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Title: Thinking intersectionally in response to the UK government's Violence Against Women and Girls 2021-2024 Strategy consultation

Abstract

In this article, we provide a summary of our review of and response to the UK government's public consultation process on the *2021-2024 Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Strategy*. We focus on issues relating to strategy reform, and implications for research and practice in the VAWG sector. We take up a feminist intersectional lens, through which we argue there are significant methodological, ethical and conceptual limitations to the quantitative survey design used by the consultation document and its content. We highlight the key focus areas of the current 2016-2020 strategy, which is directly incorporated and expanded on in the 2021-2024 Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Strategy, and draw attention to the concerning and problematic assumptions and conceptualisations of violence that underpin the strategy's consultation questions. Our review highlighted that a heavy focus on criminalisation employed by the strategy risks compounding barriers for those seeking support or justice as it does not engage with the lived experiences of those who experience violence, and fails to attend to nuance, relational patterns, and structural systems of oppression. We found that examples of violence in the public survey were underpinned by racist and Islamophobic discourse, constructing particular Othered groups of people as violent by drawing on sensationalised and heavily racialised forms of violence. The consultation document is also methodologically insufficient. More specifically, the quantitative survey design offers no room for nuance or context, it is not survivor-led, and it has concerning ethical implications. In response, we provide recommendations and considerations for future strategy reform, and for those working and researching in the VAWG sector.

Background

This article discusses the UK government's public consultation process on the proposed strategy on Violence and Women and Girls (VAWG) 2021-2024. The consultation consisted of a public survey and a call for evidence, which was initially open for comment from December 10th 2020 until February 19th 2021. It was subsequently reopened for a further two weeks from March 12th 2021. The consultation invited responses from a range of perspectives, including those with 'lived experiences' and 'relevant professionals', such as those working in public health, education, law enforcement and social care. The invitation for responses also called on contributions from academics who have an interest and expertise in VAWG field. As such, members of The Psychology of Women and Equalities Section (POWES) of the British Psychological Society (BPS) were asked by the BPS to produce a response to the consultation. As part of their consultation process, the UK Home Office released a public survey, *"Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy Call for Evidence – Public Survey"*, which was released on the UK government's Consultations website. Its purpose was to gather public views about the government's proposed 2021-2024 Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) strategy. It is important to note that this was the only public-facing component of the consultation in which anybody could volunteer to participate. Though the survey is now closed to responses, a version of the survey can still be viewed (at the time of writing) via a link included at the end of this article. We advise,

however, that the survey contains representations and depictions of violence that may be distressing.

The BPS members who reviewed the consultation are founding members of the Intersectional Violences Research Group (IVRG) which aims to examine all forms of violence through an intersectional lens to promote social change and policy reform. Each member of the IVRG individually reviewed the survey, initially for content, and met to discuss findings. During the meeting and our reviewing process, it became clear that our individual concerns were shared. Our concerns centred around methodological, ethical, and conceptual limitations of the survey's content and design, which were further discussed during this meeting. In this article we discuss these limitations and related issues, in terms of problematic content and flawed methodology along with the implications for the VAWG 2021-2024 strategy. After summarising our response, we outline some of the practice and research-related issues that we identified, and we discuss implications for practice and research. We offer recommendations for strategy reform and for those who work in practice and research in the VAWG field.

The concerns we raise in this article connect to implications for the 2021-2024 VAWG strategy which, at the time of writing this article, is yet to be released. The strategy focuses on the same four areas as the 2016-2020 strategy, which include preventing violence and abuse, Provision of services, Partnership working and Pursuing perpetrators. In this article, these issues will be contextualised within broader issues framing the strategy, which we identified as cause for concern in our review.

