greatest respect, you are probably not our target audience, but they have looked at catch-up TV, how teenagers view television nowadays—catch-up channels, et cetera. It was very targeted to get the maximum impact on that campaign. Yes, I would be interested in targeted campaigning if the evidence was that that would be a good way to spend taxpayers' money.

Q267 Tulip Siddiq: Have you had any proof that the campaign worked in terms of less teenagers carrying knives?

Victoria Atkins: Again, it is one of those things that is still going, so we are not at the stage yet of analysing the results of it. This is a campaign that came off the back of charities and people who work with gang members telling us children are increasingly thinking it is normal to carry knives. We are just trying to stop that. We are just trying to let them know and reassure them that it is not normal; not everybody carries a knife—very few people, in fact.

Q268 Tulip Siddiq: The final question from me: how are you ensuring, Minister, that there is specialist community support for victims of sexual harassment rather than leaving it up to local areas so that victims face a postcode lottery when accessing these services?

Victoria Atkins: This is where we have a role as Members of Parliament, because you will know in your constituency who your charities are, what your local authority victim support looks like, and what the police and crime commissioner in London and the Mayor of London are doing to commission victim services.

Yesterday I met the police and crime commissioner for Sussex, who is doing an incredible amount of work on stalking—truly ground-breaking work that I would quite like PCCs around the country to have a look at. She saw that, in her local area, there was a need for better victim support and support to report stalking to the police. She commissioned the services appropriate for her area, and they have seen a huge triple-figure percentage increase in the rate of reporting incidents of stalking in the last three years. We think that is because the police know the questions to ask now, and they are supporting victims better.

This is where I think that the power of police and crime commissioners can be transformational. They have the money, and they have other forms of funding that they can gather through the police transformation fund, et cetera. If they decide that to be a local priority, then they can really make a difference.

Q269 Chair: Just before Jess jumps in, I want to get this clearer in my own mind. We have been talking here, and it has been incredibly helpful to listen to you. You are very certain that the laws that we have are robust



to cover all forms of unwanted sexual conduct in line with our undertakings through the Istanbul convention, yet we still have a very high incidence of unwanted sexual conduct in public places. What changes are you going to bring into effect, given that you do not think there is a need for a change in the law and you feel that that is absolutely as it should be? How are you going to change this to make sure that the prevalence of unwanted sexual conduct is reduced?

Victoria Atkins: Again, it comes back to the definition of sexual harassment. In those instances where the 16-year-old girl has been made to feel alarmed or distressed, meeting the thresholds in the Public Order Act, then that offence sits there for her. A 16-year-old who has that shouted at her at a bus stop, is she going to want to make a report to the police? Probably not.

Q270 **Chair:** You think part of the problem is that victims are not reporting the crimes?

Victoria Atkins: No, please, I would not want to—

Q271 **Chair:** I am trying to work out where the gap is. We have the laws. We have the victims, and there are a lot of victims who do not think the laws are working. Otherwise I guess we would see—

Victoria Atkins: To use the 16-year-old, is she not reporting it to the police because she does not think the Public Order Act meets the offence or is she—

Jess Phillips: I doubt she has heard of it.

Victoria Atkins: No, this is my point. How can I put it? If a woman is raped, I would hope she would know that that is a criminal offence, that the law is very clear on that, and that if she can find the courage to ring the police to go through the process, then the criminal justice system is there for her. If we have someone who is wolf-whistled in the street, I am not sure, and I do not think we as a society are sure, that that is necessarily an act that automatically should end in a criminal justice response.

Q272 **Chair:** What are you doing to address that, given that you have a legal obligation under the Istanbul convention to have laws that cover all forms of unwanted sexual conduct? What are you doing to address the wolf whistle in the street? Otherwise you are undermining your undertakings in the Istanbul convention.

Victoria Atkins: If the woman feels that she is harassed, et cetera, the Public Order Act is there. It is whether or not, for something of that nature, women think, "Right, I am going to call the police. I am going to report this as a criminal offence." I accept this is a very, very grey area. For what it is worth, I have been wolf-whistled, and I have not called the police, because it did not occur to me for a whole host of reasons.

