

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT
GENERAL COMMITTEES

Public Bill Committee

DOMESTIC ABUSE BILL

First Sitting

Thursday 4 June 2020

(Morning)

CONTENTS

Programme motion agreed to.
Written evidence (Reporting to the House) motion agreed to.
Motion to sit in private agreed to.
Examination of witnesses.
Adjourned till this day at Two o'clock.

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the final version of the report should be clearly marked in a copy of the report—not telephoned—and must be received in the Editor’s Room, House of Commons,

not later than

Monday 8 June 2020

© Parliamentary Copyright House of Commons 2020

This publication may be reproduced under the terms of the Open Parliament licence, which is published at www.parliament.uk/site-information/copyright/.

The Committee consisted of the following Members:

Chairs: † MR PETER BONE, MS KAREN BUCK

† Aiken, Nickie (<i>Cities of London and Westminster</i>) (Con)	† Harris, Rebecca (<i>Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty's Treasury</i>)
† Atkins, Victoria (<i>Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department</i>)	† Jardine, Christine (<i>Edinburgh West</i>) (LD)
† Bowie, Andrew (<i>West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine</i>) (Con)	† Jones, Fay (<i>Brecon and Radnorshire</i>) (Con)
† Chalk, Alex (<i>Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice</i>)	† Kyle, Peter (<i>Hove</i>) (Lab)
Coyle, Neil (<i>Bermondsey and Old Southwark</i>) (Lab)	† Marson, Julie (<i>Hertford and Stortford</i>) (Con)
† Crosbie, Virginia (<i>Ynys Môn</i>) (Con)	† Phillips, Jess (<i>Birmingham, Yardley</i>) (Lab)
† Davies-Jones, Alex (<i>Pontypridd</i>) (Lab)	† Saville Roberts, Liz (<i>Dwyfor Meirionnydd</i>) (PC)
† Gibson, Peter (<i>Darlington</i>) (Con)	† Twist, Liz (<i>Blaydon</i>) (Lab)
	† Wood, Mike (<i>Dudley South</i>) (Con)
	Jo Dodd, Kevin Maddison, <i>Committee Clerks</i>
	† attended the Committee

Witnesses

Nicole Jacobs, Designate Domestic Abuse Commissioner

Pragna Patel, Director, Southall Black Sisters

Public Bill Committee

Thursday 4 June 2020

(Morning)

[MR PETER BONE *in the Chair*]

Domestic Abuse Bill

11.30 am

The Chair: Before we begin, I have a few points that we always make. First, please put your devices on silent. Secondly—a rule that I never understand—you cannot have tea or coffee in here, on the grounds that they are supposed to be hot drinks. I would argue that it will have gone cold, but you still cannot have it. Obviously, I stress the importance of social distancing in the Committee Room. If at any time you feel that the social distancing is incorrect, let me know and we will take action.

We have a problem in that every member of the Committee cannot sit round the horseshoe, so some are having to sit in the Public Gallery. I would have liked Members in the Public Gallery to have been able to speak, but unfortunately, because of the recordings that we need to make for *Hansard*, that is not possible. I tried to put a Member where the hon. Member for Edinburgh West is sitting, but you will have to move, because I have been told that you cannot go there. You are too close to the Member in front.

If a member of the Committee wants to speak, they will have to come into the horseshoe and somebody from the horseshoe will have to step back. That is not ideal, because we are moving around, but trust me, before we started, we tried every form of social distancing to get it to work. If you want to know what social distancing looks like, I am exactly the right height. If you imagine me flat on the floor, you have to walk round me.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): You will be flat on the floor, if the Government have anything to do with it.

The Chair: I will not be heckled—this is the easy bit.

Hansard has asked for you to email your written notes or speeches, because obviously these are not normal circumstances, to hansardnotes@parliament.uk.

Today we will first consider the programme motion on the amendment paper. We will then consider a motion to enable the reporting of written evidence for publication and a motion to allow us to deliberate in private about our questions before the oral evidence session. In view of the limited time available, I hope that we can take these matters without much debate. I call the Minister to move the programme motion that was agreed by the Programming Sub-Committee on Tuesday.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): I beg to move,

That—

(1) the Committee shall (in addition to its first meeting at 11.30 am on Thursday 4 June) meet—

- (a) at 2.00 pm on Thursday 4 June;
- (b) at 9.25 am and 2.00 pm on Tuesday 9 June;
- (c) at 9.25 am and 2.00 pm on Wednesday 10 June;

(d) at 11.30 am and 2.00 pm on Thursday 11 June;

(e) at 9.25 am and 2.00 pm on Tuesday 16 June;

(f) at 9.25 am and 2.00 pm on Wednesday 17 June;

(2) the Committee shall hear oral evidence in accordance with the following Table:

TABLE

<i>Date</i>	<i>Time</i>	<i>Witness</i>
Thursday 4 June	Until no later than 12.30 pm	Nicole Jacobs, Designate Domestic Abuse Commissioner
Thursday 4 June	Until no later than 1.00 pm	Southall Black Sisters
Thursday 4 June	Until no later than 2.15 pm	Latin American Women's Rights Service
Thursday 4 June	Until no later than 2.45 pm	Somiya Basar; Saliha Rashid
Thursday 4 June	Until no later than 3.15 pm	Women's Aid Federation of England; End Violence Against Women Coalition
Thursday 4 June	Until no later than 3.45 pm	Refuge; SafeLives
Thursday 4 June	Until no later than 4.15 pm	Hestia; Gisela Valle, Step Up Migrant Women UK
Thursday 4 June	Until no later than 4.30 pm	Dame Vera Baird QC, Commissioner for Victims and Witnesses
Thursday 4 June	Until no later than 5.00 pm	Local Government Association; Welsh Women's Aid

(3) proceedings on consideration of the Bill in Committee shall be taken in the following order: Clauses 1 to 37; Schedule 1; Clauses 38 to 62; Schedule 2; Clauses 63 to 73; new Clauses; new Schedules; remaining proceedings on the Bill;

(4) the proceedings on the Bill shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at 5.00 pm on Thursday 25 June.

