Home Office

Open consultation

Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) strategy 2021-2024: call for evidence

Updated 8 January 2021

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This call for evidence begins on 10 December 2020.

This call for evidence ends on 19 February 2021.

Overview

Purpose

To engage with and listen to those with lived experience of or views on violence against women and girls, those with expertise in working with victims / survivors, those involved in preventative activity, in providing services and, more generally, the communities and organisations affected by these crimes. This includes relevant professionals, such as those working in social care, education, law enforcement, local government, public health and healthcare.

Duration

10 weeks.

Enquiries

Enquiries, including requests for the paper in an alternative format, to:

Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy call for evidence
Home Office
Interpersonal Abuse Unit
Violence Against Women and Girls Team
5th Floor, Fry Building
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

Email: VAWGStrategy2021@homeoffice.gov.uk

How to respond

The easiest way to respond and ensure that your individual views are taken into account is to respond to the online survey available for the general public.

Home Secretary foreword

As Home Secretary, the safety of the British people is my top priority. That is why I am absolutely clear that we must use every possible tool to tackle violence against women and girls. These sickening crimes have no place in our society, and I am determined to see more perpetrators brought to justice and all victims and survivors receiving the support they deserve.

Crimes which disproportionately affect women and girls, such as sexual violence, domestic abuse, forced marriage and stalking have devastating consequences. They can have a profound and long-lasting impact on those directly affected as well as on communities and society as a whole. I believe passionately that we have a responsibility to help the victims and survivors, and I will do everything in my power to ensure their needs are at the centre of our approach.

We have already taken a number of important steps in this area, including strengthening the law on crimes such as stalking, forced marriage and female genital mutilation.

We have also provided significant funding for crucial frontline services and support organisations, and increased protection and support for victims and those at risk through measures such as "Clare's Law", which allows women to check if their partner has a violent history.

We have not stopped there. Home is not a safe place for everyone, which is why our ground-breaking Domestic Abuse Bill is so crucial. It will bolster our response on every level – strengthening protections for victims, while ensuring perpetrators feel the full force of the law.

In recognition of the fact that men and boys experience crimes which fall within the definition of violence against women and girls, in 2019 we published the first ever cross-government Male Victims' Position Statement.

But, despite the progress we have made, I am clear that there is more to do. While victims are suffering from these abhorrent crimes, we must continue to work tirelessly to enhance our approach. It remains the case that in the UK 1 in 5 women will experience sexual assault during her lifetime. And over the last 10 years we have seen newer forms of these crimes emerging, such as cyber flashing and so-called 'upskirting'. This is completely unacceptable, and we need a step change in our response.

That is why I will be publishing a new Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy next year and why I am issuing an ambitious and wide-ranging call for evidence to inform it. I want the new Strategy to drive forward improvements in the effort to target perpetrators; to ensure that we are fully equipped to respond to the changing nature of these crimes; and, most importantly, to place victims and survivors at the heart of our approach.

To meet this ambition, we need to draw on the knowledge and experience of the public. That includes those who have been directly affected, their friends, family and colleagues. We are also keen to hear from organisations that provide support to victims and survivors, frontline professionals, and academics. Nimco Ali OBE, who I recently appointed as an Independent Government Adviser on Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls, will be supporting this call for evidence and making sure we hear from all parts of society.

Violence against women and girls is still all too prevalent and, directly or indirectly, it affects us all. I am steadfast in my determination to root out the perpetrators, while providing victims with every possible support. It is essential that through our new Strategy we identify and put in place practical solutions which make a real difference to people's lives. That is what the victims of these terrible crimes deserve, and that is what we must deliver. By responding to this call for evidence, you can make your voice heard and play a part in helping us achieve that.

Rt Hon Priti Patel MP Home Secretary

Executive summary

Crimes of violence and abuse have a profound and lasting effect on society. They can shatter the lives of victims, tear apart families, and damage whole communities. No set of crimes does this more than those coming under the definition of violence against women and girls.

That is why tackling violence against women and girls is a top priority for the government and we are determined to step up our response to prevent these abhorrent crimes and improve outcomes for victims and survivors.

