

23 March 2021

To

Rt Hon Caroline Nokes MP, Chair, Women and Equalities Committee
Victoria Atkins MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Minister for Safeguarding)

Public outrage over the abduction and killing of Sarah Everard has facilitated a moment for reflection that can strengthen our work towards ending violence against women (VAW). It is appropriate to pause, think about why actions have not taken us where we need to be by now and consider how best to improve our efforts. We acknowledge and respect the work you have done and continue to do. We offer the following five foundational realities as a contribution to strengthen these efforts.

1. Specialist services with expert knowledge in violence against women must be protected

The foundation of our knowledge and learning on violence against women emanates primarily from activist, victim-survivor and practitioner sources: we must continue to listen to those who have lived violence. Our work benefits from hearing them with care and respect, recognising where bullying and sex-based abuse meet and diverge: this depends upon trusted and frontline specialist organisations to be safe workplaces and secure in their future resourcing. . Decades of under-funding, the damage of commissioning practices led by cost over value, waiting lists for support that are heart breaking – such as 18 months for rape crisis counselling – have all undermined the possibility of justice for survivors. Specialist services by and for black and minoritised women and girls, disabled women and specialist services by and for lesbians, gay and bisexual women and trans women that advocate and build upon specific experiences, including discrimination, remain essential. Specialist services with expert knowledge in violence against women must be protected and valued as the UK moves forward on its efforts to build a country where such violence becomes a historical relic.

2. Strategic action to end VAW must join the dots and connect all forms of violence, harassment and abuse against women.

As can be seen from the outpouring of women's voices across all forms of media and on the streets, 'stranger danger', domestic abuse, sexual harassment are not distinct issues to be treated separately. They weave together – with all forms of men's violence – to create a profoundly jaundiced, rancid and lethal culture that is dangerous and limiting for women and girls; pornography and the sex industry are core to this culture. A strategy to end VAW (as per the SDG commitment to elimination by 2030¹) will fail if it does not join the dots. Victim-survivors know very well – and tell us - how each of these feeds on the other, building a formidable web through which we anticipate danger and navigate our lives every day but which never allows us to thrive. Distinctions matter but fragmentation can be false and harmful; so

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https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/603500/Agenda-2030-Report4.pdf

long as fragmentation shapes our policy and practice the reality of women's lives will neither be seen nor addressed².

3. Government messaging must recognise the ubiquity and micro-aggressions of male violence in the lives of women and girls

We need to take every opportunity in messaging about VAW to recognise the ubiquity and micro-aggressions of male violence in the lives of women and girls, not only the 'end' points such as rape and killing that most easily capture media attention. Sexual harassment is every day, anticipated and known by likely almost all women and girls. The steady drip- drip- drip- effect is corrosive: anticipation of danger, harm, changing how one behaves, choosing not to do things that men can do without thinking, forgone options, heightened alertness – this constant safety work exhausts and depletes the ability of women and girls to live fully and to thrive. Commonly cited figures³ for prevalence are inaccurate: violence is neither rare nor unusual, violence against women is an everyday reality⁴. Charity and NGO work fills the gaps where government is not collecting data and consistently find high levels of prevalence. Recently a YouGov survey found that 97%⁵ of young women experienced sexual harassment. Regular, national tracking of the range of violence and abuse that women know – such as including sexual harassment⁶⁷ in the Crime Survey for England and Wales - would improve understanding, awareness and interventions.

4. There is a legitimate and justifiable trust deficit that inhibits women's use of state agencies. Resolution requires actions beyond policies.

Perpetrators and strangers are not synonymous; they are in every institution and space we inhabit. Institutions of the state, charities and humanitarian organisations, parliaments, universities and children's clubs – all organisations have gaps and cultures that enable abuse to exist or to be minimised/excused. The police are not exempt. Their taking of selfies with the dead bodies of Nicole Smallman and Bibaa Henry in 2020 prompted shock, as have the latest allegations against a serving police officer of kidnap and killing in the Sarah Everard case. Those who see themselves least well reflected and heard, and most harmed, in these institutions consider that they have little to gain and much to lose in their dealings with them, minoritised women, women living in poverty, women with no leave to remain and those with disabilities being particularly affected. While constant pressure is put on women and girls to report, report and report, it is perhaps a little more clear to some than it had been previously, that those very

² See for example GEO reports on harms of pornography and on harmful gender norms: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-publications>; research by YouGov for the Women and Equalities Committee on attitudes linked to policy and to sexual harassment, pornography, prostitution: https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmwomeq/701/70112.htm#_idTextAnchor124

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/violence-against-women-and-girls-vawg-call-for-evidence/violence-against-women-and-girls-vawg-strategy-2021-2024-call-for-evidence>

⁴ <https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/about/data-on-violence-against-women-and-girls/>

⁵ The Guardian https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/10/almost-all-young-women-in-the-uk-have-been-sexually-harassed-survey-finds?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other