I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone, alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham, the co-Minister for this important piece of legislation. We want to get on and hear the evidence from our commissioner, the first witness, so I will be brief. The motion provides the Committee with sufficient time to scrutinise this landmark Bill. I welcome the fact that it will enable us to hear evidence from 14 witnesses, including survivors of domestic abuse, so I invite the Committee to agree it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That, subject to the discretion of the Chair, any written evidence received by the Committee shall be reported to the House for publication.—(*Victoria Atkins.*)

The Chair: Copies of written evidence that the Committee receives will be made available in the Committee Room.

Resolved,

That, at this and any subsequent meeting at which oral evidence is to be heard, the Committee shall sit in private until the witnesses are admitted.—(*Victoria Atkins.*)

11.35 am

The Committee deliberated in private.

Examination of Witness

Nicole Jacobs gave evidence.

11.44 am

The Chair: We will now hear oral evidence from the designate domestic abuse commissioner. Thank you very much for coming today.

Before calling the first Member to ask a question, I remind all Members that questions should be limited to matters within the scope of the Bill, and we must stick to the timings in the programme order. The Committee has agreed that, for this session, we have until 12.30 pm.

What I am going to say now is about social distancing. If anyone in the room feels uncomfortable about social distancing, we will deal with it. Please do not hesitate to say if you are worried. I would be most grateful if our witness can speak into the microphone, because although this is one of the modern rooms of the Palace of Westminster, it has the worst acoustics. We have an additional problem, which is that we cannot get all Members around the horseshoe, so, exceptionally, Members are going to speak from behind. Will the witness not look behind when answering, because we lose the sound? If possible, when you are answering a question from behind, could you frame your answer in reply to the question? That way, *Hansard* will pick up the question as well. This is the first time we have done this, and we are trying to do the best we can.

Could you introduce yourself?

Nicole Jacobs: My name is Nicole Jacobs, and I am the designate domestic abuse commissioner for England and Wales. Just as a short introduction, I was appointed in late September, after having worked for more than 20 years in domestic abuse services, some in the United States but mostly in the UK in various organisations—most recently, an organisation called Standing Together Against Domestic Violence, which is based in west London.

The Chair: Before I call the first Member, Jess Phillips, to ask a question, I remind the witness that this is the only time that Ministers have fun in the whole of this process. They get to ask questions too.

Q1 Jess Phillips: Hello, Nicole, and welcome to our slightly weird distanced Committee. Some of my other colleagues will talk to you specifically about the role, the role of the Bill in creating it and some of those other areas, so I want to ask you more broadly about the Bill.

We keep hearing Ministers say, “We will be asking the commissioner to do a review of this, looking at different ways in which there might be a postcode lottery in the country for this, that and the other,” so that is expected to be part of your role. What do you think the Bill does well for the sustainability of services for victims and perpetrators of domestic abuse, and where do you think the main gaps are?

Nicole Jacobs: Thank you for that. I apologise to anyone who has heard me talk about the Bill before, but I appreciate that some Members are new here. I will say what I have said consistently from the start. I welcome almost all aspects of the Bill. There is nothing in it that I particularly disagree with, and I particularly welcome things such as the statutory definition and the inclusion of financial abuse. There are aspects that could be

improved—I am sure we will talk about them over the hour—but on the whole, I support the key elements. I particularly support the inclusion of the statutory duty for accommodation-based services, because that has been such a vulnerable aspect of our services over many years.

What I have always thought is missing from the Bill and would greatly support the services sector is the inclusion of community-based services in the statutory duty. Everything I do as the commissioner in thinking about the monitoring and oversight of services—not just specialist services, but the breadth of what we expect of all our community-based statutory services—would be supported if there were greater inclusion in the Bill of the duty for community-based services. They are providing 70% of our services, and they are as vulnerable as refugees have been for years.

I am sure that I will talk about some of my mapping. Part of the reason why I am mapping services is to look at that postcode lottery. The reason why that gets a bit complicated is that all services, no matter where they are, will be cobbling together funding from all manner of places—the local authority, the police and crime commissioner, foundations and trusts, local fundraising and their own fee earning—and they will be doing that to cover the basic crisis response. There are very few places anywhere that would have the breadth of response that we would love to see, in terms of prevention, early crisis intervention, follow-up support and therapeutic support, which we know are really needed. The Bill is missing that element, which is a particularly strong one, and we have many people who have no recourse to public funds, which means there are many barriers to support.

Q2 Jess Phillips: I just want to pick up on that issue of the postcode lottery, which is potentially not harmed in the Bill but is not catered for in the Bill. In a situation where a child is a victim of domestic abuse directly or lives every day with their mother being raped, beaten and abused in front of them, are you confident that, if the child were to come forward, there would be specialist support—or any support—for that child, no matter where they stood up in the country?

Nicole Jacobs: No, I would not be confident of that. I did not mention that in my opening comments, but unless they met a particular threshold for children’s social care—most of the public would think children experiencing domestic abuse would meet such thresholds, but they often do not. Even if they did, there would be a lot of variance within our statutory provision of children’s safeguarding from area to area, let alone anything that is specifically commissioned to address domestic abuse. Children’s services, and services that help perpetrators to change, are probably the biggest areas where there are gaps in our system.

Q3 Jess Phillips: In the follow-up to the Joint Committee on the previous Bill in a previous Parliament—it looks pretty similar to this Bill in this Parliament, so we will assume it is the one for this Bill—the Government came back and said they felt that, in the wider context of abusive behaviour towards a victim under the age of 16, it would be deemed child abuse and the extra support would come through social services. Is that a picture of our country that you recognise?

Nicole Jacobs: No. Before the lockdown, I started to visit some areas that our chief social worker had told me were particularly outstanding in children's social care. She would think it is broader than this, but she suggested a handful of places for me to visit. In the places I started to visit, I was, like she thought I might be, quite impressed by the provision of services within social care. I was seeing something that I had never seen before: a point of contact for the abusing parent, for the adult victim and for the child. I had actually not seen that before in 20 years of working, and I have not only worked in west London; I have worked in organisations that are much broader. I was really inspired by that, but I recognised something that I thought was fairly unusual. I think what you said is true.

Q4 Jess Phillips: On the gaps that you alluded to with regard to migrant women, migrant victims and migrant children, and to British children who are the children of migrant victims, you said that the Bill did not currently do enough to help them. Could you please expand on that?

Nicole Jacobs: That is right. Having been there myself, I have experienced the feeling of having someone in my office on a Friday afternoon who has three children, has no recourse to public funds and is too scared to go home, knowing that I could do very little and that I had a long night ahead of me. I understand how that feels.