Our vision is for a society in which people can live without fear of abuse or violence. To achieve this vision, we will continue to build on the foundation laid by our 2010 and 2016 violence against women and girls strategies acknowledging the disproportionate impact of these types of crimes and the limiting effect it can have on people reaching their full potential.

Even though violence against women and girls directly or indirectly touches all of us, these heinous crimes remain far too prevalent and hidden within our society. Violence against women and girls is both a form of discrimination and a violation of human rights. It is our collective responsibility to identify and tackle oppressive attitudes, patterns of behaviour and practices which try to achieve power and control over victims and survivors of these crimes.

There have been 2 iterations of the violence against women and girls strategy since 2010. In that time, the government has introduced measures to tackle a range of crimes including (but not limited to) stalking, rape, so-called 'honour'-based abuse, female genital mutilation (FGM) as well as the risks and harms associated with prostitution and sex work. Although much has been achieved over the last decade, there remains more to be done. The risks of violence against women and girls that existed 10 years ago are still present, but the pace of societal and technological change means that new and evolving forms of crimes against women and girls are continuously emerging. A new Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy is required to ensure that these crimes are tackled effectively.

We know that these crimes disproportionately affect women and girls, and we will never lose sight of the devastating and widespread impact violence against women and girls can have. At the same time, we have also published the first cross-government Male Victims' Position Statement to clarify and strengthen our response to male victims of domestic abuse, sexual violence, stalking and so-called 'honour' based abuse. The government also recognises that a significant number of men and boys experience abusive and violent crimes that are captured under the umbrella of violence against women and girls. Similarly, we also recognise that some of these offences can also be committed by females.

The coronavirus pandemic has shone a light on both existing problems of accessing services easily and quickly and, the strains on support services across the whole area of hidden harms. It is imperative we learn from and act on the vulnerabilities in our systems and structures the pandemic has so starkly exposed. We must all ensure that awareness is kept high and that all parts of society are encouraged to play their part in tackling violence against women and girls, be it service providers, employers, schools, friends or neighbours.

We recognise that violence against women and girls crimes can also include, or be linked to, domestic abuse. Responses to this call for evidence can, of course, include content relevant to domestic abuse. However, given the harm caused, and the increases in domestic abuse reported during the coronavirus national restrictions, this will be dealt with in a further, complementary Strategy that will follow later in 2021. The Domestic Abuse Strategy will follow Royal Assent of the landmark Domestic Abuse Bill, and a subsequent specific consultation process. It is imperative we learn from and act on the vulnerabilities in our systems and structures, which the pandemic has so starkly exposed.

In response to the decline in referrals, charges, prosecutions and convictions for rape cases we have seen in recent years, we have been carrying out a review into the criminal justice response to rape, which will report with an action plan. The new Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy will also complement this forthcoming action plan

We are launching this call for evidence to inform the new Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy – given the prevalence of violence against women and girls, we recognise that the public, including victims and survivors, has a wealth of knowledge and experience in and of these crimes and we are keen to get this information first-hand from survivors, victims, witnesses and those who work to support them.

The geographical scope of the call for evidence is England and Wales, though we welcome responses from other areas of the UK. Though many aspects of service provision for violence against women and girls are devolved to Wales, crime, policing and criminal justice are not. Given the areas of cross-over, and to ensure that the decisions made as a result of this call for evidence are effective in a Welsh context, the Home Office will work closely with the Welsh Government to ensure the Strategy is effective at tackling these crime types and supporting victims in both England and Wales.

Aim and objectives

The aim of this call for evidence is to enable us to understand the true scale of violence against women and girls crimes and their impact, the measures which may help identify and prevent these crimes, the extent to which current legislation and services are being used effectively to tackle them, and to identify examples of best practice.

Volume

Violence against women and girls crimes are hidden crimes and so our understanding of the volume and prevalence is limited. For example, we know that violence against women and girls can affect any person regardless of background, ethnicity, religion, age or gender, but have little understanding of how this breaks down for each crime type. This makes identifying the trends and drivers behind violence against women and girls very difficult.

However, there are some broad trends identifiable in the data. Taking rape and sexual assault offences as an example, we know from the Crime Survey for England and Wales 2020, conducted by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), that, for the year ending March 2020, 2.2% of adults aged 16 to 59 years had experienced sexual assault (including attempted offences) in the latest year. This was a significant decrease compared with the previous year (2.9%), driven by the significant decrease in indecent exposure or unwanted sexual touching (2.5% in the year ending March 2019 compared with 1.9% in the year ending March 2020).

