



**THE CASE FOR A NATIONAL STRATEGY ON
INTIMATE VIOLENCE AGAINST MEN AND BOYS**

Briefing document from the Men and Boys Coalition

Introduction

The Men and Boys Coalition advocates the adoption of a cross-governmental strategy on Intimate Violence Against Men and Boys.

This document sets out the basis for that campaign. It is intended to clarify the issues involved, to explain the current policy framework and the problems that causes for men and boys. It demonstrates how such a strategy would enhance provision and policy for male victims/survivors without detracting from or undermining the effectiveness and importance of the existing strategy on Violence Against Women and Girls.

We intend this document to be of particular interest and relevance to policy-makers and administrators, professionals in the support / recovery sector, and to the media, but we hope it will be equally accessible and valuable to interested lay-readers.

This version is published September 2020, but we anticipate this to be a living document which may be revised as circumstances and issues evolve.

For more information or to suggest corrections or revisions to content, please email info@menandboyscoalition.org.uk

About the Men and Boys Coalition

The Men and Boys Coalition is a mutually supportive network of organisations, academics, journalists, professionals and leaders committed to highlighting and taking action on the gender-specific issues that affect men and boys.

The Coalition aims to support the men and boys' sector by putting the wellbeing of men and boys on the public agenda; enabling the UK men's sector to work together, taking action on issues that affect men and boys and promoting a positive conversation about men, manhood and masculinity.

The Coalition is a registered charity (CIO) No. 1183014

For more information please visit www.menandboyscoalition.org.uk

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Terminology

Many of the terms used in this document and this debate are ambiguous or subject to ongoing debate. For the purposes of this document:

Men / Boys: describes individuals who identify as male or who could/would be legally classed as male.

Sexual Violence: All non-consensual acts of a sexual nature including sexual abuse, sexual assaults, violation, exploitation, manipulation and coercion.

Domestic Abuse: All acts of violence and abuse in a relational setting, where there is a known relationship, whether familial or sexual/romantic, excepting child abuse.

Forced Marriage: A marriage or attempt to enforce a marriage between two parties where one or both has been coerced or compelled to participate.

So-called 'Honour Based' violence: Violent and abusive practices used within families or other social groups in order to protect supposed cultural and religious beliefs, values and social norms in the name of 'honour'.

What do we mean by a strategy on Intimate Violence Against Men and Boys?

This document sets out the case for a cross-governmental strategy on Intimate Violence Against Men and Boys (IVAMB) which would take practical, measurable steps to:

1. Prevent such violence from happening, by challenging attitudes and behaviours which foster it and intervening early where possible to prevent it.
2. Provide adequate support to victims and survivors where violence does occur.
3. Work in partnership to obtain the best outcome for male victims/survivors and their families.
4. Take action to reduce the risk to men and boys who are victims of such crimes and ensure that perpetrators are brought to justice.
5. Represent and reflect the reality of modern Britain by supporting, including and recognising equality and diversity, in the context of intimate violence.
6. Retain, complement and enhance the national Violence Against Women and Girls strategy, by returning it to its stated and intended purpose.

What is Intimate Violence Against Men and Boys?

Intimate violence against men and boys (IVAMB) describes the full range of acts of violence, abuse and exploitation in which men or boys are the victims, and in which their gender, sexuality and/or intimate relationships are motivating or prevailing factors. These include (but are not necessarily restricted to) acts of sexual abuse and sexual violence; domestic and relationship violence; stalking; sexual exploitation; forced marriage and so-called honour-based violence. In practical terms, this can also be understood as all criminal and non-criminal acts involving male victims which are currently contained within the formal category 'Violence Against Women and Girls' and covered by the cross-governmental strategy to end VAWG¹.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-sets-out-key-measures-to-tackle-violence-against-women-and-girls>

Why are some forms of Violence Against Men and Boys excluded?

Males make up the majority of victims of all violent crime. There are several categories of violence against men and boys which we propose should be excluded from the IVAMB strategy. Prominent among these are:

- Serious youth violence and gang/gun/knife crime
- Interpersonal assaults and robberies
- Non-sexual violence against children, and other forms of child abuse / neglect.

These issues are all extremely serious phenomena which are entirely within the remit of the Men and Boys' Coalition and we fully support every effort to address them by policy-makers and service providers. We also recognise that there are many gendered elements to such violent phenomena, both in their causes and societal responses to them. However, at present we are not advocating that they be included in an IVAMB strategy. To do so would bring the IVAMB strategy into conflict and confusion with other existing non-gendered strategies and risk submerging the specific, shared characteristics of intimate crimes within even larger, more diverse and complex social issues.

For clarity, simplicity and convenience, we propose that an IVAMB strategy should restrict itself to those offences which would currently be classified as VAWG were they to happen to a female victim, while acknowledging that many of these distinctions are arbitrary, for example, abuse of elderly relatives is classified under VAWG as domestic abuse, but (non-sexual) abuse of children is not. We are content to keep these distinctions under permanent consideration and review.