That is happening every day, all the time, and I do not see anything in this Bill that would address that. I am a firm believer that we should lift the requirement that people have no recourse to public funds. It makes no sense. If you are experiencing domestic abuse, and you are here in our country, then you should have recourse to routes to safety.

Those are the people who actually got to me. I was sitting in an office that was within a broader larger charity, and it was probably lucky that those people got to me. Many migrant women will have fears about the system and about the repercussions of coming forward. They will be highly dependent on word-of-mouth networks and much smaller community-based services.

Q5 Jess Phillips: I wanted to clarify that the women—I am assuming they were largely women—who you talk about that came to you, and the people I am talking about, are here in this country completely legally.

Nicole Jacobs: That is right. They did not have a status that would allow them to have recourse to the funds. It is true that that did not mean they could not come to see me in a community-based service, but it meant my hands were tied and I had very few options. I would hope for a possible night in a hostel somewhere, but I would know that we would be back to square one the next day. That would happen over and over again, until, quite rarely, we would find somewhere more suitable. I might have been ringing around the few refuge spaces that were possibly available. The next witness will give you much more detail about that.

Q6 Jess Phillips: Absolutely. I want to finish by talking about the gap you identified around perpetrator services. The Bill has wide-ranging changes with regard to domestic violence protection orders and other such issues. Is there a particular area of the Bill that you think needs to be more robust about how we manage the postcode lottery of perpetrator services?

Nicole Jacobs: It could potentially be addressed in a statutory duty that was broadened in the clauses about domestic abuse protection orders. I leave that up to you to decide. In my years of experience working in the sector we have had huge changes in terms of innovation. It is an exciting time to think about the broad strategy that we need for perpetrators to help them change and for early intervention, all the way through to much more punitive measures. There are a lot of pilots, a lot of evaluation and practice.

We are in a better place than ever, but I am concerned about the DAPO and the positive requirements on it. You will not be able to place the positive requirement if there is not a service in the area that meets proper standards, as it is fairly unusual to find an area that would have that breadth of services.

Q7 Jess Phillips: Would it be pointless to have a Bill that makes ways for domestic abuse protection orders to exist if, in your local area, there is not a service that would be accredited, by some standard that does not currently exist?

Nicole Jacobs: I have always understood that the DAPO is in the Bill to pave the way, through its two-year piloting. There is no doubt that it will prompt many questions: the implementation, the way we should be working together, the thought we need to give to how victims and survivors are communicated with in courts, and any number of other things.

Because I am an optimistic person, I always thought that while things are not covered off completely—there is a huge gap with the idea of the perpetrator and where all the constant requirements are coming from—the general strategy is for people to learn in the process of the DAPO. I guess my plea is for you to strength the evaluation of that pilot any way you can in the Bill. It needs to be implemented and resourced properly, including the voice of victims, and my other plea would be for the Victims' Commissioner and I to be included in the learning for the DAPOs.

Q8 Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I want to comment on a few things that you said in response to Jess's questions. A lot of the things you are saying about the DAPOs will obviously come into the statutory guidance. It is important to remember that there are things in the Bill, but the statutory guidance will be the backup, and I suspect a lot of your concerns will be addressed by that guidance. When you talk about community-based services, are you talking about the charitable sector—the third sector—or are you talking about local government? In local government, there is an ability to offer a lot of domestic abuse services, but some councils do not choose to. What is your definition of community-based services?

Nicole Jacobs: In general, I am talking about the ones that are commissioned for domestic abuse services, usually—although not solely—by the local authority. Sometimes those are outreach workers or independent domestic violence advocates; at one point, I was one of those. All aspects of the local authority are highly dependent on those services—housing officers, social workers, teachers—and a whole breadth of referrals come into those types of services. Just to give you an example, in the area of west London where I worked the

year before I took on this role, they had 4,000 referrals of people into those community-based services, so we are talking about quite high volumes of cases. Each worker will be supporting 30 to 40 people at any given time. That is on a rolling basis over the year, so by the end of that year, just that one worker will have probably supported well over 100 people, if not more.

There are a few places where that team will be employed within the local authority, but those are few and far between; the commissioning-out of that service is much more common. I prefer the commissioning-out of the service, because people who experience domestic abuse have such a lot of fears about seeking help because they worry about the consequences. They do not know for definite what the police, particularly, are going to do, or social workers or anyone else, and they really value the independence of that role. It is not that they would never share information: if they have safeguarding concerns, for example, they have a duty to share those, but there is a level of independence that gives them a bit of safe space to think through the complexities of their situation, and it is fairly well evaluated that these are critical services. They are also quite cost-effective. It is incredible what these individual workers will do over the course of the year. If you shifted that into a local authority, they would cost more and the relationship would change, so the case I am making is for us to recognise how critical these services are.

My worry is that if we go ahead with the statutory duty for refuge-based or accommodation-based services, local authorities that are cash-strapped or concerned about budgets will obviously prioritise that duty, and the unintended consequence could be that these community-based services are curtailed or cut. They are not in main budgets, but have to fight year in, year out or in each commissioning cycle, which are relatively short: two years or sometimes three. I worry that because they are not part of a duty, they will be cut or curtailed, when even now they are barely covering the breadth of support that they should. There could be some serious unintended consequences from the implementation of the duty.

If it stays that way, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should include in the current set-up of the statutory duty for accommodation-based services a firm responsibility to understand what the consequences could be for community-based services. In practice, the pattern is that it is hard to see the expansion in these services that you might think there would be, considering the prevalence rates. I think that surprises many people. It might not surprise you, but it does surprise many people when they realise how these services have to survive on a shoestring with such a lot of cobbling together of funding.

The Chair: We will now have Peter Kyle, followed by Virginia Crosbie and Liz Twist. The Ministers have indicated that they want to ask you some questions, but I will try to save them to the end and get the Back Benchers in first.

Q9 Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Bone, and thank you, Nicole, for coming in; we all greatly appreciate it. The issue of domestic abuse has had strong advocates in Parliament for a long time, and it

has had strong advocates in the Home Office, politically and in the civil service, for a long time. Why is it that you need to act independently of these institutions in order to be effective?

Nicole Jacobs: I have developed my views on that over the past few months. Particularly in the past few months, in the period of covid-19, I have realised how much it helps Government to have an independent voice helping and advising and, at the same time, pushing for better, more effective ways of doing things. That does not mean that I have won every battle. It has not really been a battle; it has been very co-operative.