Though just a snapshot of the true figure of rapes that took place, more than 55,000 rapes were recorded by the police in England and Wales in each of the last 2 years (2018/19 and 2019/20 figures). The year ending March 2020 was the first year since 2012 with no increase in cases, however, it remains more than double the figure from 2013/14. These figures may suggest that we are getting better at recording sexual violence, yet there is also evidence from support services to suggest that the majority of sexual violence incidents are not reported or recorded in these statistics.

While the ONS survey reflected a rise in the prevalence of sexual assault offences from the year ending March 2014, the number of these offences recorded by the police showed little change from the previous year (from 154,213 to 154,113 offences). The year ending March 2020 was the first year since 2012 with no increase. This may suggest that the influence of improvements in recording practices for this particular offence is diminishing. For a subset of forces providing data to the Home Office Data Hub, 23% of sexual offences recorded by the police in the year ending March 2020 were non-recent offences (those that took place more than 12 months before being recorded by the police). While non-recent offences were an important contributor to rises in police recorded sexual offences in previous years, in the latest year, reports of non-recent offences have decreased and are therefore no longer contributing to an overall increase in sexual offences.

We know that, since the previous Strategy was written, violence against women and girls has evolved and encompasses many more behaviours and crime types. We also know that our understanding of the prevalence and causes of these newer forms of violence against women and girls is limited. For example, we know that online dating abuse via dating apps has become a real issue for younger people, damaging esteem and potentially future relationships, or acting as a trap for further victimisation. Yet we have little grasp of how many people are affected or how many need or seek help. Crimes such as cyber flashing, also an increasing concern for young people, though potentially criminal are not necessarily captured adequately or accurately in official data, if at all. There are also increasing reports of abuse and extreme sexism surfacing in the use online forums and social media platforms as well as new apps, though accurate figures for this are not yet available.

This call for evidence will seek to highlight areas of concern on these hidden crimes and provide some context to actions coming out of the Strategy.

Impact

A key aim of this call for evidence is to capture the lived experience of those affected by violence against women and girls and understand how we can use experiences and learnings to improve our response to these crimes. If we are to step up our response to prevent these abhorrent crimes and improve outcomes for victims and survivors, a better understanding of the impact is vital.

Measuring the impact of violence against women and girls can be difficult, given its hidden nature. However, the Home Office has estimated the economic and social costs of domestic abuse in 1 year (ending March 2017) to be approximately £66 billion, higher than any other single crime type. Previous estimates for rape (year ending March 2015) have estimated costs of £4.8 billion. Though much of it remains hidden, it is clear that these crimes have a significant impact on society as a whole.

Prevention and support

Violence against women and girls crimes can often receive inconsistent or even insufficient support from the system when they are reported. They are often the most challenging and difficult crimes to successfully lead to prosecutions, the decline in numbers for rape convictions being a case in point, where as little as 1% of rape allegations now lead to a conviction and where 1 in 4 victims withdraw their support for prosecution. It is important that this trend, and other less clear-cut trends in other types of violence against women and girls, are fully understood and tackled to reduce the impact of these crimes on society.

We also know that there can be little available in terms of prevention, particularly for the most recently emerged forms of violence against women and girls. There is also limited evidence on the effectiveness of perpetrator programmes for many violence against women and girls crimes. There are, however, some services in place to prevent these crimes from taking place provided by local experts, often with the support of central government. For example, projects helping women involved in sex work, a group particularly at risk of violence against women and girls, to be supported with advice and active measures to keep themselves safe. 'Whole system' approaches, such as the one adopted in South Wales with the support of Welsh Women's Aid and other partner agencies, have also been successful in tackling preventing victimisation and providing wraparound support.

There are also support services in place through helplines such as those run by Rape Crisis and the Revenge Porn Helpline. We know that these vital services play a key role in helping people going through traumatic experiences. Their work can also help highlight, through increased call volumes/contacts, when spikes in demand are taking place and therefore when the impact of the crime on society is at its highest.