Key research and practice issues

This section of the paper focuses on the issues that became most concerning during our discussions, and thus framed our response to the Home Office. These issues relate to the problematic way in which the survey content is heavily centred around criminalisation, and the way that it constructs particular groups of people as violent, through a white supremacist colonial lens which is rooted in racist and Islamophobic assumptions. We then outline our findings regarding the significant methodological flaws of the survey design, which highlight ethical and feminist issues around the erasure of a diverse range of survivor voices.

Criminalisation and sensationalisation of violence

There is a heavy focus on criminalisation in the survey and it emphasises criminal justice approaches to tackling VAWG, rather than recognising the nuanced range of violences experienced by women and girls. While we contend that reform of current responses to VAWG is needed given the low conviction rates for sexual and domestic violence (UK Government, 2021), and ongoing acceptance of sexual violence myths (Burman, 2009; Lazard, 2020), the survey's focus on criminalisation directs attention to extreme and/or sensationalised forms of violence. For example, the survey explicitly offers examples such as rape, physical domestic violence, and forced marriage – examples which we consider to be extreme and 'obvious' forms of violence. This works to direct attention away from everyday and 'grey' forms of violence, which often consist of less extreme and more implicit acts, such as sexualisation and sexist microaggressions which have been highlighted by the #MeToo movement (Lazard, 2020; Turley & Fisher, 2018). It also serves to direct attention

away from gendered and patriarchal structures which characterise and enable non-physical forms of violence, such as coercive control (Myhill, 2017; Walby & Towers, 2017; Stark, 2007). To illustrate this, non-physical forms of domestic abuse, such as coercive control (Stark, 2007) cannot be captured by counting 'incidents' or 'acts', as this form of violence is an ongoing pattern of behaviour that is underpinned by controlling and gendered power dynamics (Burman & Brooks-Hay, 2018a; Stark & Hester, 2019). As such, there is a risk that a reliance on criminal justice approaches for these 'grey areas' of VAWG will be perceived by the public as heavy handed and unnecessary, which has the potential to undermine strategies to tackle VAWG. These forms of violence shape the reality of those who experience VAWG, and a reliance on, or expansion of criminalisation is likely to compound barriers for survivors who experience so called 'grey areas' of violence such as coercive control or violence that might be considered less extreme.

Such complexities around defining sexual violence within criminal justice frames may well entrench long-standing issues that Survivors of VAWG face when seeking support within the justice system. Survivors of more extreme forms of VAWG, have historically served as the cases more likely to both be progressed within and failed by carceral frameworks (MacQueen & Norris, 2016). The ways in which survivors are failed by existing systems is exemplified by the complex set of barriers when seeking resolution via the criminal justice system, if crimes are reported to authorities at all. Epistemological power is of relevance for understanding the persistence of barriers for survivors of VAWG and the ways in which some accounts 'count' and are legitimised (Alcoff, 2018; Herman, 2003; Thompson, 2021). More specifically, In a patriarchal system whereby women's accounts of abuse have been historically, and are continually, more likely to be devalued and disbelieved (Brooks & Burman, 2016; Fricker, 2007; Woodiwiss, 2007), women's accounts hold less epistemological power due to these discourses of 'dis-believability' (Brown & Burman, 1997). This is reflected in long standing police and court procedures from reporting to court cross examination processes (ref?). The devaluation and dis-believability of women's accounts are further exaggerated for those who have experienced less severe, everyday violences, given that less extreme forms of violence, such as coercive control, are rarely reported to the police (MacQueen & Norris, 2016). This point is evidently further compounded by notably low conviction rates (Government, 2021). The legal system privileges 'objective' masculine sources of knowledge (Brown & Burman, 1997; Fricker, 2007), in other words, recognising forms of violence that can be 'measured' and counted while ignoring others (Walby & Towers, 2017; Walby, Towers, & Francis, 2016). This incident-based model however, functions to obscure 'grey' everyday instances and relational dynamics of violence that we highlight, which should be central to Home Office strategies such as this.