I have realised in recent months how much domestic abuse is an issue that runs through every Department—every strand of Government—and some of my role helps to bring those strands together. I said at the Prime Minister's summit recently that I would love to see a cross-Government action plan. I am now seeing—as you will have recognised before—how much Government Departments in themselves work in silos and how much you need some kind of independent body such as mine. I feel that I have been very helpful, if I can say that.

Q10 Peter Kyle: So independence impacts the way you do your job, but presumably it also impacts the way you are perceived by the people for whom you advocate. Abuse victims and survivors need to see you as fully independent from Government and Parliament.

Nicole Jacobs: Of course, yes. I have been struck, in the time that I have been appointed, by how much it means to people to know that there is an independent Domestic Abuse Commissioner. People have said to me, "I have waited for years for this kind of thing." In fact, I feel like the expectation is so high.

Just before I came here, I had a call from a woman who runs a campaign with hundreds, if not thousands, of people about family courts. She really values the idea that she can call me and talk to me about her worries about the Bill, and know that I can talk to her about that, and that I am not speaking for the Government. Equally, people expect me to co-operate with Government if I can, because they understand that I will have a certain level of access to conversations and influence, and it is important to them to know that is happening.

Q11 Peter Kyle: So if the Home Office was seen to be directive over you, directing your activities, or meddling in the work that you do, would that undermine your credibility in the eyes of victims and survivors?

Nicole Jacobs: Absolutely. First of all, I would not allow that. To some degree, I have to be firm in understanding where the boundaries are. If that was happening, they would probably understand that I would assert that was happening.

Q12 Peter Kyle: But there are certain areas of the Bill where the Home Secretary can direct you. The Home office sets your budget, the Home Office sets the framework that you follow, and the Home Office has the power—or the right—to look at your advice before it is published, and presumably to comment on it. In a productive, functional relationship that is co-operative, which is how you said you want to approach the job, that seems fine. However, should that become dysfunctional at any point, there is the power within the law to be quite assertive over you.

Nicole Jacobs: I suppose I would say to the whole Committee that if there is any way that you feel you could strengthen my independence, I would obviously welcome it, and I think anyone on this Committee should want to welcome that. As you say, it is important to the public and to the Government to know that. It makes the relationship functional. My experience, and the way I have been communicated with by Ministers and civil servants to date, has been entirely within those bounds, which shows me how everyone recognises it has to function—in a healthy, independent state.

Q13 Peter Kyle: That is entirely plausible, because you have here two of the most reasonable Ministers that I could ever imagine. You are very popular. The Joint Committee recommends that you should report to the Cabinet Office, the Home Affairs Committee believes that you should report to Parliament, and the Home Office will not let go of you at any cost, so you are very popular—as an institution and as a commissioner—before you have even been established. Do you have a view on any of those things, or do you believe that it is our business to try to sort that out for you?

Nicole Jacobs: My view of the role is probably more simplistic. Yes, I think it is your responsibility to sort it out. I really believe that. In my view, and with the kinds of rules I play by on this, I will always speak the truth, so far as I understand it, regardless of who I am talking to about it. That is what I have to abide by, and I will expect to be independent. However the logistics are set out, I would really welcome this Committee making sure that they are as independent as possible, without any doubt.

Q14 Peter Kyle: I have one final question—forgive me for hurrying along; we only have a short amount of time to do this—about cross-examination, which is obviously a very important part of the Bill. Do you believe that what is in the Bill achieves the purpose of giving victims and alleged victims of domestic abuse adequate protection against the possibility of continued abuse via direct cross-examination?

Nicole Jacobs: I think it is welcome. I would just take a step back and urge you to consider the kind of evidence that someone would produce in order to allow for that. Most people who are subject to domestic abuse will not always have—there will not be a record in many places, such as with the police, or of a conviction, for that matter, so I would be mindful that you consider how many people could be coming through the court and still be subject to cross-examination if they are not able to “prove” domestic abuse.

I think it points to a larger issue within family courts: because of the way the family courts currently operate, they are not able to understand and differentiate fully the breadth of what has happened, yet they make incredibly life-changing decisions. I would not like someone to make decisions about my children based on very little evidence and a short assessment, but that is what we often ask the family courts to do, in respect of cross-examination or any number of things that will happen. I just worry that we need a much broader ambition for our family courts to really understand exactly the breadth of what is happening, and not confine them to wanting domestic abuse to be proven in a particular way. There are other ways we could find these things out. That would be my higher ambition.

Specifically on the cross-examination, I would like that to be broader. There are studies that show that one in four people responding to the study who were subject to domestic abuse had been cross-examined if they had been in a family court. It is horrific to be cross-examined by someone who you fear, who knows intimate details about you. It puts you in a terrible position, obviously. So I am pleased that this is in the Bill. I think it could be strengthened.

The Chair: Thank you. A number of Members have caught my eye, starting with Virginia Crosbie, then Liz Twist, Alex Davies-Jones, Liz Saville Roberts and Mike Wood, and of course the Minister will want to ask questions. I can see what the problem is going to be: we only have less than 15 minutes. Could we bear that in mind and perhaps have brief questions and answers? It is always a problem in these sessions.

Nicole Jacobs: I will be brief, I promise.

Q15 Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): Thank you for coming in, Nicole. I have two quick questions. You mentioned working with charities, and my question is on collaboration. In terms of working with the third sector, I have Gorwel in my constituency of Ynys Môn, which is a great domestic abuse charity. It has been very helpful in giving me lots of background information and very supportive in the community. How do you as a commissioner see yourself working with the third sector to make sure it has a voice?

Nicole Jacobs: I see it in a lot of different ways, particularly because they are the closest link to the voice of the survivor. Obviously, I want to be influenced directly by people who are subject to domestic abuse, but those services have such a breadth of understanding that my first question is almost always, “What does the frontline service think about this particular thing?” because I know that they will have spotted every advantage and every problem in anything. I would hope that the way I would work with them is quite close—I have been working very closely with them in past months. For example, I have a call every Monday with quite a few of our national helplines and services that represent the sector.