Using the evidence

The evidence gathered through this exercise will inform the content, actions and overall direction of a new Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy to run from 2021 to 2024 covering the length of this Parliament. This Strategy will define the government's ambitious vision for continuing its fight to tackle abuse and violence against women and girls.

In order to make the Strategy as effective as it can be, we want to gather a wide range of information. We are keen to hear from people who work on violence against women and girls or violence against women and girls-related crimes, including domestic abuse, and encourage organisations with a wealth of experience and expertise to provide detailed information on the issues experienced by the public.

We also want to hear first-hand from victims/survivors and those directly or indirectly affected by violence against women and girls. We recognise that all people who suffer as a result of violence against women and girls come from unique circumstances and have unique characteristics that can impact on their experience. This includes age, ethnicity, religious and disability factors which can shape someone's experience of harm and access to support services. We want our new Strategy to reflect these diverse experiences and to address their differing needs.

Our approach

We propose to adopt a 2 strand approach to allow a detailed but structured discussion to tackle certain key themes such as the reduction in the incidence and severity of violence against women and girls through preventative and supportive measure; improving outcomes for victims/survivors through better handling of these crimes in the criminal justice system; and identifying new and emerging forms of violence against women and girls so that they can be adequately tackled.

The first strand will include direct engagement with victims and survivors and with the general public. As a part of our second strand, we are keen to hear from are those who represent victims, those who help deal with perpetrators, and others with an overview of violence against women and girls issues. We will also be holding in-depth focus groups and inviting members of the voluntary sector, academics and experts in the field of violence against women and girls and public bodies. Combined, these 2 approaches would provide a rich tapestry of data and ideas from which to draw conclusions and actions to meet the success measures.

A 10 week engagement with the public will help us to get a clearer sense of how those crimes are evolving, get to the bottom of underreported crimes, ensure our response keeps pace with technology, and connect with the victim experience.

First strand – first-hand data

The focus of this part of the call for evidence aims to engage directly with members of the public to understand what works well and we can do better. By using a range of approaches to publicise our call for evidence, we want to reach out and gather evidence from the wider public, include people who do not normally engage with government consultations. We are particularly keen to hear from people who may feel underrepresented in previous strategies or who feel their circumstances were not supported by existing services. The surveys are open to those aged 16 and above, though the wider process will provide opportunities to ensure that the broader experiences of children and young people are considered.

Areas covered in the public survey

In order to effectively prevent, identify and tackle violence against women and girls, it is vital that our ongoing work in this area is influenced by the views of the public. An online questionnaire component of the call for evidence will aim to capture the voice of the public and how they feel about these crimes.

Violence Against Women and Girls and the harm it causes to society

We recognise that there are identified forms of violence against women and girls that have affected many people from a variety of backgrounds. However, we would like to understand more about these crimes so we can better understand the true picture in society.

We would like responses to the call for evidence to outline some of the crime types that respondents believe come under the term 'violence against women and girls', and to describe the harms that they cause to victims and society. We would also like to understand the public's views on whether these crimes are increasing in incidence (individually or as a whole) and which groups are most affected by them.

Direct experiences of Violence Against Women and Girls

Each person who is affected by violence against women and girls has a unique experience that we can learn from, through examples of good practice that have helped people through their trauma or, sadly, where support was not as good as it should have been.

We are seeking the views of victims and survivors directly as part of this call for evidence, through a survey which we will distribute via specialist support services. These organisations will be able to provide direct support to those responding.

Victims and survivors are also welcome to complete the public survey, should they feel comfortable doing so.

Evolving and emerging Violence Against Women and Girls crimes

We would like responses to the call for evidence to identify evolving and emerging forms of violence against women and girls crimes. This will enable us to consider the public's views on what our respondents believe are emerging and evolving violence against women and girls crimes and enable us to consider the implications to inform the development of the new Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy.

Male victims

Despite the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy capturing all victims, the Male Victim Position Statement, published in 2019, was needed to explore the particular challenges and barriers male victims experience to seeking support, and points to resources which are useful for local commissioners, while maintaining that violence against women and girls is a disproportionately gendered crime.

