

APPG on Domestic Violence Meeting

Brexit and Domestic Abuse – Opportunities for Change?

5-6pm, Wednesday 14 September 2016

Committee Room 17, House of Commons

The APPG on Domestic Violence meeting on 'Brexit and Domestic Abuse' was convened to discuss the impact of the UK's decision to leave the European Union (EU) on 23 June 2016 on the fight against domestic abuse – and the potential opportunities for change.

The meeting was chaired by Jess Phillips MP. Members of the APPG also in attendance were:
Maria Miller MP
Nusrat Ghani MP
Fiona Mactaggart MP

Speakers at the meeting were:

Sam Smethers, Chief Executive – The Fawcett Society
Professor Sylvia Walby, Professor of Sociology and UNESCO Chair in Gender Research, Violence & Society, Lancaster University
Professor Jackie Jones, Trustee – National Alliance of Women's Organisations
Poll y Neate, Chief Executive Officer, Women's Aid.

Jess Phillips MP, Welcome and Introduction

Jess Phillips MP welcomed the APPG, and stated that the discussion would focus on implications of the UK's vote to leave the EU. Jess highlighted that there was significant uncertainty about the process and implications of 'Brexit', but that this was an area that Parliament would be increasingly required to scrutinise.

Jess referred to the Women & Equalities Select Committee's evidence session on the impact of Brexit on equalities legislation, which had taken place that morning. The committee had heard from experts Professor Catherine Barnard, Professor of European Law at the University of Cambridge and Professor Aileen McColgan, Professor of Human Rights from Kings College London.

Jess stated that the EU provided direct funding for domestic abuse services in the UK, which she had applied for as a refuge manager. She also said it would be important to look at EU legislation on tackling domestic abuse, and what would be needed to be protected in the future.

Sam Smethers – CEO, Fawcett Society

Sam Smethers outlined the *#FaceHerFuture* campaign, which Fawcett had launched in partnership with Women's Aid and other organisations to protect gender equality following

the Brexit vote. The campaign had a positive message of progress, and aimed to ensure that the UK becomes the best place in the world to be a woman.

Sam highlighted the risks Brexit posed for equality, particularly focusing on the fact that the UK would no longer have access to the European Court of Justice, which had safeguarded and advanced women's rights. International cooperation to tackle violence against women and girls (VAWG), including forced genital mutilation (FGM) and human trafficking, could also become harder. It would be important to recognise that the rise of racist hate crime in the wake of Brexit was an inter-sectional issue, and had severe impacts upon women.

Sam highlighted that women's voices, issues and rights were not currently at the forefront of the negotiations, and stated that there was limited capacity within Whitehall on these issues. The women's sector could be a long-term resource and source of expertise to Government in this process. Fawcett would be reviewing the impacts of Brexit on discrimination, rights and legislation in due course. Sam stated that it was important to aggregate what women want from Brexit, and maximise the impact of supportive parliamentarians to push for change and secure positive outcomes.

Professor Sylvia Walby OBE - Professor of Sociology and UNESCO Chair in Gender Research, Violence & Society, Lancaster University, UK

Professor Walby explained that Brexit was a major moment of 'restructuring' within the UK. This provided opportunities for change in two major areas – the single market, and the area of security, freedom and justice (law and order).

On reform of the single market, Sylvia highlighted that the UK's exit from the EU may not necessarily result in change to procurement and commissioning – as the rules for this were largely set by the World Trade Organisation (WTO). The EU had always allowed flexibility for contracts below a certain value (750,000 EURO), but the UK had not used its ability to protect specialist services from tendering.

In the area of freedom, security and justice, Sylvia highlighted that the Government now had new choices in terms of the directives, protections and minimum standards for victims. She posed the question of whether we want the same level of protection and cooperation with the EU as we currently have – or whether the negotiations could be an opportunity for reform.

Finally, Sylvia set out the risks that leaving the EU posed to our ability to work internationally, particularly in the exchange of best practice, research and knowledge. She highlighted that the Government now had a number of choices about what research programmes, funds and initiatives that the UK continues with – and that the VAWG sector must have a voice within these negotiations. Sylvia ended by stating that the UK must increasingly engage with international forums and instruments, including the United Nations (UN) and Council of Europe.

Professor Jackie Jones - Professor of Feminist Legal Studies at UWE Bristol and a Trustee of the National Alliance of Women's Organisations

Professor Jackie Jones highlighted that she would focus on three major areas of concern. First, as a trustee of the National Alliance of Women's Organisations (NAWO) and President of European Women Lawyers Association, she had already noted a significant loss of reputation for the UK. As a leader in equalities and legislation on tackling VAWG, the UK has long been considered a leader in this area – but that this would now change.