Q273 **Chair:** What programmes do you have on legal education to make sure



that women are aware of what does and does not constitute an offence?

Victoria Atkins: That is an interesting question. I have not had this conversation with DFE at the moment, but it may well be that educating girls as to what they can expect when they walk down the street in terms of being treated with civility and decency and manners is a statutory—

Q274 **Chair:** Is the Solicitor General on your inter-ministerial group on sexual harassment?

Victoria Atkins: Yes.

Q275 **Chair:** You might want to ask him, then, because he runs an education campaign on legal education, and I talked to him about it yesterday.

Victoria Atkins: Will do.

Chair: It feels to me as if there needs to be a little bit more joined-up thinking on this.

Q276 **Jess Phillips:** I have a series of questions to ask after this, but I just want to go back to the questions that Tulip was asking on what victim support would be available. Quite rightly, you said that the victim support budgets are held by police and crime commissioners.

Victoria Atkins: The west midlands police and crime commissioner has £106 million sitting in reserves.

Q277 **Jess Phillips:** I understand that totally, and, believe you me, I am somebody who criticises what money gets spent by police and crime commissioners. I do, however, think that the Government have a responsibility to try to find out what is available nationally in this area. I do not need to look at all the areas; I can tell you now that there is no victim support service anywhere in the country for women who have been sexually harassed. I know because I had to look it up, because I am seeking those women to come forward to me as part of a project around third-party harassment. Normally, when you start any sort of campaign, it is only right that you would have referral pathways for people who come forward. There aren't any. If Julie in Asda gets harassed at work or outside work, or harassed by a customer, there is absolutely nowhere in the country I can refer Julie to—it does not exist.

The idea that police and crime commissioners in the country are currently funding this is not true at all. If the Government are going to take it seriously, they need to look and not just hope that that individual will find out—I am not hopeful Mr Chope will be finding out. I just want to stress that it does not exist; victim support for this does not exist.

Victoria Atkins: Victim support does exist. Regardless of the crime of which they have been a victim, there is a victim support system for victims of crime in the criminal justice system. PCCs are adding to that. The police and crime commissioner for Sussex has added to the victim service in Sussex for victims of child sexual exploitation, because she wants to do more. I very much take your point. Again, this is something



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that police and crime commissioners should have very much as a priority—looking after victims.

Q278 Jess Phillips: If you think that, what will the Government do to make that happen?

Victoria Atkins: I am very happy to take that away and write to police and crime commissioners and ask them what it is they are doing for victims of not just sexual harassment but violence against women and girls. I am very happy to do that.

Q279 Jess Phillips: Lots of them will be doing something about violence against women and girls, but in the public domain it is not a localised issue. We know it is happening everywhere, so it should be the responsibility of everyone.

Anyway, the Home Office states in its written evidence to this inquiry, "There is currently limited evidence to suggest a link between the consumption of pornography and sexual violence." However, we have heard from leading researchers that there is a lot of evidence showing a strong correlation between men viewing pornography and sexually aggressive and sexist attitudes. We have heard the same from BBFC, and women who have experienced sexual harassment told us this again and again, too. How will you be able to address that link if your evidence is out of step with what is so widely known?

Victoria Atkins: I agree, and as I said earlier to Mrs Miller, I am commissioning research on this.

Q280 Jess Phillips: Good. So there is going to be a piece of research.

Victoria Atkins: Absolutely right, yes.

Jess Phillips: Brilliant.

Victoria Atkins: And not just confined, if you will forgive me, to sexual harassment—violence against women and girls. I want it to be ambitious. I want it to look at how it may have an impact in future years in terms of developing healthy relationships.

Q281 Jess Phillips: Do you think that the Government's new policy of age-verifying pornographic websites will have an impact on attitudes towards women and sexual harassment?

Victoria Atkins: I very much hope so. The idea that websites thought it was fine to let children aged 12 or 13 view their site is frankly extraordinary, so I very much hope that it will be effective.

Q282 Jess Phillips: If there is a link, let's say, in the research, will the Government really push on trying to sever that link, with regulation around that industry?