It is in our commitment to male victims of these crimes that we would like responses to the call for evidence to better consider how these crimes affect male victims. Only by understanding the key issues can we truly reflect the experiences of male victims in the in the new Strategy, which will consider the approach, treatment and support that this group needs.

Second strand – strategic data

Our second strand will be to gather strategic information through submissions and focus groups from academics and experts in this area and those exploring emerging and evolving violence against women and girls crimes.

Our focus groups will include (but are not limited to) the following areas:

- perpetrators and offender management
- rape and sexual violence
- stalking and harassment (including public and workplace harassment)
- migrant victims and international obligations
- so-called 'honour-based' abuse, forced marriage and female genital mutilation
- LGBTQ+ victims/survivors
- Black and Minority Ethnic victims/ survivors
- Deaf & Disabled victims/survivors
- male victims/survivors
- online harms and technology-enabled abuse
- children and adolescents
- extreme sexism
- duty of care: employers and education
- prostitution and sex work, commercial exploitation, trafficking and modern slavery
- economic abuse
- multi-agency working
- criminal justice system
- mental health (including suicide and self-harm)
- local commissioning - National Statement of Expectations

Written submissions

We will be engaging with specialist organisations who have a wealth of experience and understanding. This valuable source of information will be considered pivotal in collecting the sector's views about violence against women and girls to help us write the new Strategy.

We also welcome submissions from academics and others who have interest and expertise in violence against women and girls. Written submissions can include the contribution of published data, research, and other reports of relevance to violence against women and girls.

To assist our understanding of the scope of crimes that should be classified as violence against women and girls, we will be inviting the sector to engage in this call for evidence to provide further information on more established crimes alongside new data on evolving and newly emerging forms of violence against women and girls. We will take into account any crime type that disproportionately affects women and girls, alongside specifically looking at rape, sexual assault, stalking, domestic abuse, forced marriage, so called 'honour-based' abuse, sharing of personal intimate images without consent, cyber-flashing, female genital mutilation, sexual harassment, online harassment and others.

We are looking for submissions to cover the scope, scale and prevalence, where possible, of these crimes. Demonstrating as clearly as possible how big a problem each violence against women and girls crime type is, or how pervasive these crimes are across society and whether there are particular groups more deeply affected. We are also interested in information on the spectrum of crime types that affect particular groups, including those with specific vulnerabilities.

Information on activity to aid prevention is also important, helping define ways the new Strategy will stop people becoming victims in the first place. Responses that provide examples of successful prevention programmes and ideas of how they could be expanded will help us to shape further actions by government to reduce harm.

Linked to prevention, and equally important in preventing crimes would be any evidence experts, organisations and charities can provide on perpetrators. The new Strategy will include work around perpetrators, and it is important we gather as much evidence as we can on both who commits these crimes and what works to help them stop. No Strategy can be considered a success unless it delivers for victims, so we would like submissions of evidence to clearly lay out services and support for victims by those involved in this work or with expert knowledge of it. Highlighting best practice here alongside prevention programmes, could open up opportunities for expansion. Identifying areas where service provision is inadequate or even absent will help to identify specific workstreams for

improvement.

Similarly, submissions covering the criminal justice and other system response to violence against women and girls crimes would also be welcomed. We know that though improvements have been made in many areas, there is still much that can be done to improve the victim experience and to ensure the punishment fits the crime and the harms to victims and their families are reduced, in particular with regard to repeat offending.

We would also be keen to understand any other key violence against women and girls issues which you would like considered for the Strategy. This could include information on interactions with other areas of crime or areas where you see violence against women and girls crimes emerging in the future. We therefore invite written submissions to cover these 6 areas.

How to respond

The easiest way to respond and ensure that your individual views are taken into account is to respond to the online survey available for the general public.

We also welcome submissions from academics and others who have interest and expertise in violence against women and girls. Written submissions can include the contribution of published data, research, and other reports of relevance to violence against women and girls.

Written submissions can be sent to VAWGStrategy2021@homeoffice.gov.uk.

If you or the people you are assisting cannot complete an online survey or would like a more accessible version, or another language, additional versions of the survey are available. Please contact the team via the email address above or via post at:

> Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy Consultation 2020
> Home Office
> Interpersonal Abuse Unit
> Violence Against Women and Girls Team
> 5th Floor, Fry Building
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