I probably should say the obvious: the idea of the domestic abuse commissioner’s office—not me personally, but the idea of it—will have a massive impact, because it will allow me to go to the local level and help elevate those voices. It will help illustrate more clearly the breadth of funding that needs to go to those services for them to do what they need to do, so that they are not constantly chasing funding deadlines or dealing with shortfalls in their budgets and all those kinds of things. It is also about making sure that they are rightfully where they need to be in strategic conversations at local level, because that has deteriorated quite a bit over time. You have charities that, because they are commissioned by the local authority, are sometimes at a disadvantage when there are challenging discussions to be had. That is because, on the one hand, they are asking for funding and, on the other, they are trying to be a meaningful strategic partner in the whole of the response for an area. I would like to make sure that I have an expectation in areas that would elevate that voice. Those would be my priorities.

Q16 Virginia Crosbie: How do you see your role working with the Welsh Government advisers and the other commissioners—the Victims’ Commissioner and the Children’s Commissioner?

Nicole Jacobs: Again, if anything, covid has accelerated my picture of how I would do that. I speak to the Children’s Commissioner often, and to the Victims’ Commissioner several times a week. I speak to the Welsh national advisers usually once a week, but possibly once every two weeks. We have pretty close working relationships because there is such a lot of join-up about, in recent weeks, the response to covid, but, in general, the breadth of whatever is being implemented or thought about or should be happening. They are pretty close working relationships, and I will develop a memorandum of understanding with all those offices in due course.

Q17 Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I have a few short questions. What is your view on the inclusion of children in the Bill’s definition? Is that desirable?

Nicole Jacobs: Yes, because children are victims of domestic abuse in their own right, so that would seem an obvious thing to want to do.

Q18 Liz Twist: There is a suggestion that that issue would be covered in the guidance. Have you seen the final guidance?

Nicole Jacobs: I have not. I have seen draft guidance. I think it should obviously be in the statutory guidance as well, but there is a strong case that we would want to recognise in the Bill that children are victims of domestic abuse.

Q19 Liz Twist: Finally, on the issue of community-based services, do you think that authorities and organisations will see looking after children in community services as a lesser responsibility if it is not in the definition?

Nicole Jacobs: Yes, I think they would understand that they have a statutory duty on one hand and not on the other. There is already a pattern and practice that is very evident—there is not the commissioning of a whole breadth of services, particularly for children. I do not know why we would think that would improve if we do not make it clear. I think there would be a detrimental effect; I would be afraid of that.

The Chair: I will now call Alex Davies-Jones. She is about to make history, because I do not think we have ever had a Member speak from the Public Gallery before. I hope it is okay under these unusual circumstances. I ask the witness not to turn to face the Member, but to speak into the microphone, and if possible to frame your answer so that we can understand the question as well.

Q20 Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): Thank you, Chair. I am never one for being quiet, so I think my voice will carry. I want to ask about the impact of the coronavirus and whether you think that has any implications. What can we learn from the impact of the pandemic that can help the Bill?

Nicole Jacobs: The question was about the impact of the coronavirus and what we might learn in relation to the Bill. I will answer briefly, but I think if it has taught us anything, it is about the prevalence of domestic

abuse and the need for services. That goes exactly to our argument on broadening the statutory duty. At national helplines, we have seen increases across the board—for male victims, female victims, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender victims, and people who are concerned about their own behaviour. It shows the need for those services—that is where people go to for help, support and advice—and it strengthens our view about the need for the statutory duty. It has certainly, in my mind, shown the need for cross-governmental and much clearer action, planning and strategy. I will do my part and will make sure I play my role in that too. I would have been able to function more easily in the last weeks if there had been that kind of framework and the expectation on Departments.

Q21 Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): One of the things I was very glad happened in the Joint Committee was the recognition of the fact that there is different legislation in Wales. There are also different third-sector organisations and a different arrangement with local authorities. There have been initial steps in your work in relation to the Welsh Government. You have been talking about cross-Government working. How do you see that developing in future? We have this divergence between England and Wales, and yet your role is equally important across both countries. How do you ensure that you are getting a voice back from Wales, to influence you at the heart of what you do?

Nicole Jacobs: To date, there has probably been more influence from Wales for me. I mentioned that Monday call. Welsh Women’s Aid sits on that call and an official from the Welsh Government sits on that call every Monday. They influence what comes out of that call, in what is given in the read-out, which goes to a number of stakeholders. It has helped us develop the obvious areas where we will need to work together—for example, thinking about funding through police and crime commissioners most recently and about what the picture is for Wales and what is happening there. I can see more than ever before where the synergies are. What is yet to be formalised in my mind is the areas where there could be more overlap, potentially, in thinking about mapping—things that, with agreement, it would make more sense to do together rather than separately on issues that are devolved. The working relationship is off to a good start, but I can see a real need for further development as well.

Q22 Liz Saville Roberts: Is there any formal arrangement between you and the Welsh Government to report back on their strategy as well?

Nicole Jacobs: Not yet, no.

The Chair: Thank you. I think Mike Wood has kindly given up his slot because of the time restraints. I have Julie Marson first, then Christine Jardine and then the Minister. It might be an idea to stand up at the back.

Q23 Julie Marson (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): I am interested in your views on the impact of having a statutory definition of domestic abuse for the first time. Also, can you give your views of your relative powers compared with some of the other existing commissioners, such as the Victims’ Commissioner or the Children’s Commissioner?

Nicole Jacobs: We cannot underestimate the need for that statutory definition; if I think that, for years and years, I have been training to what would have been an agreed cross-departmental definition, that is particularly welcome. That will have some effect, without any doubt, on any number of systems and services.

The question was about the importance of having the statutory definition. Like I said earlier, I think it should include children. I really welcome the inclusion of economic abuse. We are seeing, particularly with covid—it is coming up time and time again each week—people needing support for economic-related, financial abuses, and that is increasing quite substantially. It is a really important time to recognise that. One of the things we need in order to do that better would be to amend our coercion and control legislation to include post-separation abuse. That is incredibly important to consider and do.

I also think that the definition could include—you will hear about this from others later today—the idea of having a non-discrimination clause. I know there is a lot of detail to that, but, in some ways, that would help reiterate and underscore some of the points we talked about earlier in relation to migrant women. I would welcome that, and it would be positive.

In relation to the powers of my role in comparison with other commissioners, I think I have said before that the Home Office has looked at various commissioners and has done quite a good job of thinking about what set of powers this office should have. They are relatively strong. The duty to respond to recommendations, and the ability to ask for information and have an expectation for co-operation—all those things compare quite well with other commissioners.