Victoria Atkins: We have a piece of work going on, as you know, in terms of the internet safety strategy. This is online abuse, sexual abuse,



and so on. This is all part of that strategy, which is in the process of being drawn up. I am very clear, though, that the reason for doing the research, frankly, is to help it inform policy and legislation, so I would watch the research and any links with great interest and with a view to acting.

Q283 Jess Phillips: I don't think you could find many people who would disagree that children watching pornography was a bad thing, but attitudes are not fixed in childhood—they are changed by personal experience as well as social norms. If the Government is addressing the link between pornography and violence and sexist attitudes by regulating children's access to pornography, how will you address the link, if and when you find it—I am sure you will find it, given the previous research and the evidence that has been given on this Committee—between adult men viewing legal pornography and violence and sexist attitudes?

Victoria Atkins: Yes, we have got into a situation where pornography, and pornography of a type that I suspect was not widely shared 15 or 10 years ago, is now there on one's phone, and we know from conversations anecdotally with youth workers—and, from my perspective, from people who work with children with harmful sexual behaviours—that there is a desensitisation.

I will give you a pretty heartbreaking example. Last week I met a head of a charity that has a young man that they are helping, who had said to his youth worker that he did not realise that girls were not supposed to cry during sex. In terms of where he has learnt that from, we know that online pornography played a very big role in it.

This is absolutely crucial in terms of young people, but in terms of men as well, but I am not sure this is just for Government to tackle. We have to be asking ourselves what we expect of the internet. In terms of people viewing that sort of pornography, why are they doing that and how does that then influence their treatment of their loved ones—their girlfriends, their wives, their daughters or whatever. That is a huge question.

Q284 Jess Phillips: If the Government know—and the Government do this all the time—that other violent and aggressive material is available online, such as grooming people for terrorism, they force that to be taken down. Do you not think it would be the same in this instance because, arguably, far greater numbers are suffering?

Victoria Atkins: We have had this debate about rape pornography. I find it extraordinary that that sort of pornography would be deemed legal and acceptable. I am conscious that this is part of, and must form part of, the internet safety strategy. It cannot just be led by Government; it has to be societal.

Q285 Jess Phillips: We have received evidence that pornography should be treated as a public health issue, much like smoking. Would you agree with that?



Victoria Atkins: That is an interesting suggestion. May I reflect on that?

Jess Phillips: Yes.

Victoria Atkins: Thank you.

Q286 **Angela Crawley:** Government have recently introduced the Bill to criminalise upskirting. What additional protections will that bring?

Victoria Atkins: The Bill has just had its Second Reading. It has been expedited through parliamentary procedure, and it is at the Bill Committee next week. It mirrors the Scottish legislation, in that someone taking a photograph without consent for sexual gratification, or for the second category, which is not banter but for irritation, and so on, will be committing a criminal offence, as in Scotland. I hope that it will help the many, many women who are victims of this.

Q287 **Angela Crawley:** We have heard evidence that the law is running to keep up with technological advances in relation to harassment and the abuse of women. Is it time for a new law that would cover all image-based sexual abuse, including photoshopped images such as so-called dick pix, and that would give automatic anonymity to the victims of this abuse?

Victoria Atkins: I think that is very interesting. Yes, I think that, looking at the internet safety strategy towards the end of this year and at the way that the law has not kept pace with modern practices, we should be considering that in that way.

It is not my Bill, so I don't want to interfere, but given the very expedited timeframe of the upskirting Bill, I don't know whether that is a subject for that Bill—I am not the Bill Minister—but certainly if it is not, then it is something that I think we should look at.

Q288 **Chair:** Before we move on to our next question, in earlier conversations today you have talked about the drivers of sexual harassment being power and entitlement, yet the Bill around upskirting identifies the motivations of the perpetrators as being sexual gratification and harassment. Would you think that perhaps the upskirting Bill is looking at a particular group of people, which may not entirely represent the motivations of all of those who might be perpetrating upskirting as a form of sexual harassment? To my mind, sexual gratification and harassing are not really a lot to do with power and entitlement.

