

Rt Hon Priti Patel MP
Secretary of State
Home Office
2 Marsham Street
London, SW1P 4D



6 March 2020

Dear Rt Hon Priti Patel MP

Renewal of the cross-government Violence Against Women & Girls Strategy

We are writing to you as leading women's organisations, campaigners, and experts in the field of violence against women and girls ahead of International Women's Day. We recognise the progress made in England and Wales over the past 10 years as a result of the Home Office led cross-government Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) strategy, that complements equivalent Strategies in Wales and Scotland, and want to ask for your commitment to consultation on and renewal of this vital joined up approach to preventing and tackling the most serious harms and abuse.

The prevalence of VAWG in the UK and the connection to women's inequality

One in four women will experience domestic violence in her lifetime, and 241 women and girls were murdered in England and Wales in the year ending March 2019, the highest number for over a decade. Close to half a million women are raped or sexually assaulted each year, but although we've seen reports of rape to the police increase exponentially recently, we are all deeply concerned by the shocking collapse in prosecutions and convictions, which means that only 1 in 65 of these cases now result in a charge or summons. It is estimated that there are more than 135,000 women and girls affected by FGM living in England and Wales, and a third of girls report having experienced sexual harassment at school. These forms of abuse stop thousands of women and girls living the lives they would choose for themselves.

The achievements of the VAWG Strategy

Women and girls' very disproportionate experience of these forms of gender-based violence throughout our lives is driven by women's ongoing inequality, with many women facing multiple disadvantage due to race, disability, poverty or immigration status. In recognition of this, the Government instituted a joined-up approach to tackling these crimes from 2010. The 'VAWG Strategy' has helped to transform some responses to abuse, leading to substantial changes in the way the police and courts respond to VAWG cases; legislative and policy change around coercive control, FGM, and image-based abuse; a very significant roll out of special victim-focused advocates (IDVA's and ISVA's) for some domestic and sexual violence victims, with some of these notably now based in health settings; a real growth in the recognition and development of perpetrator intervention work; and support in making the case for compulsory Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) in all schools in England, to complement mandatory SRE in the new curriculum in Wales.

However, there is clearly much more to do to ensure that women and girls do not live in fear of

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violence. We trust that you will continue to show a high level of commitment and priority to a refreshed VAWG strategy, which must be cross-departmental and involve work with devolved Governments, to encourage shared responsibility for preventing and tackling VAWG across our public services whilst responding to new and emerging online and tech-enabled abuse.

Crucial to this work is ensuring there is central oversight and an effective response when local commissioners do not meet the National Statement of Expectations, if we are to avoid a postcode lottery of service provision and gaps in protection and support that put women at risk. A joined up approach to tackling VAWG enables policy makers, system leaders, commissioners and frontline workers to better see abuse and provide what is needed to address it.

The re-introduction of a Domestic Abuse Bill for England and Wales, is an important opportunity to send a strong message that violence against women and girls has no place in our society and to ensure the sustainability of the range of specialist services that survivors rely on, including those services for black and minoritized, migrant, LBT and disabled women. We know you aspire towards the standards of protection and prevention set out in the Istanbul Convention, and as such we want to see the measures in this Bill appropriately resourced to build on the government's established framework. We look forward to working closely with the Domestic Abuse Commissioner, who we know to be supportive of such an approach, as new law and policy are rolled out.

Recognising the needs of survivors

Those of us working in the specialist sexual violence support sector welcomed the increased attention and funding commitments announced last year for vital rape support services. Exactly one year ago a [petition](#) by rape survivor Fern Champion was launched, calling on the Prime Minister to ensure counselling services would be available to all rape victims. Fern couldn't get help when she needed it because her local Rape Crisis centres' waiting lists were too long or closed. Fern's petition has been signed by almost 200,000 people and has been widely publicised, indicating how strongly the public feel about the provision of therapeutic support for rape survivors.