The Chair: I am sorry to interrupt. I am conscious of the lack of time, so I am going to move on to Christine Jardine.

Q24 Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I will be very brief. I want to follow up on the question on Wales. What sort of a relationship are you developing with Scotland, because much of this is devolved there as well? Do you feel there is a need for a formal relationship with the devolved Authorities?

Nicole Jacobs: I have been to Northern Ireland as well, and I have had conversations particularly with Scottish Women's Aid. I was quite interested to understand that some of the funding for Scottish Women's Aid comes as core funding from Government in Scotland, because of the recognition of their expertise and the need to advise Government. I was quite interested to see that that happened. In some ways, Scottish Women's Aid is quite comparable to the way my role is set out in terms of advice to Government and challenge.

I think I will have quite a good working relationship in both Northern Ireland and in Scotland. I would probably welcome any way that you see fit to strengthen that, because, inevitably, there will be learning and crossover. I have talked to Scottish Women's Aid about, for example, the research they do with their counterparts in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, in terms of Women's Aid, the research and the potential synergies with my office. I want to join that up and make sure we are not wasting any time or resource.

The Chair: I will have to apologise to Members who have not been able to get in. You have been an excellent and very clear witness. There are lots more questions,

but I am afraid we are bound by the time limits, so I have to call this session to an end. Thank you very much indeed. We move on to the next session.

Nicole Jacobs: Thank you.

Examination of Witness

Pragna Patel gave evidence.

12.30 pm

Q25 The Chair: We will now hear oral evidence from the Southall Black Sisters. I am very grateful that our witness sat through the first session, so I will not repeat all the information about social distancing and the fact that Members are sitting behind you, as you have heard that. I would be very grateful if you could introduce yourself.

Pragna Patel: My name is Pragna Patel, and I am the director and a founding member of Southall Black Sisters. We were established in 1979 to meet the needs of black and minority ethnic women, certainly in our local area of west London. Although we are based in west London, we now have a national reach.

Most of the women who come to us have been subject to all kinds of gender-related violence and, related to that, issues of homelessness, poverty, trauma, mental illness and, of course, difficulties with immigration matters. We exist as an advice, advocacy and campaigning centre, and have been at the forefront of many campaigns to highlight the needs and experiences of black and minority women in the UK.

Q26 Jess Phillips: Hello, Pragna. Thank you for coming in today in these slightly strange circumstances.

For a number of years, this Bill has been getting to the point where we are sitting here today. Organisations like yours, Southall Black Sisters, are run for and by migrant women and black and minority ethnic women. Could you estimate how many hours you have spent trying to help build the Bill, working with the Government and advocating in meetings in this House? How many hours do you think you have spent asking for things to be in this Bill for migrant women and victims of domestic abuse?

Pragna Patel: During the course of the Bill, I would say hundreds. It has become a core element of our work. The reason why we have put so much time and resources into the Bill is that, like many, we see it as a landmark Bill—a once-in-a-lifetime-opportunity Bill—to try to get things right for abused women. For us, it is vital that it includes protection measures not for some women but for all women, and particularly the women we work with.

Q27 Jess Phillips: Could you briefly, in one line, set out what exactly you—not just you, but organisations like yours and lots of more generic organisations—have been asking to be put in the Bill?

Pragna Patel: There are lots of aspects of it that I could talk about, but the key thing is the inclusion of protection for migrant women, who represent some of the most marginalised, vulnerable, forgotten women in our society. If covid-19 has taught us anything, it is that there are glaring inequalities in our society. If we want to create a new normal, we have to seize opportunities

like this to combat the inequalities that are being shored up, which lead to problems in the long run. We have seen that in relation to the exclusion from the Bill of protection for migrant women.

Q28 Jess Phillips: So after all those hours of work and, I believe, two reviews—please correct me if I am wrong—on migrant women, with one completed and one not completed, do you see any of your work written on the face of the Bill in front of us?

Pragna Patel: I cannot tell you how disappointing and frustrating it is for us to feel that our voices continue to be unheard. It is not my voice, but the voice of those who remain invisible, that I am trying to amplify here. It does not signal confidence that, in the governing structures of this society and in the criminal and civil justice systems, there will be protection afforded to all women who need to engage with statutory, legal and voluntary services to obtain protection and justice. The women I work with are some of the women who suffer the most disproportionately from violence and abuse, who face some of the most prolonged and extreme forms of harm, and who have the least ability to exit from abuse and protect themselves. That is why it is so important that people here today take account of the need to make this Bill the best that it can be, in terms of protecting those who cannot protect themselves. The litmus test of this Bill has to be: are we protecting those who are the most marginalised and the most vulnerable?

Q29 Jess Phillips: Just so that people can hear this, if a victim comes forward who is working in, let us say, a hospital and has no recourse to public funds, would she be able to easily access a refuge bed for her and her children in any local authority area?

Pragna Patel: No way. There is no way. No recourse to public funds prohibits abused women who are subject to it from accessing any kind of support. They basically cannot access the welfare safety net.

Q30 Jess Phillips: Have you ever met any women in that circumstance who have children—let us discount single victims at this point—and who have been told that they would have their children removed from them? Obviously, local authorities have a duty to provide, under section 17 of the Children Act, for every child who comes forward. Have you ever seen circumstances in which women have been told that their children will be removed because the women have been victims of domestic abuse?

Pragna Patel: All the time. One of the areas of work for us has been working with our local authorities to try to encourage them, support them and challenge them to support women and children, because they have safeguarding duties to the children at least, even if women have no recourse to public funds. We are finding that there are two problems to this. The first is that many of these women have insecure immigration status. Immigration and Home Office enforcement officers are now embedded in many social services, which increases the level of fear that women have in even getting out, reporting abuse and seeking help, because they are afraid that data will be shared with the Home Office and that, instead of being offered help, they will be subject to possible deportation. That is the first problem we are facing.

