



Women and Equalities Committee

House of Commons London SW1A 0AA

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From the Chair

Victoria Atkins MP, Minister for Safeguarding
Caroline Dinenage MP, Minister for Online Harms
Nick Gibb MP, Minister for Schools

By email

7th June 2021

Dear Victoria, Caroline and Nick,

Changing cultures underpinning male violence against women

Our Committee took oral evidence on [Changing cultures underpinning male violence against women](#) on 28th April 2021, with experts John Carr, Dr Stephen Burrell, Dr Helen Mott and Dr Purna Sen. The session covered a wide range of issues that we hope will help to inform the development of the forthcoming Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) and Domestic Abuse (DA) strategies, and to strengthen clear and targeted objectives on prevention in both documents. This will enable the Government to meet its legal obligations relating to violence against women, including under the Equality Act 2010, the Human Rights Act 1998, the Istanbul Convention (once ratified), and the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). I have outlined below some of the key issues covered in the session to this end.

Tackling harmful gender norms

The Government's own research, [Changing Gender Norms: Engaging with Men and Boys](#), explores how harmful gender norms relating to what it means to be a man and notions of masculinity underpin male violence against women. This should be the starting point for work to address and prevent male violence against women and explicitly inform actions on prevention in the forthcoming strategies.

Taking this approach will have far wider benefits. As Stephen Burrell, one of the research report's co-authors, told us: *If we address some of these harmful ideas and norms about masculinity, we can address other forms of violence as well, because those ideas are often also at the heart of men's violence towards other men, for example.*

Witnesses noted the UK Government's excellent reputation for evidence-based work on preventing violence against women and girls in the international arena, which is underpinned by an understanding of the role that social norms play. They urged the Government to take the same approach domestically as is being taken internationally.

Addressing intersecting equality issues will also be critical for the success of the forthcoming VAWG and DA strategies. Purna Sen, former Executive Co-ordinator And Spokesperson on Addressing Sexual Harassment and other forms of Discrimination for UN Women, told us; *"[...] we have to recognise, understand, learn from and address how issues of age, race, immigration status and disability shape those experiences and shape what happens to people who want to speak up from those different positionings."*



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Public campaigns

Witnesses told us about the importance of public campaigns in shifting attitudes linked to harmful behaviours, and further informed us that these need to be designed and developed with experts to avoid unintended (eg victim-blaming) messages. Public campaigns – such as the Home Office’s previous [This Is Abuse](#) campaign - can be particularly impactful as part of a broader programme of work on prevention.

Witnesses stressed the urgent need for the Government to develop a new programme of work, incorporating public health campaigns, in the wake of the pandemic when risks to women and girls have been heightened. The current public debate and media focus on male violence provides a critical opportunity for the Government to send a strong message on how it plans to shift the underlying cultures.

Work in schools, colleges and universities

There was support during the evidence session for the recent introduction of age-appropriate Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) in schools. Witnesses emphasised that VAWG prevention work as part of Personal Health Social and Economic Education (PSHE)/RSE needs to address gender norms and be rooted in a women’s rights approach. Helen Mott warned against this work drifting into a gender-neutral approach, which she believed would not effectively address the issues.

Witnesses said that schools should be supported and resourced to deliver this work and to bring in expert organisations, such as women’s groups, to provide specialist training for staff. However, under-resourcing is undermining the Government’s prevention objectives at present. Stephen Burrell asked, *“If the front-line services are really struggling, what message does that send about how seriously we treat this as a problem[...]?”*

The session also covered the role of universities in creating culture change. Helen Mott, who co-designed the [Intervention Initiative](#), a bystander programme for universities, said that such programmes are *“a very good vehicle for delivering attitude change and ultimately behaviour change when it comes to norms around violence against women.”* She gave as an example how the programme had been shown in [evaluation](#) to dramatically reduce rape myth acceptance. However, we are concerned to learn that prevention programming is still not being taken seriously in the university sector and encourage the Government to take steps to address this.

Addressing the harms of media and pornography

The session also covered the impact of harmful media and pornography and how the *“sexual objectification of women very specifically is absolutely related to violence against women”* (Helen Mott). Witnesses discussed recent research by researchers at Durham University, [Sexual violence as a sexual script in mainstream online pornography](#), which examines the ways in which sexual violence is positioned as a ‘sexual script’ in mainstream pornography and raises questions about the efficacy of regulatory mechanisms.

Online harms expert John Carr detailed research showing a link between the consumption of pornography and sexual violence perpetration in relation to children’s safety. He said that,



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“porn has ... completely changed the culture in the playground.” In contrasting the easy accessibility of pornography with other harmful products, John Carr made the compelling point that *“[...]it is a well-established norm now that it is wrong to allow children to have access to tobacco, alcohol, gambling and so on. If you go on the internet and try to obtain any of those things, you will be met with a number of practical obstacles and difficulties to you obtaining them.”*

Witnesses expressed disappointment that the Government’s stated intention of introducing age verification/assurance of pornography websites through the Online Safety Bill will lead to a delay of possibly several years until children are protected from the harms of online pornography. John Carr said; *“[...] it will be at least another three or four years, possibly more, before that new legislation hits the ground and starts operating. It is such a shame, because three or four years is a very long time in the life of a child, and it could have been avoided.”* We would ask the Government to think again about what steps it can take now to put in place the protective measures to which it is committed.

Finally, our witnesses emphasised that this work requires a long-term approach. Purna Sen called for a commitment to the ‘long haul’: *“We are not going to get quick wins if we are doing proper prevention work and if we are doing proper cultural change work. Prevention is part of the work, not just response to violence.”*

We look forward to hearing from you in an oral evidence session about how these and other matters have been addressed in the VAWG strategy once it has been published.

Rt Hon Caroline Nokes MP

Chair, Women and Equalities Committee