We hope the next phase of the VAWG Strategy will go further in recognising the public's increased awareness of and rejection of gender based violence, and the expectation that all survivors' needs will be met. A [report](#) by Imkaan on minoritized women and sexual violence published just this week, shows how BME women who have been raped and sexually abused as children face higher levels of disbelief and commonly cannot access the specialist therapeutic support they need. BME, asylum seeking and refugee women experience higher rates of homelessness, destitution and repeat victimisation, and there must be specific attention to addressing the multiple barriers they face in finding safety. It is critical that as well as specialist support services run by women who understand different women's needs, the public sector workers across housing, health settings, schools, and the criminal justice system are appropriately trained and resourced to also provide an effective response to survivors.

When new Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) are elected this May, they need to know that their Government expects them to have regard to the VAWG approach. While there are examples of good practice across England and Wales, research by the End Violence Against Women Coalition in 2019 highlighted that many PCCs have had a haphazard and unreliable local response to domestic and sexual violence, ignoring the approach set out by the Home Office, and seriously impacting both the setting of local policing priorities and the commissioning of victims' services.

The Rape Review recommendations and outcomes

The 'end to end' Rape Review led by the Criminal Justice Board, announced in last year's refresh of the VAWG strategy, is set to conclude soon. This is an opportunity to be truly forensic in understanding the failures across the criminal justice system for victims, and to set out an expectation that leadership in this challenging area must be bold and determined to provide access to justice. We hope the review will recommend advocacy and legal support for victims from initial complaint; disclosure rules which respect victims' privacy; and work with police, prosecution and courts workers which tackles victim-blaming attitudes head on. We also need to recognise that at least half of victims never report sexual assault to the police, and that there are poorer justice outcomes for younger women and girls, BME women, those with insecure immigration status, and those living in poverty, for example. A renewed VAWG Strategy is a critical way of underpinning wherever the Rape Review recommendations and their legacy may take us.

Women's organisations welcome the opportunity for consultation on what should be in the VAWG strategy and how best to implement it. We look forward to hearing from you about plans for a renewed strategy, and remain available to meet with you or your advisors at your convenience.

Yours sincerely,

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Professor Aisha K. Gill, Co-Chair of EVAW
Baljit Banga, Director, Imkaan
Eleri Butler, CEO, Welsh Women's Aid
Nicki Norman, Acting Co-Chief Executive, Women's Aid Federation of England
Pragna Patel, Director, Southall Black Sisters
Natasha Walter and Marchu Girma, Directors, Women for Refugee Women
Dr Nicola Sharp-Jeffs, CEO, Surviving Economic Abuse
Gurpreet Virdee, Director of Operations, Women and Girls Network
Estelle Du Boulay, Director, Rights of Women
Gisela Valle, Director, Latin American Women's Rights Service
Vivienne Hays MBE, CEO, Women's Resource Centre
Karen Ingala Smith, CEO, nia
Jo Todd, CEO, Respect
Yvonne Traynor, CEO, Rape Crisis South London / Surrey & Sussex
Claire Bloor, CEO, Somerset and Avon Rape Crisis (SARSAS)

Fee Scott, CEO, Devon Rape Crisis and Sexual Abuse Services
Donna Covey CBE, CEO, AVA (Against Violence and Abuse)
Ellie Butt, Head of Policy, Refuge
Shonagh Dillon, CEO, Aurora New Dawn LTD
Professor Nicole Westmarland, Director, Durham University Centre for Research into Violence and Abuse
Dr Fiona Vera-Gray, Durham University
Dr Helen Mott, UWE Bristol
Dr Miranda Horvath, Middlesex University
Yasmin Rehman, CEO, Juno Women's Aid
Anthea Sully, CEO, White Ribbon
Centre for Women's Justice
Stacy Smith, CEO, Her Centre
Rio Tuli, Ashiana Network
Jacqui Hunt, Director, Equality Now
Gemma Aitchison, YES Matters UK
JURIES (Jurors Understanding Rape is Essential Standard)
Times Up
We Can't Consent to This

cc Victoria Atkins MP, Alex Chalk MP