⁶ As per Government acceptance of Recommendation 4:

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmwomeq/2148/214802.htm>

⁷ See also Helen Mott's response on sexual harassment and the VAWG strategy consultation: [Mott \(2021\) harassment VAWG response.pdf - Google Drive](#)

institutions mandated to deal with reports themselves *include* perpetrators⁸. This is relevant to the criminal justice system – including the police, the Crown Prosecution Service, the judiciary and probation services- but it extends beyond them to women and girls’ experiences of social care and other services that are not trusted to uphold rights and needs. Perpetrators do not begin their journeys of abuse with murder and kidnap, they work their way up to these and have learned that - and how - they can get away with their actions. The trust deficit that inhibits women’s use of state agencies is acute and serious, requiring actions beyond policies: cultural change⁹ must bring institutional courage not institutional betrayal¹⁰.

5. Inequality of voice and experience

If we considered women truly and fully human we would afford their voices and experiences credibility, respect and treat them as a source of learning. Instead, gaslighting, dismissal of their accounts as anecdotal and victim-blaming infuse the rape culture that privileges men’s reputations, careers and prospects over the basic rights of women and girls to live free of violence. Men’s ability to deny, minimise and dismiss women’s accounts against them exemplifies and feeds inequality of who is believed, that continues to deny justice and safety to women whether in the state, its agencies or any other organisation. Undoing this - building a climate of credibility for women - is long term work and will be deeply challenged, as it fundamentally disrupts the ways in which inequality operates between men and women, as we know¹¹. Any strategy to end violence against women must attend to this inequality of voice and be shaped and led by independent, experienced subject specialists (on rights, inequalities and VAW).

Holding these realities as constant reference for the implementation of policy and cultural change will provide the best basis for improving the lives of women across the country in ways we all seek.

For decades, women have spoken, organised and demanded policy, practice and cultural changes that could shift the endemic and seemingly inescapable poison of violence against women that occupies our lives. Today we see many young women leading the dismay, anger and demand for change. Policy changes and some legal revisions have progressed over long years yet women’s “space for action”¹² to live in safety, certainty and joy remains severely constrained.

In 2021 as a specific femicide occupies the nation’s consciousness, the work towards a UK strategy to end VAW is in the spotlight. As you develop this work further, we urge you to consider our five key points above as integral to solidifying the work to end VAW.

⁸ See also https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/police-sexism-locker-room-boys-23766285?pure360.trackingid=&fbclid=IwAR26qiN79_kBHv0qNHzyx60lODxN7DwHkRivbsw4wUrp4-IID_Awz2YCV6c

⁹ Signatories to this letter recognise and welcome this initiative:
<https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/328/women-and-equalities-committee/news/152900/committee-looks-at-underpinning-male-violence/>

¹⁰ Smith, C.P. & Freyd, J.J. (2014). Institutional Betrayal. *American Psychologist*, 69(6), 575-587. Available from <https://dynamic.uoregon.edu/jjf/articles/sf2014.pdf>

¹¹ <http://www.katemanne.net/down-girl.html>; <http://www.katemanne.net/entitled.html>

¹² Vera Gray & Kelly (2020) Contested gendered space: public sexual harassment and women’s safety. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01924036.2020.1732435>

We remain available for further consultation and advice.

Yours sincerely,

Umme Imam, *Executive Director*, and Rosie Lewis, *Deputy Director*, *The Angelou Centre*

Sara Kirkpatrick, *Prif Weithredwr, Chief Executive, Cymorth i Ferched Cymru, Welsh Women's Aid*

Dr Helen Mott, *specialist in prevention of sexual harassment & violence against women*

Dr Ava Kanyeredzi, *Senior Lecturer, University of East London and Black Church Domestic Abuse Forum*

Professor Nicole Westmarland, *Professor of Criminology, Director, Durham University Centre for Research into Violence and Abuse*

Dr Fiona Vera-Gray, *Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Durham University*

Dr Purna Sen, *Visiting Professor, Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit, London Metropolitan University*

Professor Liz Kelly, *Professor of Sexualised Violence, Director of the Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit (CWASU) and Roddick Chair on Violence Against Women, London Metropolitan University*

Dr Kelly Johnson, *Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Durham University*

Professor Aisha K. Gill, Ph.D. CBE, *Professor of Criminology, University of Roehampton*

Dr Geetanjali Gangoli, *Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, Durham University*

Professor Catherine Donovan, *Head of Department, Department of Sociology, Durham University*

Dr Stephen Burrell, *Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Durham University, Centre for Research into Violence and Abuse (CRiVA)*

Sent by email to

caroline.nokes.mp@parliament.uk

womeqcom@parliament.uk

victoria@victoriaatkins.org.uk

From email Purna.Sen@LondonMet.Ac.Uk

Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit, London Metropolitan University, 160-220 Holloway Road,
London, N7 8DB