

Women's Mental Health and Gender Based Violence: A joint session of the Mental Health and Domestic Violence APPGs

Wednesday 6th June, 15:00 – 16:30

Room A, 1 Parliament Street

The joint meeting of the Mental Health and Domestic Violence APPGs sought to better understand the connection between gender-based violence and women's mental health and consider what steps could be taken to improve women's mental wellbeing. It considered upcoming opportunities to influence Mental Health and VAWG policy, including the Domestic Abuse Bill.

The meeting comprised a panel discussion, co-chaired by the Chair of the APPG on Domestic Violence, Jess Phillips MP, and the Chair of the APPG on Mental Health, Helen Whately MP, and invited questions from an audience of parliamentarians, policy makers, and other influencers.

Speakers on the panel:

- Katharine Sacks-Jones, Director of Agenda and Co-Chair of the Women's Mental Health Taskforce
- Victoria Atkins MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Crime, Safeguarding and Vulnerability
- Alison*, expert by lived experience and women's engagement worker at Inspiring Change Manchester
- Sian Hawkins, Head of Campaigns and Public Affairs, Women's Aid
- Jackie Doyle-Price, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Mental Health and Inequalities and Co-Chair of the Women's Mental Health Taskforce

Attendees:

Alex Worrell, Mind
Amabel Scott, Bright Blue
André Tomlin, The Mental Elf
Caroline Heath-Taylor, Office of Fiona Bruce MP
Caron Connolly, Department of Health and Social Care
Charlotte Newman, Lexington Communications
Diane Sempare, Citizen's Advice
Emily Goddard, freelance journalist
Emma Yapp, Kings College London
Baroness Fiona Hodgson
Fiona MacTaggart
Hazel Black, Mind
Baroness Hilary Armstrong
Jennifer Holly, AVA
Laura Furness, Big Lottery Fund
Louise Forsyth, Rethink Mental Illness

Luciana Berger MP
Lydia Stallard, Together UK
Natalie Harrison, Inspiring Change Manchester
Olivia Clarke, Royal College of Psychiatrists
Phillip Constable, Office of Baroness Finlay
Rebecca Oxley, Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government
Richard Kelly, Department for Health and Social Care
Robyn Turnock, Department for Health and Social Care
Ruth Francis, Inspiring Change Manchester
Sarah Champion MP, Domestic Violence APPG member
Sophie Francis-Cansfield, Women's Aid
Vicki Nash, Mind

*Not her real name

Panel discussion

Jess Phillips MP

Jess opened the session, welcoming attendees and introducing the topic of women's mental health and gender based violence. She spoke about the prevalence of severe mental health problems among women who present at refuges, particularly among women who self-harm and have eating disorders, and the lack of specialist support available for women who experience abuse, poor mental health, and other complex needs.

Katharine Sacks-Jones, Director of Agenda and Co-chair of the Women's Mental Health Taskforce

Katharine outlined the rates of mental health problems amongst women, the links between women's mental health and experiences of abuse, and spoke about the experiences of women with more severe mental health problems and complex needs. She detailed the treatment of women in mental health services, citing Agenda research which found restraint against women and girls in mental health settings is widespread, and that most mental health trusts do not have a policy on asking mental health patients about experiences of abuse.

Katharine spoke about Agenda's Women in Mind campaign, which is calling for women and girls to get the support they need when they need it, including calling for trauma informed care in mental health services, the use of routine enquiry into experiences of abuse with routes to proper support where abuse is disclosed, and investment in specialist women's mental health services.

She outlined the work of the Women's Mental Health Taskforce she Co-Chairs with the Minister Jackie Doyle-Price MP, which brings together experts from mental health services, academics, and professionals from the women's sector. The Taskforce will report later in the year. Katharine mentioned upcoming opportunities for improvement, including building on the work of the Taskforce, as well as influencing the Five Year Forward View for Mental Health, the Domestic Abuse Bill and the new VAWG Strategy at the Home Office, and the Mental Health Act Review. She welcomed the commitment of the two APPGs and two Ministers at the meeting, and noted that this was the start of a continuing conversation.

Victoria Atkins MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Crime, Safeguarding and Vulnerability

Minister Victoria Atkins MP welcomed the joint work of the two APPGs on this subject, and stated that she and Minister Jackie Doyle-Price MP would work together around women's mental health. Ms Atkins outlined the work of the Home Office in this area, including the Domestic Abuse Bill. She outlined plans for the draft Bill, including a statutory definition of abuse, a domestic abuse commissioner, and a package of non-legislative measures. She noted that the consultation had received 3,200 responses, with the biggest single group of respondents being survivors of domestic abuse.