While the secondary victimisation of survivors in rape cases has gained some recognition in public arenas, less attention has been given to other particular criminal justice barriers for survivors of other forms of gendered violence. For example, if cases are reported and if they are taken through the criminal justice system, via family courts for example, it is likely that court processes are used by those who perpetrate violence to further enact violence against women and children. One example of this is by perpetrators using post-separation contact with children in order to maintain control and therefore enabling abuse to continue (Morrison, 2015; Thiara & Humphreys, 2017). Given these complexities, expanding

criminalised responses to VAWG is not the most useful approach to take when understanding and addressing VAWG. Legal system processes, such as cross-examination, providing evidence or attending court, should be a process whereby victims/survivors are supported, but many experience this as re-traumatising and harmful (Herman, 2003; Wheatcroft, 2017). Criminalising all forms of violence in this way does not recognise the range of harms that can be caused by systems which are not often established from a perspective of belief or support for victims/survivors.

Furthermore, if cases are reported and *if* they are taken through the justice system, via family courts for example, it is likely that court processes are used by those who perpetrate violence to further enact violence against women and children. One example of this is by perpetrators using post-separation contact with children in order to maintain control and therefore enabling abuse to continue (Morrison, 2015; Thiara & Humphreys, 2017).

Barriers relating to criminalisation also extend to issues surrounding epistemological power, regarding whose accounts 'count' and are legitimised (Alcoff, 2018; Herman, 2003). In a patriarchal system whereby women's accounts of abuse have been historically, and are continually, more likely to be devalued and disbelieved (Brooks & Burman, 2016; Fricker, 2007; Woodiwiss, 2007), women's accounts hold less epistemological power due to these discourses of 'dis-believability' (Brown & Burman, 1997). Framed in this way, expanding criminalised responses to VAWG is not the most useful approach to take when understanding and addressing VAWG. Legal system processes, such as cross-examination, providing evidence or attending court, should be a process whereby victims/survivors are supported, but many experience this as re-traumatising and harmful (Herman, 2003; Wheatcroft, 2017). Criminalising all forms of violence in this way does not recognise the range of harms that can be caused by systems which are not often established from a perspective of belief or support for victims/survivors. This point is evidently further compounded by notably low conviction rates (Government, 2021). The legal system privileges 'objective' masculine sources of knowledge (Brown & Burman, 1997; Fricker, 2007), in other words, recognising forms of violence that can be 'measured' and counted while ignoring others (Walby & Towers, 2017; Walby, Towers, & Francis, 2016). This incident-based model however, functions to obscure 'grey' everyday instances and relational dynamics of violence that we highlight, which should be central to Home Office strategies such as this.

Who is constructed as violent?

In addition to the survey being underpinned by a carceral framework and criminal justice focus of approaching and understanding violence, and the examples of violence given in the survey are sensationalised and often extreme, they also depict violence and 'offenders' in a heavily racialised way. For example, the survey offers examples of domestic and sexual violence that include honour-based abuse, female genital mutilation, and forced marriage. These are instances of violence which depict the 'perpetrator' in heavily racialised and Othered ways. This speaks directly to anti-Muslim and Islamophobic discourse which has operated to racialise crime, and particularly sexual violence, in the UK (Cockbain & Tufail, 2020). As noted by Cockbain & Tufail (2020), this anti-Muslim narrative is not only perpetuated by right-wing media, but has been legitimised and adopted by a wider range of

groups in the UK. Farris (2017) additionally documents how this rhetoric has been taken up in some sectors of feminist discourse. This has enabled Islamophobic discourse to become more mainstreamed, leading to the demonisation of Muslim communities, particularly Muslim men, and therefore further reproducing this racialised discourse. Our review of the strategy highlighted our shared concern about these constructions of racially diverse communities, further highlighting the need for an intersectional lens in this strategy, and more broadly, in tackling and addressing VAWG in the UK.

