

## Response to open consultation: Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) strategy 2021-2024: call for evidence.

### 1. The respondent

1.1 The Men and Boys Coalition (MBC) is a registered charity<sup>i</sup> which operates as a mutually supportive network for organisations, professionals, academics and experts in the UK who are committed to highlighting and taking action upon gender-specific issues that affect men and boys<sup>ii</sup>.

1.2 Members of the Coalition include numerous organisations in the male victim/survivor support and prevention sectors, including Survivors UK; Survivors Manchester; Survivors West Yorkshire; Mankind Initiative; Mankind Counselling; Breaking The Silence; Break The Silence UK; Men's Advisory Project; Stay Brave UK. Our member organisations work extensively with male survivors of prominent criminal cases, such as the 200+ victims of serial rapist Reynhard Sinaga<sup>iii</sup>, survivors of the football abuse scandal and of institutional abuse in religious organisations and children's/care homes. Our Academic network includes large numbers of researchers in diverse aspects of intimate violence including domestic violence; rape and sexual abuse; sexual exploitation and so-called honour-based violence.

1.3 This submission has been developed in consultation with expertise from the membership and is intended to represent an over-arching consensus view, however individuals and member organisations may have specific or specialist knowledge, or may differ or derogate from specific points in this submission. On that basis, we have encouraged our member organisations to submit their own responses to the consultation where appropriate, and this submission should not necessarily be held to entirely represent the views of all of our members.

## 2. Issues with the inclusion of Men and Boys in the VAWG strategy

MBC believes that crimes against men and boys should **not** be included in a strategy that is designed for, and described as, targeting Violence Against Women and Girls, for reasons that include:

**2.1** The inclusion of intimate crimes against men and boys within the VAWG strategy, as currently established, is held to be unsatisfactory, harmful and offensive by the overwhelming majority of the male survivor / victim support sector. From our own extensive engagements, we have been unable to identify a single organisation or individual expert in the men's sector who supports the current approach in its existing form.

**2.2** Among the key issues identified as problems with the current inclusion of male victims in the strategy are:

2.2.1 Male victims/survivors are excluded and marginalized by their inclusion in a strategy that is explicitly described and titled as addressing 'Violence Against Women and Girls.' This is an inherent, pervasive problem with the current strategy and is a barrier to the involvement of male survivors and victims in services and engagement. This is perhaps best illustrated by this consultation exercise itself. Some of our member organisations have reported that they have felt reluctant (or in at least one instance, unable) to invite their service users to participate in this call for evidence, as the titling and branding was considered so exclusionary as to risk causing offence, insult or even setbacks to therapeutic recovery. The UK Home Office social media accounts have publicized the consultation<sup>iv</sup> with a succession of messages saying "*Violence against women and girls can devastate lives. Help inform the government's strategy to tackle these crimes by completing a short online form.*" After repeated pleas for more inclusive language, the messages improved, to clarify that the consultation was open to "respondents of all genders", but at no stage has the Home Office social media output specified that the strategy applies to male *victims and survivors* of intimate crimes (as opposed to say, male academics or clinicians). We note this, not as a criticism of the professionals who administer the Home Office social media account, but to highlight the inherent contradictions in the terminology. We also note that the Press Release sent out by the Home Office on December 10<sup>th</sup> 2020 to publicise this consultation<sup>v</sup> made no mention whatsoever of male victims and contained no invitation to male survivors to participate, in direct contravention of the Home Office's own Position Statement on Male Victims of VAWG crimes (see also para 3.1]

2.2.2 We have been given access to (and permission to reprint) an email<sup>vi</sup> from a member of the public who contacted the survey management company commissioned to run surveys for this consultation, to ask about the (perceived) exclusion of men and boys from this call for evidence. He received a reply which included this paragraph:

We have been commissioned to run the survey on behalf of the Home Office as part of their consultation to inform their new approach to tackling violence against women and girls. *As the focus of this consultation is on violence against women and girls specifically, the questions reflect this.* They are not intended to suggest that violence does not occur against men and boys, but *that subject is not the focus of this consultation.* We have passed your concerns (without sharing your contact details) onto our client at the Home Office too so that they are aware. [Emphasis ours]

This is deeply alarming, not only because it demonstrates how the framing of the issue is actively excluding male survivors even from this very consultation, but that staff involved in running this very consultation do not understand that the phrase 'Violence Against Women and Girls' is intended to be fully inclusive of intimate crimes against men and boys, and consequently is actively misinforming a potential respondent.