The Minister spoke about the introduction and roll out of particular legislation, including the coercive and controlling behaviour legislation, and Clare's Law. She detailed funding streams including the Tampon Tax and the VAWG transformation fund. She outlined the psychological impacts of abuse, including anxiety, depression, and suicide, as well as the impacts on children who witness domestic abuse.

Alison, expert by lived experience and women’s engagement worker at Inspiring Change Manchester

Alison spoke about her experiences of domestic abuse and mental illness as well as other complex needs including homelessness and substance misuse. She spoke about her experiences of engagement with services and what she would like to see change.

Alison went into care at 13 and started self-harming. She experienced her first violent relationship through care, and went on to experience two further violent relationships – after fleeing the third she was left homeless, and was lost in the system. Violence had a significant impact on her mental health: she experienced flashbacks, anxiety and depression, self-harm, and attempted suicide. It was not until she got into trouble, and met a great probation officer, that she was able to get help.

She started volunteering, became a trainee, and now works at Inspiring Change Manchester, where she supports women with similar experiences to hers. She wants to see more support specifically for women, including more women-only hostels, more women-only rehabs, including those that allow women to stay with their children, and Housing First for Women. She wants to see mental health services do proper assessments to find out what underpins a person’s mental ill health.

Sian Hawkins, Head of Campaigns and Public Affairs, Women’s Aid

Sian emphasised the importance of getting the health service response right, highlighting that most women will never report their experiences of abuse to the police, but most will see a health worker at some point. She outlined the findings of Women’s Aid’s Survival and Beyond report, which found that over a third of women in refuges have mental health specific needs. Refuges need to be able to provide specialist support in safe locations, including having 24 hour sleep in staff. She noted that less than a third of refuges employ mental health support workers, and only 20% of domestic abuse services get any funding from local health bodies.

She outlined a project carried out by Women’s Aid and funded by MHCLG to provide casework support to a group of women who are trying to leave a violent relationship, but who face barriers to accessing support. Of the women supported by this project, one quarter had serious mental health issues, and only 28% were able to get into a refuge space. Sian suggested that the new Domestic Abuse Commissioner should review the accessibility of services for particular groups of women – in particular women with mental health problems and complex needs. Sian read testimonies from women with experiences of gaslighting from Women’s Aid’s online peer-to-peer support platform.

Sian spoke about the experiences of children, who are not just witnesses of domestic abuse, but are often trying to manage the behaviour of the perpetrator to protect the victim or survivor. She welcomed the Government’s aim to transform the response to women and children, but emphasised that we need to see more support in this area, particularly in specialist mental health support for children, and in ensuring domestic abuse services can support children.

Jackie Doyle-Price, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Mental Health and Inequalities and Co-Chair of the Women’s Mental Health Taskforce

Minister Jackie Doyle-Price emphasised that services are male dominated, and local authorities tend to cut women’s services first. Ms Doyle-Price outlined the work of the Women’s Mental Health Taskforce at the Department of Health and Social Care, which will adopt principles to ensure better mental health care for women. The Minister stated that we must intervene earlier so that women like Alison access support before they reach crisis. She stated that people are most likely to present to the mental health system, so the NHS is crucial in ensuring effective response.

She noted that we have seen a rise in poor mental health among women, a result of a rise in sexual violence, emphasising the importance of trauma-informed care, and the need to do more to support victims of FGM. The Minister emphasised the role of the NHS as an employer, and the support it could provide to the many NHS workers who will be experiencing domestic abuse.

The Minister emphasised the difficulties posed by siloed policy making, and welcomed the joint work of these two APPGs.

Helen Whately MP, Chair of the Mental Health APPG

Helen Whately closed the panel discussion, thanking speakers and attendees and emphasising that this was a welcome conversation that has not been had before.

She detailed the experiences of her constituent who was on a long waiting list for mental health support after she was raped. She reflected on a visit to a women's prison, where 70% of the women said they had been victims of domestic and sexual abuse – for many of them, prison was the first place they got help. She stated that we must make sure women get support before they enter the criminal justice system.

She opened the floor to questions.

Question and answer session

André Tomlin, the Mental Elf asked a question on behalf of Dr J Watts on twitter, who asked about Borderline Personality Disorder diagnoses, and the links with abuse.