The need for an intersectional lens in examining service availability and accessibility

The consultation asked respondents to answer questions regarding access to services, and about the support that is available. These questions included:

Q5: 'Do you think it would be easy to get help or support if you, a friend or family suffered from violence against women and girls?'

Q6: 'Do you think there should be more support for women and girls who are victims of violence?'

Q6b: 'If you think there should be more support, what do you think should happen?'

Framing these questions as 'more support', and 'easy' to access over-simplifies what access means and the systems within which services exist. In short, these questions fail to engage with the reality of the current service landscape in the UK. Specifically, the consultation fails to consider the chronic lack of funding for long-term and sustainable services that currently rely on short-term funding and commissioning, which often leaves services giving a 'patchy' response to survivors in a 'variable and highly volatile service landscape' (Action for Children, 2019, p. 7). With the dismantling of the welfare state in the UK, women's services have seen a significant decrease in funding, having a direct impact on the safety of women and girls (Sanders-McDonagh, Neville, & Nolas, 2016). Local authority funding for sexual and domestic violence services in the UK saw a 31% reduction between 2010-2011 and a further decrease from £7.8m to £5.4m between 2011-2012 (Hawkins & Taylor, 2015). As Sanders-McDonagh et al., (2016) argued, 'the lack of services for women involved in, or exiting, a violent relationship can amount to state-sanctioned violence, if funding is withheld or stretched to breaking point' (p. 60).

We raise this as a significant issue of concern because the strategy consultation fails to capture the context in which the domestic and sexual violence sector is operating within. In addition, children's services specifically were not adequately attended to in either the strategy or the strategy consultation. A recent Action for Children report (Action for Children, 2019) concluded that there are significant postcode lottery issues at play in England and Wales, in terms of the accessibility, and even existence of specialist provision of services for children affected by domestic abuse. In four of the 30 local authorities surveyed for this report, there were no specialist children's services for children at all. Only two out of the 30 offered a specialist service for early years children, (children under 5), and in two thirds of the areas surveyed, children's access to service relied upon parental engagement. At the same time as funding decreases and becomes increasingly precarious, referrals to social care for children have increased, and there has been a 26% rise in children being

placed on a child protection plan ¹(Action for Children, 2019, p. 49). This produces a picture that is deeply concerning and requires sustained commitment to attending to the multi-layered issues at play. It is vital that children's needs and experiences are not ignored or considered as an 'add-on' in the strategy reform. We draw attention to existing expert literature in this field (for example see Beetham, Gabriel, & James, 2019; Callaghan, Fellin, & Alexander, 2019; Holt, Overlien, & Devaney, 2017; Katz, 2016; Mullender et al., 2002; Överlien & Hydén, 2009) which the strategy fails to engage with or draw upon.

In an already precariously funded landscape, intersectionality becomes an important lens through which to examine these issues. There are notable disparities within and between urban and rural locations in terms of access to services for families experiencing domestic abuse (Action for Children, 2019), and there is no acknowledgement of these issues in the strategy consultation document. Further, there is no recognition that racism and racialisation becomes implicated in terms of the lack of service access and availability. For example, Sandhu & Stephenson (2015) noted that the impact on public funding cuts in the VAWG sector means that 'BAME² women (are) disproportionately affected' (p. 110) and this has a 'cumulative impact' (p. 110) when accounting for intersections of race *and* gender, in the context of ongoing several funding cuts at once. Additionally, a 2021 Women's Aid Report (Austin, 2021) noted that: 'the women most marginalised by society tend to face the greatest barriers in their search for refuge provision, with intersecting structural inequalities (manifested for example through poor agency responses, immigration rules) impacting on women's ability to access appropriate safety and protection' (p. 10). Women they consulted with reported an average number of 2.5 times they had sought a refuge space, but there being no spaces available, with one woman reporting that there was no space available 27 times (Austin, 2021). The report highlights the structural systems of oppression which often underpin the barriers women face when seeking support or refuge space, including racialised barriers. The report specifically draws attention to 'black and minoritized women' (Austin, 2021, p. 10), and 'women reporting having disabilities' (Austin, 2021, p. 10). Our review of the VAWG strategy consultation argues that the erasure of these issues is extremely concerning and should be centrally featured in the strategy. We urge strategy reform to take seriously and engage with the intersectional issues and interlinked structural systems of oppression that marginalised and Othered women and families face when seeking support and safety from violence.