2.2.3 Formally categorising intimate crimes against men and boys, at governmental level, as 'Violence Against Women and Girls' actively obscures the incidence and prevalence of such crimes against men and boys. The categorization regularly results in press and media confusion and misinformation, with journalists and broadcasters failing to understand or convey that victims of such crimes include men and boys. This has serious implications for public awareness and understanding, which in turn has implications both for preventative measures and for fundraising and income generation for charities and services supporting male victims and survivors.

2.2.4 The UKSA Code of Practice for Statistics<sup>vii</sup> requires that all public bodies produce statistical data which has 'transparency' and 'coherence'. The inclusion of men and boys in statistics on Violence Against Women and Girls would appear to conflict with these commitments and have indeed led to several complaints to the Statistics Ombudsman<sup>viii</sup>.

2.2.5 Professionals who support male survivors of intimate offences recount that issues of sexuality and masculine gender identities are often central to their work<sup>ix</sup>. Male survivors commonly disclose a sense of emasculation from having been victimised, or feel that their sexual identity has been impacted by abusive experiences. In light of this, it is extremely damaging, some would say an act of willful cruelty, for government policy to tell them they are classed as 'women and girls' at the very highest level.

2.2.6 The VAWG Strategy includes funding streams which are accessible by projects working with either male or female service users (or occasionally, with both.) This has the effect

of forcing charities and services from the men and boy's sector into direct competition with their colleagues in the women's sector. If advocates for men's services wish to lobby and campaign for better funding for male victims, it forces them to argue – in effect - for funding to be taken away from female victims. This is intolerable. The men and boys' sector needs to be able to campaign for a larger cake, not just a bigger slice of the same small cake.

2.2.7 Our member charities convey concern that the inclusion of men and boys within the VAWG strategy risks causing material harm to male victims/survivors as it renders them invisible and/or irrelevant to public services and professionals. There is extensive evidence of double standards being applied where victims are male. One striking recent instance was in a report on the BBC's website<sup>x</sup> recounting a difficult case for Hertfordshire Social Work department, in which social workers are described as witnessing the female partner in a violent relationship beating her male partner in the car park of the social work department, so severely he was left sprawled on the ground. The social workers are then described as 'angering' their female client by asking her whether the 'fight' had been caused by the male partner's own abusive behaviour. It is important to note this was apparently being described by the BBC reporter as an example of good practice.

**2.3** The published record is, to say the very least, opaque as to when, how and why male victims/survivors ever came to be included in the VAWG strategy.

2.3.1 The origins of the VAWG Framework are in the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention on VAWG<sup>xi</sup>, and the 1993 UN Declaration on the Eradication of Violence Against Women<sup>xii</sup>, but at no time, from what we can establish, has either of these bodies ever recommended that the term should apply to male victims. There is no suggestion in any of their core documents that this was their intention. There is no record in Hansard of any political decision to do so. The first official acknowledgement of male victims within the strategic policy documents that we have been able to find was in a 2012 update to the VAWG strategy<sup>xiii</sup>. At no stage were male survivors or their representative organisations ever consulted on their inclusion within the VAWG Strategy, or even officially informed that it was happening. As far as we have been able to establish, as the strategy evolved in practice, administrators began to include male survivors within the policy as a matter of bureaucratic convenience rather than as a reasoned, planned or evidence-based approach. It may have also involved a misreading of the 1993 UNDEVAW (see para 2.3.3.) There has never been any kind of impact assessment conducted into the policy, whether in terms of Equalities legislation or as an issue of duty of care toward male victims and survivors.

2.3.2 There has never been any coherent explanation offered by government at any stage as to why male victims and survivors have been included in the VAWG strategy.