Victoria Atkins: It may well be that that is drawn out in the scrutiny of the Bill next week. I don't know. If that is a point that has occurred to you, Mrs Miller, it may well occur to others. I do know that the MOJ is very keen to pass this law as quickly as possible, which is why they have adopted the Scottish model. Not being the Bill Minister, I would not wish to interfere at this crucial stage in the Bill's development.

Q289 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** The Committee heard from the British Transport Police about Project Guardian and the Report It To Stop It initiative to



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tackle sexual harassment and sexual assault on the railways. What other work is being done to tackle these problems on buses or other public transport?

Victoria Atkins: British Transport Police is the police force that focuses on public transport, and they are developing their sexual offences co-ordination unit, which focuses on identifying offenders; series of offences, where people are doing it more than once; patterns of behaviour; vulnerable locations; and also offender management.

Q290 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** What is it doing to monitor how well transport providers tackle sexual harassment? Are Government collecting any data on this?

Victoria Atkins: I am sure I will be assisted on that point about the data.

Certainly, the train operating companies are required to work with BTP as part of their franchise agreements. I will have to check whether bus companies have similar—

Q291 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** BTP do not cover the buses, do they?

Victoria Atkins: I have just been handed a very helpful note. I do take your point about that. Certainly, in terms of the tube network, BTP is working very hard, and they have recorded just over 2,000 sexual offences on the tube network in the last year. In terms of bus companies, if I may, I will get the relevant Minister to write to you on that point.

Q292 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** What about outside of the London bubble?

Victoria Atkins: I know exactly what you mean; I am from one of the most rural constituencies in England. If I may, I will get the Minister for Transport to respond. In my local area, for example, CallConnect, the little rural bus service that people call up, is run by Lincolnshire County Council. I do take your point about DFT/BTP and about BTP not being the appropriate police force in that context.

Q293 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** And regarding the data, as well, you will get back to us?

Victoria Atkins: Yes.

Q294 **Mr Gavin Shuker:** Minister, I have listened to you for a little over an hour; honestly, it is only a little over an hour—I don't know what we agreed with you before you came in. Could I characterise your broader thoughts, if that is okay, and you can tell me if you agree? There is a powerful normalising effect on what is acceptable among men that is playing out in lots of different fields and areas, and we have touched on some of those.

Victoria Atkins: Not all men. There are lots of very decent, lovely men who do not behave like this.



Q295 **Mr Gavin Shuker:** That is very generous. However, it has a normalising effect on all men in lots of different ways. We have talked about some of those areas. Equally, it is not Government's role, or Government may not be good at legislating in every single area, so what more can we do to change men's attitudes towards their sense of entitlement to women's bodies?

Victoria Atkins: It cuts across every part of society. From the very early years, in school, we can help as Government through the teachers setting expectations. However, it reaches into everyday life—online as well as offline.

In terms of women ourselves, we have a great deal of power in this, and I don't think we should be backward in coming forward on it, if you like. In terms of the power of the #MeToo campaign, the power of Gina Martin's upskirting campaign, and the power of the women's marches that Mrs Miller and I have been on this year, there is a great deal of strength and anger at the way women are treated—not necessarily every day, but from time to time. I think we should feel empowered to shout out for ourselves a bit more.

Interestingly, I think the gender pay gap work plays into this because it is very much about requiring businesses to have the conversation about how they pay their women, but I hope one of the beneficial consequences of that is that women will feel empowered to say to their employer, "Why aren't you paying me properly?"

Q296 **Mr Gavin Shuker:** Let me give you a few areas where Government could pull a lever but currently do not. I would like to get your honest assessment on this. On the first one, we have been looking at harassment and the night-time economy. Do you think that licensees, such as bars and clubs, should be required to give training, for example, to their staff about sexual harassment and to have that requirement more closely monitored by local authorities?

Victoria Atkins: That is a really interesting idea. I know that the Mayor of London has a strategy—"a charter" is the correct phrase, I think—whereby clubs and bars sign up to it and their treatment of sexual harassment is part of that charter. I think that is a very interesting idea. There is work going on in this area through the alcohol strategy, the modern crime strategy, local alcohol area partnerships and so on. There is work going on.