Secondly, Jackie set out a range of concerns about the impact that leaving the EU would have on human rights for women. Although UK citizens would continue to retain human rights (such as through the Human Rights Act 1998), the removal of obligations under the EU Charter may risk removing certain safeguards and remedies which are currently available for women living in the UK. The EU Charter was a strengthened, modernised rewriting of the Convention on Human Rights, and enshrined a direct and fundamental right to gender equality. Brexit was likely to remove due diligence obligations on the UK Government, who would be unlikely to establish them of their own accord because of financial considerations. The Government's proposal to develop a new British Bill of Rights would likely also be of concern.

Jackie concluded by stating that Brexit was likely to result in a loss of partnership and funding opportunities for women's rights in the UK. It was not clear how the UK would now negotiate and vote at CEDAW or other international forums. Jackie called for equal representation of men and women during the EU negotiations process, and for women's campaigners to stand together in solidarity across Europe and internationally. She also stressed the need for a Human Rights and Gender Impact Assessment on all trade deals negotiated as a result of Brexit.

Polly Neate – CEO, Women's Aid

Polly explained that Women's Aid had publically supported 'remain' in the EU Referendum, when most civil society organisations had remained neutral. Polly stated that survivors of domestic abuse were among the most vulnerable, voiceless and disadvantaged people in society and urged decision makers to place them at the forefront of any future negotiations.

Polly stated that Women's Aid were focused on the impact of Brexit in four key areas – both in terms of risks and opportunities. Firstly, funding was a major concern – as many member services received direct funding from EU grants and the loss of this, particularly for specialist BME services, could be acute. She noted that the sector had borne the brunt of austerity and must be protected from any negative economic impacts of Brexit. Polly also highlighted that Brexit could be an important opportunity for major reform of complex and procurement commissioning systems, which had often been blamed on EU law, and which had been devastating for specialist services.

Polly agreed with other speakers that Brexit threatened established rights and protections for women and victims of domestic abuse, and that the UK would need to ensure legislation such as the EU Protection Order was retained. She highlighted that Brexit was an opportunity to develop more robust legislation to tackle online abuse – which was a major issue for survivors.

Polly concluded by stating that domestic abuse and VAWG must remain a political priority following the EU referendum, and that she was confident that under the leadership of the Prime Minister it would be. She did, however, note concerns around rising levels of abuse, harassment, racism and intolerance – and highlighted that Government policies on immigration, deportation and tackling extremism could often exacerbate these issues and contribute to a climate in which it is harder to keep women safe.

Discussion

Jess Phillips MP concluded by stating that it had been an incredibly informative and helpful discussion, particularly for the scrutiny of the Women and Equalities Committee on this issue. Maria Miller MP agreed that the expertise of the contributors had added hugely to their understanding, and asked for further clarifications around equality legislation and rights. Fiona Mactaggart MP added that clear 'list of asks' for tackling domestic abuse and VAWG would be needed on Brexit, which parliamentarians could use to influence and press the Government on.

Subsequent contributions from delegates at the meeting focused on:

- The importance of tackling VAWG through international frameworks and global partnerships, such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals.
- The need to ensure future trade deals protected human rights and gender considerations, potentially by reviving mechanisms such as the Gender Expert Group on Trade – which was established by the former Department for Trade and Industry to ensure gender was mainstreamed in trade policy, and consisted of women's organisations and experts.
- Recognition of the significant issues that women from EU and EEA countries living in the UK already face around residency and access to services, and the need to protect them further post- Brexit.
- The need to ensure that survivors of domestic abuse retain the access to support, training, education and other services required to build an independent and safe future – which were often provided through EU grants and funding programmes.
- The challenges and realities that young women and girls face in challenging misogyny, sexism and harassment on a daily basis, and the need for comprehensive change.

Actions

- The Secretariat (Women's Aid) to produce a briefing and key recommendations for Brexit, which parliamentarians could use to influence Government and the EU negotiations.
- Speakers and delegates at the meeting to send the Chair and Vice Chair of the APPG on Domestic Violence briefings and expert papers on specific areas of concern around Brexit
- The APPG, supported by the Secretariat, to press the Government to utilise the specialist expertise of the women's sector within the EU negotiations – potentially through reviving mechanisms such as the Gender Expert Group on Trade.