The focus on heterosexuality

¹ A 'child protection plan' is made by a local council where the outcome of a child protection conference (a meeting between family members and all professionals involved in the child's case) indicates that the child is at risk of suffering serious harm or has suffered serious harm. The child protection plan aims to ensure the child's safety and welfare, to prevent further harm, and to support the family to promote the child's best interests.

² 'Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic' (BAME) is a term that we find problematic as it homogenises a diverse and broad group of people. In the UK, the term 'BAME' is used by the government and widely across the VAWG sector, but it is a white-centric position, which Others those who would be categorised as BAME, often further marginalising them.

It is also necessary to state that the consultation frames violence within a cisheteronormative framework, which routinely excludes people of all genders and sexualities and relationships who do not identify as heterosexual. This needs a more nuanced and attentive framework if VAWG is to be meaningfully addressed on a strategic level. The consultation does not address issues of violence faced by Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer and/or Questioning, Intersex, and Asexual (LGBTQIA+) individuals. Research demonstrates that at least 25% of lesbians, 1 in 3 bisexual people, and up to 80% of trans people are affected by domestic and intimate partner violence. This should be attended to with urgency in the revised strategy (Bolam & Bates, 2016; Galop, n.d.; Whitton, Newcomb, Messinger, Byck, & Mustanski, 2016). National estimates suggest that lesbian women experience a similar prevalence of domestic violence to heterosexual women (Galop, n.d.), however, the heterocentrism present in the previous strategy meant that it did not specifically address violence against the LGBTQIA+ community and how this would be addressed.

LGBTQIA+ victims/survivors face additional barriers in accessing support as a result of their sexuality or gender identity (Galop, n.d.), and Galop report that there are only six specialist voluntary sector victim/survivor support providers, which are all located in large cities in England. There is no service provision in regional or rural areas of England and Wales. The supposed ease of accessing services, as implied by the survey questions, serves to erase LGBTQIA+ people's experience of domestic and intimate partner violence and makes heterocentric assumptions regarding service availability and provision. Given that 60-80% of victim/survivors never report instances of domestic and intimate partner violence, and there are no LGBTQIA+ focused refuge services in England and Wales, these additional barriers in accessing services should be highlighted by the strategy rather than ignored. We suggest that the strategy should reconsider its cisheteronormative framing of violence to explicitly recognise and account for the experiences of LGBTQIA+ victim/survivors, and acknowledge the lack of, and need for specialist service provision.

Victim-blaming

The strategy indicates a commitment to tackling “deep-rooted social norms, attitudes and behaviours that discriminate against and limit women and girls across all communities”. The discriminations referred to in the strategy focus on the ways in which women and girl's bodies are viewed. It should be noted that a body of long-standing research has pointed to how the sexualisation of women and associated objectification has been implicated in the manifestation of sexual and gendered violence and how this is tied to the reduction of women to bodily passivity. As Lynne Segal (1992) has argued objectification produces women as “passive, perpetually desiring bodies—or bits of bodies—eternally available for servicing men”. Objectification and historical social prescriptions around feminine passivity have been implicated in the cultural scaffolding that enables the manifestation of sexual violence (e.g. Gavey, 2018). However, the strategy does not refer to this well-established body of work. Nor does it refer to the ways in which emerging patterns around how the feminine ‘sexy’ body has increasingly infused with notions of women's social power and agency and the ways in which this may impact and shape sexual and gendered violence (e.g. Lazard, 2020). Instead, it presents a plan for “a programme for tackling gender norms by working with partners in the advertising industry around body image and low self-esteem”.