Finally, we are currently assuming that non-clinical circumcision of boys will not be categorised as IVAMB, despite the fact that female genital mutilation is stated to be a form of VAWG. We fully acknowledge the strength and sincerity of belief on both sides of the debate about ritual male circumcision / male genital mutilation, both within the membership of the Men and Boys Coalition and across society. We believe the debate about the legality, morality and practice of male circumcision is urgent and pressing, however for as long as it is held to be lawful in the UK, to include it within the IVAMB strategy would create an insurmountable obstacle to this campaign at this stage. Again, we fully intend to keep this position under consideration and review and actively invite further discussion and debate.

What strategy is in place at present?

Since 2010, successive British governments have maintained a rolling programme of cross-governmental policy strategy documents to end Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG). The current operating incarnation is the Strategy to End Violence Against Women and Girls, 2016-2020². These strategies are underpinned by the UK's signing, and subsequent ratification of the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention³.

In a 2012 update it was acknowledged for the first time that male victims of (so-called) 'VAWG' offences should also be assumed to be included within the strategy. There is no record of this decision ever being formally debated or decided at any political level.

Are you campaigning to abolish The Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy?

No, categorically not. We are only asking that male survivors and victims are extricated from the VAWG strategy, and that their needs and all related issues be contained in a parallel strategy to prevent Intimate Violence Against Men and Boys. Nor are we recommending a gender-neutral approach to intimate crimes. We argue that intimate crimes of violence and abuse against both men and women should be considered with a gender-inclusive approach, which acknowledges the key causal roles which can (or may) be played by gender in driving the perpetration of such offences and the importance of gender-sensitivity in developing support services for both female and male survivors. We also suggest that the VAWG strategy would be more effective in supporting women and girls if the data underpinning that policy were not confounded by the inclusion of men and boys.

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-sets-out-key-measures-to-tackle-violence-against-women-and-girls>

³ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/home?>

What justification has been provided by the Government as to why male victims are included in the VAWG strategy, and is it reasonable?

The only explicit justification that has ever been provided for this decision at government level was contained within the March 2019 position statement⁴ (see separate section below): *“We know that these crimes disproportionately affect women and girls, which is why these crimes are captured within the cross-government Ending VAWG Strategy”*

This reasoning is, we suggest, self-evidently absurd. Most other forms of violence disproportionately affect males⁵, and yet we do not classify, say, street robbery or knife crime as ‘Violence Against Men and Boys.’ Many other social problems disproportionately affect one or other gender, and yet the government does not routinely describe homeless people as ‘homeless men’ – to do so would be considered (rightly) dismissive of the existence and needs of homeless women who, while a minority, have needs and situations that are no less pressing.

It should also be noted that while these offences might typically disproportionately affect women and girls as a gender, this should not be taken to mean that individual victims are disproportionately affected according to their gender.

What are the problems with including male victims/ survivors in the VAWG Strategy?

The issues are extensive and complex, the following list should be considered an outline of the issues, not necessarily an exhaustive list:

1. *The VAWG strategy does not properly meet the needs of male victims/survivors and could not reasonably be expected to.*

The social and psychological causes of IVAMB cannot be assumed to mimic and reflect the causes of VAWG. At an ideological level (as agreed in international treaties) VAWG is held to be both a cause and a consequence of gender inequality and this assumption permeates the VAWG strategy. The causes of IVAMB, are in key respects, profoundly different. Among the issues driving IVAMB are myths of male invulnerability and the gender stereotypes which say men cannot or should not be victims of such offences; the empathy gap with respect to male suffering; the marginalisation, minimisation and invisibilisation of male victims; prevailing social and structural homophobia; poor public understanding of the nature of male victimisation; lack of understanding among the public and some professionals of the nature and

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https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/783996/Male_Victims_Position_Paper_Web_Accessible.pdf

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<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/crimeinenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2020#violent-crime> and passim

extent of female perpetration. These and many other gender-specific issues are unique to men and boys and not addressed or even acknowledged in the VAWG strategy.

- 2. Including men and boys in the VAWG strategy actively contributes to marginalisation, minimisation and invisibilisation of male victims.*

One of the most commonly reported grievances of victims/survivors of IVAMB is a sense that no one wants to acknowledge their existence, that they are not the 'right' kind of victim or even a 'real' victim of these crimes. In practice this is often manifested in media coverage of issues such as domestic and sexual violence, where 'victims' and 'women' are used interchangeably, and if male victims are even mentioned it is as an afterthought or a curiosity. It should be considered deeply shocking that our national government strategy, which purports to support and include such victims is, by its very name and nature, actively contributing to this problem.

- 3. Including men and boys in the VAWG strategy forces male and female survivors into conflict and competition while obscuring the extent of support for both.*

The VAWG strategy, while largely an expression of priorities, objectives and targets, also involves funding streams and other programmes of financial support. Most prominent of these is the government's VAWG Transformation Fund, worth £80m over four years. This is widely advertised and publicised as being the fund which supports organisations to end violence against women and girls. In practice, this is the same fund to which bodies must apply to fund projects supporting men and boys. This puts services for male and female victims/survivors in direct competition with each other and demands decisions as to whether male or female victims are more deserving. At the same time, it is close to impossible for public or media to establish how much support is actually being provided for women and girls, or for men and boys. Separate but parallel funding streams would enable both women's and men's sectors to actively campaign for a larger pot of funding, without effectively demanding that money should be taken away from the other, and would improve the visibility and transparency of the availability of funding to assist men and boys.