Q297 **Chair:** Is sexual harassment explicitly in the alcohol strategy?

Victoria Atkins: I don't know, because I have not seen an early draft of it, but in terms of the work has been going on into the safety of the night-time economy, certainly my officials are thinking along those lines. However, you have given me a very helpful indication, Mrs Miller, that they should ensure that if they are thinking along those lines, they should make that clear in the strategy.



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Q298 **Chair:** Is there a reference to sexual harassment in the modern crime strategy?

Victoria Atkins: It refers to preventing alcohol-related crime and disorder in the night-time economy—

Chair: That feels like a no.

Victoria Atkins: So as part of that. If I am incorrect on that, I will write to you to clarify.

Q299 **Chair:** Earlier you talked about women shouting about these things a bit more. Maybe Ministers need to be shouting about it as well.

Victoria Atkins: Yes. Please don't think I was in any way putting all the burden on women. Of course Ministers should be shouting about it.

Chair: Some of them are.

Q300 **Mr Gavin Shuker:** We took evidence from Avon and Somerset Police that said, "Licensing of sex entertainment venues contributes to the sexual harassment of women". Do you agree?

Victoria Atkins: I am very grateful for your APPG's work on commercial sex services, and indeed we have a debate this afternoon in Westminster Hall on that, secured by the Honourable Member for Rotherham.

We have, as you know, commissioned research into what prostitution looks like in the 21st century. I am not for a moment saying that licensed venues are the same thing as prostitution, but we do know, anecdotally of course, that those premises must be licensed and regulated very, very carefully because of the risk there is for women—not just women, but sex workers—to be exploited in those venues. It is something I am very conscious of.

Q301 **Mr Gavin Shuker:** Is there not another parallel, though, in the linking that you raised, having mentioned prostitution at this stage—

Victoria Atkins: No, no, I am aware.

Mr Gavin Shuker: Both are driven by an ability for men with money to gain access to either viewing or interacting with women's bodies. The point I was making at the start was, do you not think that has a wider normalising effect on society in general, even when neither prostitution nor lap dancing are present?

Victoria Atkins: I think it is a very valid observation. Of course, men can also be prostitutes and sex workers—

Mr Gavin Shuker: Of course, yes.

Victoria Atkins: And, similarly, there can be vulnerabilities there.

Q302 **Mr Gavin Shuker:** We do just accept that it is a highly gendered phenomenon.



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Lastly, Minister, could we have a sense from you around what your vision for licensing is if our desire is to reduce demand or to reduce harassment? Do you think that the licensing system needs to be looked at in a more comprehensive way to make sure that individual local authorities are doing all they can to prevent sexual harassment and exploitation?

Victoria Atkins: I would always encourage local authorities to look at such applications with great care. They will know the locality, the street and the neighbourhood in which the application is being made, and I am sure responsible councillors will be very mindful of the impact it could have locally. So, yes, I do very much agree with that.

Q303 **Tulip Siddiq:** Would you be in favour of venues losing their licences if they cannot protect the women who come to their venues? We heard from a council officer who was very much in favour of this, at the last session. Having been a local councillor myself, I can see the merits of this. Is this something the Government would be in favour of?

Victoria Atkins: I am cautious that I must not make policy on the hoof. However, that is something that I will be looking at with great interest.

Q304 **Tulip Siddiq:** Is it something you would advocate?

Chair: Before you answer that, would there not be existing rules under health and safety at work and other legislation, which should mean that that is the case at the moment, but it is just not being seen that way?

Tulip Siddiq: It is not enforced.

Victoria Atkins: If a woman is being touched without her consent—touched or more, without her consent—that is a criminal offence.

Q305 **Chair:** Should those people be losing their licence because of it?

Victoria Atkins: I would have to say that my instinct would be yes. These licence holders need to understand that they are operating within the law and with the consent of the public. If they are abusing that, I would be very sympathetic to action being taken against them. They have a duty to the people they employ and to the people in the wider community.

Q306 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** Hareem Ghani, the NUS women's officer, told us "gender inequality and sexual harassment persist within the higher education setting". Who is responsible for the safety of women students?