Thus, the strategy appears to focus on women's own view of their bodies rather than how their bodies are socially scrutinised and sexualised, and importantly, how this links to experiences of sexual violence.

By focusing women and girls' own sense of body image, in the absence of a clear theoretical basis for linking it with the manifestation of sexual violence, the strategy not only appears clumsy and confused but also risks secondary victimisation. What is implied by a focus on body image is that there is something detrimental about some women's view of their own bodies which lowers their self-esteem and is somehow relevant to their experiences of sexual and gendered violence. Our review identified problems with the phrasing of this strategy, which risks making unwarranted connections between women's sense of their own body image, self-esteem, and VAWG. Specifically, we note that the strategy could be interpreted as suggesting that women's' and girls' body dissatisfaction plays a key role in and essentially blames women and girls for their victimisation.

Survey Design

Aside from the problematic survey content and associated assumptions outlined above, our review identified numerous issues related to the methodology and survey design used in the consultation process. Regarding this public-facing survey, we argue that the quantitative, internet-mediated survey methodology is inappropriate for a public consultation on VAWG. A quantitative survey design is not appropriate for capturing a broad range of perspectives and experiences, as it fails to allow for nuance or contextual information in relation to sensitive topics. The standardised response set featured in the survey forces diverse responses into a fixed, pre-determined framework which risks erasure and homogenisation of the complex and multi-layered experiences of VAWG survivors. Given that the survey sought responses from people who did and did not have direct experience of VAWG, this fixed response set was unsophisticated. It is advised to use skip logic when designing surveys in order to tailor questions to different types of response. However, upon testing the survey for the review it was apparent that skip logic was not utilised and that questions were not specifically tailored for those who had direct experience of VAWG and those who did not. Another problematic issue with this approach is that the voices of survivors of VAWG are not foregrounded, when arguably those voices should be at the core of directing the strategy's focus and direction.

Given that the public consultation was interested in exploring *experiences* of VAWG, a large-scale quantitative survey is not the most appropriate method of data collection.

Quantitative surveys are not designed to collect data about people's experiences of phenomena; rather they are designed to collect numeric data in order to reveal patterns or trends in population groups. By taking a quantitative approach the contextual detail and nuanced responses are again subsumed into a uniform response set, which reveals less about the idiosyncrasies and nuances of VAWG. Using a qualitative approach or including guided qualitative response options would have provided more nuanced and insightful data, while allowing respondents to express their perspectives more openly. Although the survey aimed to collect "public's views about violence and crimes that predominantly affect women and girls", it should be noted that there is existing expert scholarship in this area which did not appear to have informed the design or content of the survey (for example,

Burman, 2009; Burman & Brooks-Hay, 2018b; Gavey, 2018; Lazard, 2020; McGlynn & Westmarland, 2018; Nicolson, 2019). As such the government's survey is a blunt instrument not equipped to capture the complexity, nuance, or personalised experience of VAWG in contemporary British society.

The need for intersectional methodologies that centre survivor voices is not a new argument in the VAWG field (see for example (Crenshaw, 1991; Damant et al., 2008; Etherington & Baker, 2018; Gill, 2018; O'Brien, 2016; Strid, Walby, & Armstrong, 2013), but it is a crucial part of consultation that the survey fails to do. Further to this, our review highlighted an important lack of consideration of ethics. It stated that it aimed to seek the views and experiences of a range of people, including those with 'lived experiences', yet it appeared to show little consideration of who might be harmed by facing questions that appear blunt, de-contextualised, and insufficiently 'content-noted' (we note there is no forewarning that certain upcoming questions ask about topics that might be distressing, apart from an initial note at the very beginning of the survey). Due to this lack of ethical sensitivity, and the way that the survey centres around sensationalised and extreme forms of violence (such as rape, physical domestic violence, and honour-based abuse), those with lived experiences of violence that might be considered less extreme, become further invisibilised in this kind of consultation process.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Our position is that VAWG is relational. As such strategy reform needs engagement with the structural conditions that enable violence and the relational and structural conditions that can help people recover and access meaningful support. We urge that part of this approach should involve foregrounding the voices and experiences of survivors and consulting with them in a meaningful and positive way. This can be possible by including survivors in all stages of a consultation process, particularly in the methodological design of studies, to ensure survivor experiences are not minimised, excluded, or considered in a tokenistic way. Consultations should also be guided by experts in the field and the existing research literature to avoid presuppositions and assumptions about VAWG.