Jess Phillips MP noted the prevalence of BPD diagnoses among women, particularly women in the criminal justice system.

Katharine Sacks-Jones stated that this is an issue the Women's Mental Health Taskforce has come across; BPD can be a very stigmatising and exclusionary diagnosis, and can make it difficult to access services and support. Often women are facing PTSD when they are given the diagnosis.

Jennifer Holly, AVA stated that it is important for the institutions that train the NHS workforce, including psychiatrists, mental health nurses, social workers, to understand trauma and trauma-informed care. Members of the panel agreed.

Caroline Heath-Taylor, the office of Fiona Bruce MP asked about the adverse effects of domestic abuse on children, and whether there were ways of working for example with Childline, to empower children to speak up themselves.

Jess Phillips MP noted that NSPCC run Childline, as well as FGM and sexual exploitation helplines.

Sian Hawkins stated that we need services that wrap around children, and speak to them in a way that would help them come forward. She spoke about Operation Encompass, with which Women's Aid partners, which involves the police informing a child's school following an incident of domestic abuse, and the school are trained to respond.

Jackie Doyle-Price MP gave the example of a school which funded support workers to do 1 on 1 intervention and support.

Helen Whately MP emphasised the opportunity to work on this area through the mental health in schools work as part of the Children and Young People's Mental Health Green Paper.

Jess Phillips MP stated that schools need support and funding to provide this care. They have been affected by cuts. It will cost a lot of money to do this right – but it will cost more if you don't invest.

Jackie Doyle-Price MP noted that we need a skilled workforce to do this work, which takes years to build.

Baroness Hilary Armstrong spoke about the national Commission on Domestic and Sexual Violence and Multiple Disadvantage which she Chairs, and asked if the Minister Jackie Doyle Price MP would be interested in hearing from them. She spoke about the work of Changing Lives, which she Chairs, and their work around Operation Sanctuary, supporting the young women who were sexually exploited as children. She emphasised the importance of building on what we already know, the impact of women's centres, and the value of employing people with lived experiences. She noted that services must respond to what a particular woman needs, and work around that.

Alison stated that having a criminal record makes you afraid to apply for a job or go to an interview. She highlighted the importance of roles like her current job, for which applicants are required to have lived experience.

Vicki Nash, Mind raised the issue of restraint in mental health settings, referencing Agenda's research on restraint against women and girls, and the Mental Health Units (Use of Force) Bill currently going through the Commons, and the need to ensure trauma-informed care is a part of it.

Jackie Doyle-Price MP stated that she is confident that the Bill will do this, but that it does not end there – we must keep working on this.

Katharine Sacks-Jones stated that it has the potential to be a really good piece of legislation that will take into account experiences of trauma. Emphasises that we must look at other opportunities to influence too, such as the Mental Health Act

Jackie Doyle-Price MP also noted the importance of influencing the DOLS legislation, particularly looking at women with learning difficulties.

Jess Phillips MP noted that there's no domestic abuse service for women with a learning difficulty.

André Tomlin, the Mental Elf asked a question from Ian Hamilton on twitter: what practical steps will the APPGs take on this issue and how will we know how you will check back on this?

Helen Whately MP stated that it is important to join these groups together, and to get a combined conversation on this issue

Jess Phillips MP stated that each Chair will ensure they integrate the other issue in their work: they will ensure that all mental health bills that go through Parliament will integrate domestic violence, and that the Domestic Abuse Bill recognises mental health.

Helen Whately MP stated that the schools work from the Children and Young People's Mental Health Green Paper is a specific issue the APPGs can pick up on and influence.

Laura Furness, Big Lottery Fund spoke about the programme she leads looking at what works with people with complex needs, and noted that they're struggling to get people to listen and take on their learning. She asked how she can talk to people who make some of the decisions.

Jess Phillips MP suggested that women like Alison made great advocates to talk to decision makers.

Alison noted that the women she works with listen and trust her because she has lived experience; they will open up more, for example about abuse.

Baroness Hilary Armstrong emphasised the importance of focusing on commissioning. The Big Lottery Fund have a strand focused on commissioners, looking to see how they inform them better about how they commission this work. She spoke about the work of the national Commission on Domestic and Sexual Violence and Multiple Disadvantage, which has a group of peer researchers who have worked on

a report for the commission. They are saying that there needs to be more women with lived experience working in local areas.

Helen Whately MP thanked the audience and the panel, and closed the session.