- 4. Describing male survivors as 'women and girls' is deeply offensive and can be harmful.*

No one likes to be misgendered at any time, it is invariably considered offensive and rude. But for male survivors of intimate crimes and abuse, the impacts of misgendering can be much deeper. Many male survivors struggle with a feeling that they have been demasculated by having been victimised or

abused; many may question their own masculinity if they have been the victim of domestic violence, for example, or question their sexuality if they have been subject to sexual abuse by another male. Addressing these concerns is often a key stage in therapeutic recovery for male survivors. It is little short of obscene that the national government willingly participates in misgendering tens of thousands of male survivors who enter these systems every year, and millions of men who have been or will be affected in their lifetimes.

5. *A parallel IVAMB strategy would allow male survivors and their representative organisations to design a strategy which meets their needs.*

For obvious reasons, the VAWG strategy was designed and authored by individuals and organisations with expertise and experience in preventing violence against women and girls. There was minimal involvement from, or heed to individuals and organisations with equivalent expertise on male victim/survivors. A new strategy could lean on the groundwork and lessons learned through the years of the VAWG strategy but design a strategy which has the specific objectives of supporting men and boys.

What recognition has already been given to male victims and survivors by UK governments and national agencies?

In 2015 it emerged that the Crown Prosecution Service was publishing annual performance reports on prosecuting Violence Against Women and Girls which were reported in the press as saying, for example, that 107,000 women and girls had been victims of rape, domestic violence and other VAWG crimes. The original CPS report made no mention of the fact that one in six victims of these crimes (where victim's gender was recorded) was in fact male.

After a prominent media campaign and an intervention from the national Statistics Ombudsman, the Director of Public Prosecutions withdrew the report and republished it with better acknowledgement of the genders involved⁶. From 2016 onwards the annual report has been published with a clear acknowledgement that the bulletin incorporates statistics on male victims and with separate reporting of statistics on male and female victims.

In 2017, in association with the Men and Boys' Coalition, the CPS published a statement on Male Victims of VAWG to clarify their support and recognition for them⁷.

In March 2019 - so more than eight years after the VAWG strategy was launched and seven years after first acknowledging that male victims were included within it, the government published its first ever Position Statement on male victims of crimes classified as VAWG⁸. Developed after extensive engagement with male survivors' charities and experts, this document culminated in a 12-point plan to improve national standards in supporting male survivors and improved preventative and educational efforts.

Despite serious ongoing concerns about the inclusion of this document within the VAWG strategy, its publication nevertheless represented a massive step forward in engagement between central government and male victims /survivors. We look forward to it becoming a solid cornerstone of an independent IVAMB strategy in future.

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jul/28/violence-women-girls-male-victims-crimes-men>

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/law/2017/sep/06/cps-to-issue-guidance-on-handling-cases-of-abuse-against-men>

⁸ <http://www.menandboyscoalition.org.uk/newsevents/three-year-campaign-by-coalition-members-results-in-landmark-government-statement-on-male-victims/>

Footnote on the international background to the VAWG Strategy

The definition of VAWG used within UK government strategy is as drawn from the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, 1993 (UNDEVAW):

“Any act of gender-based violence that is directed at a woman because she is a woman or acts of violence which are suffered disproportionately by women.”

In implementing governmental strategies, it became apparent that the UK government had interpreted the second part of this definition to mean that VAWG policies would also cover male victims of crimes such as rape, sexual abuse and domestic violence, in which women are usually assumed to make up the majority of victims. This policy was only explicitly acknowledged by UK government in 2019, when they published their first position statement on male victims of VAWG crimes.

It is important to understand that there is little or no reason to believe it was ever the intention of those who drafted UNDEVAW that male victims should be included in such policies. There is no record of the needs, circumstances or wishes of male victims being included in discussions or debate at the UN Women’s Conference in 1993 or the Istanbul Convention of 2011/14, nor would we suggest there was any reason why they should have been. The most coherent reading of the definition above is that it should always have been understood to mean ““Any act of gender-based violence that is directed at a woman because she is a woman, or acts of violence **directed at a woman, of types** which are suffered disproportionately by women.”

In the absence of any evidence to the contrary, it is our assertion that this was the intention of those drafting the definition, who never meant it to be taken to include male victims.

There is no record in Hansard or elsewhere of any minister, politician or civil servant ever explicitly advocating that male victims should be included in this strategy. At no stage, through the adoption of the original definition or the development of strategies were male victims and survivors or their representative campaigns and charities consulted about their inclusion in the strategies. It seems most probable that the decision to include male victims was taken out of bureaucratic convenience rather than considered policy.

Endnote

This document has been prepared by the Trustees of the Men and Boys’ Coalition. This version dates from September 2020, but the briefing should be considered a living document and may be subject to ongoing revision and updates as circumstances change.

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