The 2021-2024 VAWG strategy (which incorporates the 2016-2020 strategy) consultation process failed to address the needs and experiences of a broad range of survivors. We draw attention to the need for a postcolonial and intersectional approach that recognises and addresses both racialised *and* gendered experiences of violence, and suggest close attention is needed to the subsequent revictimization and re-traumatisation that is often perpetuated by institutions such as criminal justice systems (see Thompson, 2021 for a broad analysis). The strategy's emphasis on criminality further produces barriers to already marginalised people in accessing resources and support needed in order to recover and/or seek justice.

In light of our review of the 2016-2020 strategy, we provide recommendations for strategy reform, and for VAWG research and practice more broadly.

- We recommend the need to adopt critical and intersectional methodologies to meaningfully seek a broad and diverse range of views, experiences, and voices of those who have lived experiences of gendered violence. The approach needs a feminist lens which accounts for both personal, individual experiences as well as

attending to systemic and oppressive social structures which shape individual experiences, how we give voice to them, and how those voices are heard.

- We highlight that reflexivity is important. Engagement with language, underpinning assumptions, and the ways particular groups of people are constructed in harmful and oppressive ways, is crucial to deconstruct and examine. We draw attention to the need for those working at all levels (practice, research, and policy) to work to reflect on our own assumptions, addressing ways in which methods and questions centre white, cisgender, heteronormative theories and assumptions. This is particularly harmful to those who are already marginalised and face barriers to services and justice.
- We urge strategy reform to account for the existing literature, which offers a wealth of expertise and knowledge in relation to VAWG. Ignoring such literature does little to develop meaningful strategy, and it also functions to erase survivor voices.
- Cultural change is needed, and personal social health and economic (PSHE) education is an appropriate avenue by which to tackle this. We recommend sustained engagement with literature and consultation with experts regarding health practices around relationships and consent. A bolt-on approach to existing curriculum is not sufficient.
- A review of current strategy is needed to embed the needs of children in domestic abuse services and in the domestic abuse research agenda. A nuanced and intersectional approach is needed, which accounts for barriers to service, conflicting requirements from support agencies, postcode lottery issues, and safeguarding thresholds which do not sufficiently recognise the significant risks to children from living with domestic violence and abuse. Again, we recommend that the voices of survivors should be centred in research, including the voices and lived experiences of children.
- There are significant limitations to criminal justice approaches to understanding and addressing VAWG. Given the persistence of sexual violence myths in the criminal justice system, we strongly recommend that future reforms consider the problems that arise from criminalisation and the limits of carceral approaches to perpetrators. A focus on perpetrators, without a critical examination of the criminal justice systems and processes, individualises the issue of sexual violence and fails to attend to the systemic problems within the criminal justice system. We recommend that we work to deconstruct the racialised discourses and assumptions which underpin dominant narratives surrounding who is violent, and to whom. We also recommend that a diverse range of victim/survivor perspectives around justice should be embedded into strategy reform.
- We recommend that the Government Equalities Office (GEO) considers working with advertising agencies to produce images and messaging that counteracts victim-blaming, objectification, and sexualisation of all people. This risks promoting a narrow individualising discourse and an unnecessary connection between VAWG and poor body image rooted in the harmful assumption that women and girls are responsible for their own victimisation.

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