The second problem we face is that, for all sorts of reasons, the local authority response is one of deterrence. It may be because they are cash-strapped; it may be for other reasons. It means that when women go and report domestic violence, particularly if they have no recourse to public funds and have children, there are three or four common responses that we are always met with. One: “We do not have a duty to accommodate you, but we can pay for your return ticket to your country of origin—this is without assessing needs and risks. Two: “We have a duty to your child but not you, and therefore we will accommodate the child and not you.” Three: “The child has not been the subject of abuse, and therefore the child can remain with the abuser.” That way, the safeguarding duties are discharged. Reconciliation and mediation meetings, offering immigration advice when they are not experienced enough to do so, having immigration officers in the building speaking to those women, which drives up their levels of fear, encouraging women to return to their country of origin or sometimes encouraging women to go and obtain asylum even though that is not appropriate, are some of the most common responses that we have received from local authorities, not just in London, but also outside.

We are in the middle of producing research to bring together the evidence around local authority responses. What I would say is that over three months last year—October to December—we had occasion to seek legal advice in 18 cases involving local authority responses, because they were not fulfilling the statutory duty in relation to section 17 of the Children Act and the need to safeguard children.

Q31 Jess Phillips: This is my final question. If it was written into the Bill that victims of domestic abuse who have no recourse to public funds, regardless of their status, were able to access welfare, security and support from any agency, would that save people’s lives?

Pragna Patel: There is no question that introducing such a measure would provide almost certainty, in terms of protection and safety and providing life-saving services and access to justice for many women.

I really want to emphasise the context of this. We have seen with the covid-19 crisis that inequalities that have always existed have been exposed and exacerbated. We have also seen, in relation to what is going on in the US, the racial uprisings, which are also a reflection of historical and glaring inequalities—in both cases, in relation to the protected characteristics of race, age, class, sex and so on. When I say that migrant women are excluded from the Bill, I am also talking about discrimination and inequality.

We have an opportunity to redress that balance and to ensure that those who need protection and justice can get it, regardless of their status, regardless of their background. That is what the Istanbul convention that the Bill is seeking to ratify—it is a step towards that ratification—is hoping to do. If we really mean that, if we really want to change and to combat inequalities and create a new normal, introducing measures that will support the most vulnerable and the most invisible—those who are most likely to be subject to the hostile immigration environment—is critical. I encourage the Committee to really think about the opportunity we have got to signal a new normal.

The Chair: I am going to call the Minister next, and then I will go to Peter Kyle and then Mike Wood.

Q32 Victoria Atkins: Good morning. You agree that the Government need clear data and evidence in order to create meaningful and effective policies to help those incredibly vulnerable women.

Pragna Patel: Absolutely. Of course I do. I think the evidence has been gathered, and it is there; that is my difference with the view that we need to collect more data and evidence. Over the duration of this Bill, there have been various roundtables, ministerial meetings, submissions to the Home Office, internal reviews, submissions to the last call for evidence. In all these ways, evidence has been submitted to show how migrant women, particularly those with no recourse to public funds and on non-spousal visas, are being left behind and left devoid of protection. There is a lot of evidence out there, and it is gathered. Government themselves have funded us, through the tampon tax, to provide that evidence.

Q33 Victoria Atkins: That was my next question: we have asked you to help us with this evidence, haven't we? We have given you £250,000 through the tampon tax fund and a further £1 million to build on that work. Against that background, could you please help us by telling us how many victims you have helped through the tampon tax fund?

Pragna Patel: We produced the findings, which we have also let you have. That is an evaluation of the tampon tax funding for no-recourse women.

Victoria Atkins: How many victims?

Pragna Patel: There are a number of tampon tax funds, but altogether between them, from 2017 to date, we have probably helped in the region of 500 women.

Q34 Victoria Atkins: Is it fair to say that a high proportion of those 500 women were eligible for support under the destitute domestic violence concession?

Pragna Patel: No. We would say that half were and half were not.

Victoria Atkins: So 250 of the 500 were eligible, but 250 were not—

Pragna Patel: Were not eligible.

Q35 Victoria Atkins: Of the 250 who were not eligible, how many of the cases were complex and would have needed more than three months under the DDVC arrangements, and how many times have you asked for the DDVC time limit to be extended?

Pragna Patel: We have asked several times for the time limit to be extended, in recognition of the fact that women who are on non-spousal visas have complex immigration histories, and the evaluation findings suggest that we need a longer period of time to support them in order for them to resolve those immigration difficulties. Up to six months or so would be an average.

Victoria Atkins: Fair enough, but of the 250—

Pragna Patel: Half of them at least, because our evidence shows that about two thirds of the women who come to us and our partner agencies in relation to the no-recourse fund that we provide are women who do not have spousal visas, and therefore need at

least three months, if not longer—up to six months, or sometimes a little more—to resolve their immigration matters.

Q36 Victoria Atkins: Fair enough. How many of the 250 women who were not eligible under DDVC could have sought help from other sources of Government support, including, for example, the national referral mechanism, having been trafficked and—

Pragna Patel: Not many would have sought help through the national referral mechanism, because trafficked women only represented a small proportion of the women who came to us for help.

Q37 Victoria Atkins: I appreciate that incredibly vulnerable victims of human trafficking living in abusive households may not know that the NRM exists, but of course, the role of charities is to signpost them to that system where they get support.

Pragna Patel: Not many of them were what we would classify as trafficked victims. Many of them were women who were in abusive marriages and relationships, whose relationship or marriage broke down due to domestic abuse. It is not an accurate reflection to say that many of those women could have been referred to the national referral mechanism.

Victoria Atkins: I am not saying that; I am just asking for your findings.

Pragna Patel: Perhaps a handful.

Q38 Victoria Atkins: The reason I am asking these questions is to understand the evidence base we have at the moment. We are very grateful for the work you have done, but at the moment, the evidence base consists of a few hundred cases. They are compelling, complex cases, but to create a national policy, would you not agree that we need more evidence to ensure that the policies we are creating will help those women most in need? For example, the three-month DDVC extension may not help some of the women who you have just described.

Pragna Patel: No, we are talking about a six-month period in which the evaluation findings suggest that many of the women could be helped to resolve their immigration matters or be well on their way, and helped to deal with the barriers they need to overcome in order to stand on their own two feet. In terms of the evidence you need, the evidence we have provided is exactly the evidence that you will get if you do another pilot project.

Victoria Atkins: Let's not speculate about the pilot project—

The Chair: Minister, I must apologise, but I can see what will happen if I do not stop you—I will not get the other Back-Bench Members in. This always happens. I apologise to the witness. We could do a two-hour session, but we only have half an hour, so—

Q39 Victoria Atkins: Am I allowed one more question? Do you welcome the pilot project, and the money that we are investing in trying to help?

