

We need an integrated approach to ending violence

Somali Cerise and Holly Dustin argue that a criminal justice focus detracts from prevention and support.

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is more prevalent amongst women in England than stroke, diabetes and heart disease. Each year up to 3 million women across the UK experience rape, domestic violence, forced marriage, stalking, sexual exploitation and trafficking, female genital mutilation, or so-called honour violence (Coy et al., 2008). On average in England in Wales, two women a week are killed by current or former partners, 60,000 women are raped and 66,000 women are living with the consequences of FGM (ibid.; Home Office, 2009). Overwhelmingly, the perpetrators of VAWG are male. This violence bears significant costs – for the individual, for public services, for society and for the economy.

Policy responses to violence against women have historically been prosecution-focused, with efforts centred on mopping up the aftermath of VAWG through the criminal justice system. Yet, VAWG is chronically under-reported and successful prosecutions and convictions are rare. Approximately 90 per cent of rape victims do not report the crime to the police and only 6 per cent of reported rape in England and Wales results in a conviction (Coy et al., 2008). Strong government focus on the criminal justice system has meant that the provision of adequate specialist support services in the community, particularly to those who do not report violence, and prevention programmes have been severely neglected. This is not to say that holding perpetrators to account in

the criminal justice system is not important. On the contrary, addressing the virtual culture of impunity that exists, owing to low reporting and conviction rates, is critical for delivering justice for victims and setting social norms where VAWG is clearly understood as unacceptable under all circumstances. However, increasing prosecutions must not be the sole driver of policy.

Lack of gendered approach

A large part of the problem has been the absence of a gendered perspective from policy responses that understands violence against women and girls as a cause and consequence of gender inequality. Instead, policy responses have historically understood VAWG as individual problems or, in the case of specific forms of violence such as forced marriage, problems associated with particular communities or cultures. Incidents of violence are too often seen as the actions of individual ‘psychopaths’, or the result of domestic arguments or bad choice of spouse. In many cases, it is deemed the fault of the woman herself – what she was wearing, what she was doing or how much alcohol she had consumed. Men’s violence against women is often attributed to abusive childhoods or socio-economic disadvantage. Such views of VAWG fail to pay attention to the broader social context in which VAWG is perpetrated. Societal structures that devalue women and reinforce male power, social norms which dictate rigid gender stereotypes, myths that justify violence, and peer

approval of violence in our day-to-day environments – these are all common factors underlying different forms of VAWG. There is evidence that poverty and childhood violence can be factors in the perpetration of violence. However, these factors alone are not the root causes of violence. Violence happens because of the underlying inequalities in society between men and women, the lower value placed on women’s and girl’s lives and the discriminatory attitudes that determine how women, girls, men and boys should behave. Women’s economic inequality, which is even greater for marginalised groups of women such as Black and Minority Ethnic women, increases vulnerability to and creates barriers from escaping violence and sexual exploitation. As such, a gendered understanding of violence is critical for policy responses.

The End Violence Against Women (EVAW) coalition assessed each government department on their response to VAWG, and demonstrated every public policy area that is relevant for VAWG. For instance, women’s safety is an issue for transport providers and the consequences of VAWG for productivity are a matter for employment policy. In recognition of these connections, the EVAW coalition has long campaigned for a cross-government and integrated strategy with every department and public body playing its part in the response to VAWG. Violence against women and girls poses a complex policy challenge that requires a shift away from silo thinking that starts with the vision of ending violence against women and girls. In 2009, women’s organisations largely welcomed the then Labour government’s cross-governmental strategy. This represented a major step forward as the strategy made connections between different forms of violence. Furthermore VAWG was recognised as a cause and consequence of gender inequality and emphasis was placed on services for victims and a vision for preventing violence. This was followed by the Coalition government’s VAWG strategy in November 2010.

A postcode lottery

In March 2011, the Coalition released their cross-government Action Plan on VAWG (HM Government, 2011). This document contained a number of positive elements, including funding for Rape Crisis Centres following decades of under-investment, a commitment to ensure that women who are on spousal visas in an abusive relationship are supported and plans for campaigns to tackle teenage relationship abuse. However, despite these positive steps, there remain significant gaps. Even though schools are a key site to foster positive attitudes towards equal and respectful relationships, the Department for Education continues to significantly lag behind other key departments with a weak and minimal response. Furthermore, the Coalition's strategy lacks an overall framework to measure and monitor progress on the basis that local authorities and public bodies should set their own priorities and targets. However, evidence from research into VAWG services shows that, if there are no national mechanisms for ensuring local services and policies are developed, the outcome for women is a postcode lottery. This is particularly problematic given the shift towards localism, which will place an additional burden on VAWG organisations to monitor and hold public bodies to account when they are already chronically under-resourced and facing further funding cuts.

If we are to truly end violence against women and girls, there is much more to be done to prevent violence from happening in the first place. In addition to the imperative of ensuring women's safety and well-being, there is an indisputable business case. It is estimated that violence against women costs society £40 billion each year (Järvinen et al., 2008). The total for domestic violence alone in England and Wales in one year is £20 billion. This includes health and social services costs of £1.6 billion, criminal justice costs of £1.2 billion, lost economic output costs of £2.3 billion and human and emotional costs of £15 billion. The cost of

sexual violence (separate to domestic violence) in a year is estimated to be £20.9 billion (ibid.). Women and girls who experience violence endure significant physical, emotional, health, financial and social consequences. There is also evidence that women offenders are much more likely than men to be victims of domestic and sexual violence, and their experience of violence both in childhood and as adults is a key risk factor for their offending (Ministry of Justice, 2009). There is no doubt that the benefits of preventing violence in the first place will far outweigh the costs.

Normalise

A major obstacle that stands in the way of preventing VAWG is the deeply held belief that violence is somehow inevitable or that some men will always be perpetrators. These beliefs are further compounded by widespread attitudes that normalise and excuse violence. For example, over one in three people believe that a woman bears some responsibility for being sexually assaulted or raped if she was drunk (Home Office, 2009). These attitudes are fuelled by a growing culture of sexualisation in our media and popular culture. For example, pornography is increasingly accessed by boys at a younger age and studies show a link between tolerance for physical or sexual violence and a repeated exposure to sexualised imagery in media and popular culture (Coy, 2009). By reinforcing the stereotype of women and girls as purely sexual objects and sexually available for men and boys and the stereotype of male sexual 'need' and 'entitlement', sexualisation creates a culture in which VAWG is normalised and justified. Effectively preventing violence against women will require long-term and targeted interventions to tackle the formation of these attitudes.

While the Coalition government has stated a commitment to ending violence against women, the government's proposed actions are piecemeal and short-sighted with poor levels of investment in research and evaluation. Education is a large part of the answer for shifting social

norms for future generations. This includes, for example, the universal provision of proper sex and relationship education that teaches young people about consensual, healthy and equal relationships. Indeed, the prevention of VAWG through education has been widely commended as more cost-effective and successful in the longer term than initiatives that merely punish or dictate behaviour. Education needs to be backed up with long-term public awareness strategies and efforts to mobilise communities to challenge violence to create new social norms of gender equality and women's safety. Above all, there is a need for strong leadership from political leaders, business and the voluntary sector. With targeted and long-term interventions and strong leadership, we can create a safer world for women and girls. ■

Somali Cerise is Prevention Programme Manager and **Holly Dustin** is Director, End Violence against Women Coalition.

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