

The Rt. Honourable Theresa May
MP Prime Minister Office of the Prime Minister
10 Downing Street London
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By email and post

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Dear Prime Minister,

I am writing to you today on International Women's Day as it marks one year since I was last turned away from accessing counselling from Rape Crisis. After I was raped in 2016 I sought help from two separate sexual violence support centres in my region but over the months was told repeatedly, as I contacted each one, that their waiting lists were closed due to very high demand for their service.

My situation worsened as I received these rejections. I was experiencing severe stress, lack of sleep, migraines and I was having flashbacks during my sleep which had started to creep into my waking hours too. I really needed help from a service which understood the nature of this particular kind of trauma, but I couldn't get it. I was self-medicating with alcohol which of course I knew wasn't healthy but it had simply turned into one of the only coping mechanisms I had. My mental health spiraled further beyond my control until suddenly I just couldn't go on any longer. This experience was very frightening and I hit crisis point. Then, something very unusual happened – my private sector employer recognised the seriousness of my situation and stepped in, arranging for private therapeutic support.

The support services I approached turned me away because successive governments have failed to recognise the absolute necessity of the life-saving community-based services who provide sexual violence counselling for women, men, and children who are in crisis, and who need long-term support. I didn't know the situation for rape survivors trying to get help was this bad until I was in this situation. I am speaking out and writing to you because I cannot bear to think of other survivors who are struggling but where no one will sweep in with an offer to privately pay.

As I write, there are many services with waiting lists closed and survivors of sexual violence and abuse not able to get the support they need. In March 2018 Rape Crisis reported that there were 6,355 survivors on waiting lists across the country, a number which is expected to have grown since then. When I called my local Rape Crisis centre, I expected there to be a waiting list but I didn't expect that I wouldn't even be able to get *on* to that waiting list. I know there are many more people like me making those calls today and finding the door closed. I believe this should be recognised as an urgent local and national political issue.

Over the last few years we have seen an exponential increase in reporting of rape to the police. There has also been media and social attention to sexual violence as never before, with the high profile scandals around men like Jimmy Savile, and the #MeToo movement giving women the platform to speak about what has happened to them. However, politicians are not keeping up with this. The political debate about responding to rape is still focused almost entirely on criminal justice and never asks what help survivors actually need.

Survivors have called again and again for independent, community based specialist services that offer safe spaces and trauma informed support. A Rape Crisis Centre manager in the South West of England describes the situation like this:

“Lurching from funding crisis to funding crisis with ever increasing waiting lists... destabilising and demoralising for all concerned and leaves many women and girls in our communities vulnerable and at risk. With demand for our services going through the roof as more women begin to name what has happened to them and seek support, we need to ensure we are sustainable and offering services to them as long they need us. The funding postcode must stop.”

The funding and commissioning landscape for specialist support services like Rape Crisis is complex and confusing, with no overall accountability at government level for ensuring that support is available. An ever-increasing push towards devolution of funding has exacerbated this. Forthcoming research from the End Violence Against Women Coalition will show that many Police and Crime Commissioners choose not to prioritise Violence Against Women and Girls, and similarly Clinical Commissioning Groups do not engage with their responsibility to commission mental health services by funding specialist trauma informed counselling.

The Government is committed to ratifying the Istanbul Convention which commits which sets a standard of support for victims of sexual violence. The Convention’s Explanatory Report recommends **there should be at least 150 Rape Crisis Centres in England and Wales. Currently there are only 44.** To meet the standards of the Istanbul Convention, the government would need to invest a minimum of **£195 million per annum** into specialist, independent, community based provision. A significant proportion of that would need to be ring fenced for specialist BME services that cater to the needs of the most marginalised in our society. As a point of comparison, the current overall income of the Rape Crisis network is around £20 million.

It infuriates me to think that there are still survivors out there unable to access the support they need due to a lack of funding. To be frank, why should we care about funding? We were raped. That was not our fault and yet we continue to be punished for it by not even being allowed to recover from it.

By not adequately funding support services on a long term and sustainable basis this Government is telling survivors that their recovery does not matter and by extension that they do not matter. When you have been raped – when someone else has deeply harmed you and you are left with the trauma and pain – the vital, life-saving counselling should just be there when you need it.

I have decided to waive my anonymity as I know there are so many others who are less privileged and fortunate than I am. It is shameful that in our society we are unable to provide support to people who have been raped and sexually abused. Specialist rape counselling support should be available for everyone who seeks it.

Your own government’s Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy undertakes to ensure that by 2020 no victim is turned away from accessing critical support services delivered by rape support centres. There is a long way to go to stand any chance of meeting this target.

I would very much like to meet with you and discuss in a little more detail why I have been motivated to write to you, and what I know of the situation of those seeking counselling support after rape. I appreciate that you have led many years of Government work in this area as Home Secretary and as Prime Minister. I hope we might be able to have a conversation about this particular need of sexual violence survivors and what long-term solutions might look like.

Yours sincerely



Fern Champion