Pragna Patel: We are worried that the pilot project will delay matters and will delay the needed protection measures, and that it may be followed up by yet more pilot projects. We are worried that the pilot project has been allocated £1.5 million, whereas the tampon tax

that we currently have has allocated £1.9 million. It is only helping 130 women over two years, so we cannot see how the £1.5 million that you have allocated for a pilot project will support many women or will garner the kind of evidence that you will need and that is not already available to you now.

The Chair: Thank you. I am going to change the order slightly, because Mr Wood kindly gave up his slot last time. Mike, I will come to you now, if that is okay.

Q40 Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): I shall be brief, because time is short. Turning specifically to the Bill, what benefits do you see the domestic abuse commissioner being able to deliver for migrant women who are victims of domestic abuse?

Pragna Patel: What benefits in the Bill so far?

Mike Wood: What benefits of the role of the domestic abuse commissioner, as it has been set out in the framework document, do you see being available for migrant victims of domestic abuse?

Pragna Patel: The first thing about the role of the domestic abuse commissioner is that it allows someone independent of Government to amplify the voices of migrant women, and also the BME women's sector, and to help ensure that the kind of demands that we are making are included in any agenda in relation to statutory guidance, on further reforms in law and in relation to the kind of joined-up thinking that the Government need to be doing in order to meet the needs of more women.

The benefit of the role of the domestic abuse commissioner, so far as I can see, will be particularly powerful when it can influence Government Departments to work across government to try to deal with some of the barriers and obstacles that migrant women particularly face, because those barriers are intersectional. They relate to the ways in which the Home Office, the criminal justice system, the family courts and the third sector can all work together and better to provide the support and protection needed.

Q41 Mike Wood: On the statutory definition, do you think that the definition within the legislation is the right one?

Pragna Patel: I think the statutory definition is definitely a step forward. It is a very important definition. I wish it was gendered, because the social reality of domestic abuse is that it disproportionately affects women and girls. As the Bill is intended to mirror the Istanbul convention, it would have made sense to have been a violence against women and girls Bill.

That is not to say that I do not think that other groups face violence, but this is about gender inequality. Domestic abuse is a reflection of the cause and consequence of gender inequality, so it makes more sense to me to include a gendered understanding of domestic abuse for a number of reasons, including for the gathering of evidence to inform future policy and the need to ensure that support and prevention measures are targeted particularly at young girls, so that they can better understand abuse, recognise abuse and negotiate abuse.

The broad categories of abuse that are set out in the definition are very useful, but it would be important to show that there are also specific forms of abuse that are not included, including forced marriage, honour-based violence, female genital mutilation and other forms of cultural harm that straddle these broad categories. They straddle physical violence, sexual violence, emotional abuse and also financial abuse.

I think it can be strengthened. I think the statutory guidance and the explanation of the definition could spell out some of these things better.

Q42 Peter Kyle: Reading your evidence last night, one can sense the weariness of the frequency with which you have had to feed information in for a very long time. This is a fresh opportunity. I am sorry if it feels repetitive to you. There are many of us who are trying to do justice by some of the work and experience you have had.

In your written evidence and in your verbal evidence today you say that the pilot will cover support for about 130 to about 150 women. How many women will be left out from that? How many people are we talking about in general, in total?

Pragna Patel: I wish I could tell you that. I wish I could tell you how many women there are who are subject to abuse in this country and who are subject to no recourse to public funds. Those figures just do not exist, and that is part of the problem. That is part of the problem of why this issue is so invisible.

Some of the ways in which we have tried to gauge is by looking at how many women, for example, have received the DDVC. I think the figure in 2019 was, if I am not mistaken, that about 1,200 were entitled to the DDVC. If we then look at Women's Aid statistics and the statistics that Southall Black Sisters have gathered over the years, which suggest that two-thirds of the women who come to us are not entitled to the DDVC, we get a figure of 3,000-odd women. That is the best estimate I can give you. It probably could be more because of under-reporting, so we are talking about possibly low thousands. That is why it is not beyond our ability to ensure that those women receive the support they need.

There is enough evidence. We do not need another pilot project to assess needs. Those needs have been assessed by my organisation and others over the years. The Home Office internal review has not been published. We would like to see that published. We would like to see what the equality outcome of that has been. That would also help us in terms of understanding where the gaps in the evidence are.

Q43 Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): A few moments ago you said that you wanted a gendered definition of domestic abuse. I completely understand that everybody acknowledges that the overwhelming number of victims of domestic abuse are women and that is tragic. Are you not worried that, in doing that, we would actually overlook and possibly leave behind some male sufferers of domestic abuse?

Pragna Patel: I think it is possible to provide a gendered analysis of domestic abuse while also recognising that there are circumstances in which men also face abuse. I do not think that the two need be mutually

exclusive. I think it is possible for us to draft the Bill in such a way—the way in which we talk about the fact that it applies to many groups in society but the overwhelming victims are women—that it should not necessarily do what you fear might happen. The disadvantage of not making it gendered—I have seen this in our local area and the way in which statistics are gathered and skewed. Let me give you an example, if I may.

When a woman reports domestic abuse and the police turn up at the door, the perpetrator usually makes a counter-allegation and says, “Well, actually, it was her abusing me.” The police feel that they cannot judge who is the victim and who is the perpetrator. What they have done—we have seen this in a number of our cases—is that they either label both as perpetrators or both as victims. There have been circumstances when the victim herself has been labelled the perpetrator and arrested and charged. What that then means is that the statistics gathered locally are skewed, because it suggests that more men are victims of domestic abuse than they are. In all these cases where women have been categorised as perpetrators, by the time they have got to court those

charges have been dropped, because the context has been interrogated and it has been seen that they were the victims.

What I am saying is that that then skews the statistics. It then skews the policies that are needed to deal with abuse and skews policies that are needed to deal particularly with prevention and who the target audiences should be. It is dangerous not to reflect what is a social—and a global—reality and what is recognised in other UN laws, in international human rights law, under the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and in the Istanbul convention itself: that domestic abuse is gendered. It does not mean, therefore, that we cannot accept that abuse also occurs towards men and make sure that there are also protective measures to deal with that.

The Chair: I am afraid we have run out of time. Thank you for being an excellent witness.

1 pm

The Chair adjourned the Committee without Question put (Standing Order No. 88).

Adjourned till this day at Two o'clock.