The only reason given in the VAWG document, and repeated in many government documents, is that such crimes ‘disproportionately affect women and girls.’ We submit this is not any kind of coherent explanation. The academic literature on gender-based crime does not use this rationale, indeed we have been unable to find any support for it anywhere in the academic canon. Many other crimes (eg knife crime, GBH, robbery with violence) disproportionately affect men and boys, but we (correctly) do not categorise those crimes as ‘VAMB’. Similarly, there are many other areas of social policy, such as prison policy and street homelessness, where the overwhelming majority of those affected are male. We do not, however, routinely describe prisoners or rough sleepers as ‘men’ – to do so would be considered profoundly exclusionary towards the minority who are women.

2.3.3 Within the academic canon there are many definitions of ‘Violence Against Women and Girls’ or ‘gender-based violence’ but none match the simplistic Home Office definition of ‘crimes which disproportionately affect women and girls.’ Perhaps the most widely accepted and used definition is that offered in Heise, 2002<sup>xiv</sup>.

“Gender-based violence includes a host of harmful behaviors *that are directed at women and girls because of their sex*, including wife abuse, sexual assault, dowry-related murder, marital rape, selective malnourishment of female children, forced prostitution, female genital mutilation, and sexual abuse of female children. Specifically, violence against women includes any act of verbal or physical force, coercion or life-threatening deprivation, *directed at an individual woman or girl* that causes physical or psychological harm, humiliation or arbitrary deprivation of liberty and that perpetuates female subordination.” [Emphasis ours]

We ask the consultation to note that this definition implicitly excludes male victims/survivors from the definition of Violence Against Women. We also submit that the definition above is a more clearly expressed and rational reading of the text of 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.”*

We submit that all available evidence points toward the assumption that this is intended to read as “...or acts of violence **directed at a woman** of types which are suffered disproportionately by women.”

### 3. Additional problems with the current strategic framework as applied to male victims and survivors

**3.1.** The current strategic framework for male victims is contained within two separate documents, the VAWG Strategy 2016-2020 itself, and the Position Statement on male victims of VAWG crimes. At present the VAWG Strategy document makes no reference to or acknowledgement of the Position Statement, and its only references to men and boys of any kind refer to a desire ‘to engage men and boys in efforts to address VAWG,’ strongly implying that men and boys themselves are not victims and survivors of those crimes. This should be considered fully negligent. The main strategy does not include any commitment to observe or meet targets set by the Position Statement, and on numerous occasions it directly flouts commitments made in the Position Statement. (see 2.2.4), most notably by failing to clarify that the victims of the crimes under discussion include both males and females.

**3.2** The current Position Statement on male survivors is inadequate in too many respects to address here. The sections on ‘barriers’ and ‘prosecution’ are welcome in as far as they go, but do not begin to describe the full range of policy issues which impact on male victims/survivors. The strategic issues relevant to men and boys which are not even touched on by either strategy document include (among many others): culturally prevalent popular myths regarding male vulnerability to intimate crimes; the need for public awareness and prevention messaging; rape and sexual exploitation within male prisons and other institutions; the social and cultural invisibility of female perpetrators; the lack of availability of non-custodial courses of treatment and management for female perpetrators; the influence of homophobia and strict traditions of masculine gender norms upon male survivors and victims.

**3.3.** The Position Statement makes several government commitments but has no mechanism to monitor or evaluate adherence to those. For example, the Statement commits *“to ensure communication campaigns are inclusive of men and boys to raise awareness of male victims and encourage male victims and survivors to report abuse.”* We submit that even the ‘communication campaign’ to promote this very consultation we are now participating in has failed to meet this commitment [see 2.2.1], and also note that several elected members of the government, up to and including the Prime Minister, have recently made statements which clearly flout this promise<sup>xv</sup>.

## 4. Recommendations

**4.1** We recommend that the VAWG Strategy from 2021 should set out a course of action to disentangle and extricate crimes against men and boys from the VAWG Strategy. We appreciate the practical complexities of such a change and are not calling for a sudden, radical transformation, which could cause huge problems to services currently funded through, or guided by, the VAWG Strategy. We do propose, however, that the Strategy 2021-2024 should be the last to include intimate crimes against men and boys.