Victoria Atkins: From memory, that is Universities UK. Obviously universities themselves have a duty, but Universities UK is doing a great deal of work on this.

Q307 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** What do you think is the role of the Office for Students in ensuring that women are safe at university?

Victoria Atkins: The role of?



Tonia Antoniazzi: The role of the Office for Students.

Chair: It is actually the Office for Students that is responsible.

Victoria Atkins: Forgive me. I am so sorry. If I may, I am going to consult my file. This may be an area, I am afraid, where a letter from the relevant Minister would be better than me gathering the lines together, but yes, the Government have requested the Office for Students to support student safeguarding, including from sexual harassment.

Q308 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** The Office for Students told us it is not collecting data on sexual harassment or on universities' actions in this area. Do you think it can carry out its role if it is not collecting this kind of data?

Victoria Atkins: It comes back again to the point about data collection, doesn't it? Data collection helps us understand the scale of a problem—the nature of a problem. I would hope that individual universities themselves would take a great interest in this because although, obviously, students are adults, none the less, it is a learning environment and an environment in which female students should feel safe and be treated equally.

Q309 **Chair:** Should they collect the data?

Victoria Atkins: I believe so, yes.

Q310 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** Do you think the Government should be asking for this data? Is there a duty to provide it to the Universities Minister? When you talk about working with all Departments—

Victoria Atkins: Yes. If I may, I am going to ask the Universities Minister to write to you about that, because I do not know the intricacies of the relationship between the Department and the organisation, but this will certainly be a matter I will be raising with the Minister personally, as well as asking my officials to ensure that he writes to the Committee.

Q311 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** In your role as Minister, how do you expect the Office for Students and the EHRC to work together as regulators ensuring women's safety at university?

Victoria Atkins: I hope they would work together—very much so. The fact that the harassment takes place in a university should not preclude the Commission from looking into it and helping.

Q312 **Chair:** We heard evidence last week that they do not work together, which we were quite surprised about. Would you be surprised?

Victoria Atkins: Yes.

Q313 **Chair:** Would you be encouraging them to work together?

Victoria Atkins: Yes, I would be.

Q314 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** Finally, we have heard that there are specific federal laws in the US requiring actions by universities on sexual harassment and



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women's safety and that they are obliged to collect data, to act to prevent sexual harassment and to meet the standards for supporting victims. What do you think the impact would be on the safety of women students in the UK of introducing similar legal obligations here to collect the data?

Victoria Atkins: It sounds like a very interesting piece of work and, if I may, I will take that away and we will look into it. I can see that there may be considerable benefits to it.

Q315 **Chair:** In the same breath, you might encourage the Universities Minister to consider why he did not attend today. Given the aspect of safety of women at universities was such a pivotal part of the work—of our terms of reference—we are very surprised.

Can I ask, in closing, how many times the inter-ministerial group has discussed sexual harassment?

Victoria Atkins: I have only been present on one occasion, in terms of my appointment. It was discussed last week. I was not in the meeting for that part of it because I had parliamentary duties in the House, but certainly it was discussed.

Q316 **Chair:** Do you think that, following this session today, the Committee will have a feeling that the Government have a coherent strategy on sexual harassment in public places?

Victoria Atkins: I would hope that the Committee is reassured by our very clear intention to refresh the VAWG strategy. The fact that DFT and DFE have done work in their own Departments on this shows what can be done. However, I think there is room for improvement, if I am honest; I do think there is. I hope that frankness will encourage the Committee to give a full report and to give us ideas as to where you have identified, from the evidence you drawn together, that we should be improving.

Q317 **Chair:** You are refreshing the VAWG strategy? When are you going to have that done by?

Victoria Atkins: We are in the process of looking at the domestic abuse consultation responses. We are doing that over the summer, basically. We have three months to do that. The VAWG strategy is hand in hand with the draft Domestic Abuse Bill, so by the end of the year, I would hope. That is my intention.

Chair: By the end of the year.

Minister, thank you so much for your time today, and for your very frank and forthright answers to our questions. We always enjoy having you in front of the Committee. Thank you very much for your time.

Victoria Atkins: Thank you.



HOUSE OF COMMONS