**4.2** We recommend that the Home Office begin a major review and reform of the Position Statement on Male Victims of VAWG Crimes, with a view to drawing up a greatly expanded and more comprehensive strategy. This must be conducted in close collaboration with male survivors and their representative organisations. A comprehensive and effective Position Statement that has the full engagement and support of male survivors and their representative organisations could form the basis of a separate, parallel strategy to address Intimate Violence Against Men and Boys in future strategic reviews. We hold that this is the optimum long-term solution to the problems set out in this submission.

**4.3** The updated Male Victims Position Statement should incorporate a review mechanism and a clear line of accountability to ensure the terms of the Statement are kept and targets reached.

**4.4.** The top-level VAWG Strategy document must acknowledge, refer to and incorporate the Male Position Statement, including adhering to the spirit and detail of the text. The document should be inclusive of, and respectful towards, male victims/survivors. This would involve ensuring the text uses gender-inclusive phrases such as 'victims of VAWG-type crimes' rather than 'women and girls,' when that is the intended meaning. It would also involve ensuring the range of case studies include male victims and female perpetrators, as well as same-sex and gender-diverse relationships. It should be considered entirely unacceptable to acknowledge male victims only as a footnote.

**4.5** The VAWG Strategy and/or Male Victims Position Statement must guarantee that the voices, views and concerns of male victims/survivors are properly represented through all policy-making processes which directly affect them, including democratic processes such as committee hearings and inquiries, and policy development processes at all publicly accountable bodies. Where possible, the organisations which speak on behalf of male survivors should be led by male survivors or have their interests as their sole or primary focus.

**4.6** The VAWG Strategy, incorporating the Position Statement, should acknowledge, describe and commit to addressing the social and cultural factors that drive intimate violence against men and boys and which marginalize male survivors, including public misunderstanding and myths. These should be recognised as being (in some respects) distinct and different to social issues driving violence against women and girls.

**4.7** There should be an Independent process to review and quantify the impacts upon male victims/survivors, and the implications for policy and service delivery, of their inclusion in the VAWG strategy. This process should also clarify the legal and practical policy justifications for the inclusion of male victim/survivors in the VAWG strategy.

#### Further communication

We would be very keen to assist the consultation exercise or processes arising from it.

Please contact [info@menandboyscoalition.org.uk](mailto:info@menandboyscoalition.org.uk)

#### References

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<sup>i</sup> Registered Charity No.1183014

<sup>ii</sup> For more information please visit <http://www.menandboyscoalition.org.uk/about/>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-england-manchester-51021379>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://twitter.com/ukhomeoffice/status/1356980769965682688>

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/nationwide-call-for-views-on-tackling-violence-against-women-and-girls>

<sup>vi</sup> This email, with redacted identifiers, is available on request.

<sup>vii</sup> <https://code.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/>

<sup>viii</sup> eg <https://osr.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/correspondence/mark-brooks-obe-to-ed-humpherson-draft-statutory-guidance-framework-july-2020-domestic-abuse-act-bill/>

<sup>ix</sup> [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/222607725\\_Male\\_Sexual\\_Assault\\_Victims\\_A\\_Selective\\_Review\\_of\\_the\\_Literature\\_and\\_Implications\\_for\\_Support\\_Services](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/222607725_Male_Sexual_Assault_Victims_A_Selective_Review_of_the_Literature_and_Implications_for_Support_Services) and <https://doi.org/10.3149/jms.0902.205>

<sup>x</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/stories-54117562>

<sup>xi</sup> <https://rm.coe.int/coe-istanbulconvention-brochure-en-r03-v01/1680a06d4f>

<sup>xii</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/ViolenceAgainstWomen.aspx>

<sup>xiii</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/97901/action-plan-new-chapter.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/97901/action-plan-new-chapter.pdf)

<sup>xiv</sup> <https://iogt.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/a-global-overview-of-gender-based-violence.pdf>

<sup>xv</sup> <https://osr.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/correspondence/ed-humpherson-response-to-mark-brooks-obe-draft-statutory-guidance-framework-july-2020-domestic-abuse-act-bill/>