



**Consultation Response**  
**Home Office Consultation on Strengthening the Law on Domestic Abuse**

**October 2014**

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*imkaan*



**Girls  
Against  
Gangs  
Project**

**About Us:** The MsUnderstood Programme aims to improve local and national responses to young people's experiences of gender inequality. The MsUnderstood Partnership is a three year partnership between the [University of Bedfordshire](#), [Imkaan](#) and the Girls Against Gangs Project, to improve responses to peer-on-peer abuse in young people's relationships and peer groups through:

- Intensive support of local areas to review and improve their strategic and operational response to peer-on-peer abuse
- A national assessment of provision for boys and young men who perpetrate gender-based violence
- Paid internships and volunteer placements for young people to influence policy and service development locally and nationally

[The MsUnderstood Programme](#) is founded and headed by [Carlene Firmin MBE](#), Research Fellow at the University of Bedfordshire

## **1. Does the current law adequately provide sufficient protection to victims of domestic abuse?**

Note: The MsUnderstood partnership fully endorses [Imkaan](#)'s response to this consultation.

The MsUnderstood partnership welcomes government commitment to develop a more effective response to domestic abuse. However, strengthening law in isolation will not automatically improve victim safety, encourage victims to report or reduce violence.

Current law should be sufficient to prosecute all cases of domestic abuse involving violence and/or coercive control. However, as the HMIC review has demonstrated, systematic failings in police attitudes and responses are leaving victims inadequately protected from violence and abuse.

Now that the government has changed its definition to acknowledge that abuse occurs among young people aged 16-17, government must also consider whether sufficient protection is provided to those experiencing abuse within this age group.

In order to feel able to report violence to the police or another agency, young people must be aware that abuse has taken place, however statistics highlight that 1 in 2 boys and 1 in 3 girls think it is ok sometimes to hit a woman or force her to have sex. While 29% of 16-18 year old girls say they have experienced unwanted sexual touching at school, 24% of 16-18 year olds say that their teachers *never* said unwanted sexual touching, sharing of sexual pictures or sexual name calling are unacceptable (EVAW, 2010). It is crucial for the government to develop a prevention programme that includes compulsory sex and relationships education in schools in order to shift attitudes around violence and gender inequality, enable young people and school workers to identify when violence or abuse has taken place and to seek support.

Emerging findings from case file analysis conducted by the Head of the MsUnderstood partnership suggest that while young people may tell their peers about experiences of violence and abuse, this is unlikely to travel beyond their peer group to adults that can or should be able to safeguard them. If young people are to report violence, they must feel safe and supported to do so. In considering changes to the law, government must also consider how to create settings that promote healthy relationships and gender equality, and how to make young people feel safe to seek support when they are experiencing abuse.

While the impact of violence and abuse is different between boys and girls, prevalence rates of violence within young people's relationships suggest similar rates between girls and boys. Effective implementation of the law must include a specific approach for young people that recognises and responds to the context of young people's relationships whilst ensuring that young people are not disproportionately criminalised.

Although the government's definition of domestic abuse now includes young people, their remains a gap in specialist services for young people. While young people's experiences of violence and abuse won't necessarily mirror adult experiences, current approaches are designed to respond to violence in adult relationships - there is a lack of gender specific youth provision and many adult women's services remain inaccessible to young women.

The law – existing or new – is not enough on its own to provide sufficient protection to victims of domestic abuse. Law must be implemented alongside prevention programmes, public awareness raising and ring-fenced resources for age and gender appropriate support services to adequately protect all victims of domestic abuse.

## **2. In what ways could the law be strengthened?**

It is the implementation of the law – whether existing or new – that must be strengthened within a wider strategy to address violence and abuse. We must see a culture shift within the police and wider criminal justice system to ensure that cases of domestic abuse are identified and responded to appropriately, and that victims of domestic abuse feel able to report crimes to the police.

The MsUnderstood partnership endorses Imkaan's response to the consultation which contains comprehensive suggestions to strengthen the law.

## **3. How would any changes you suggest be practically implemented?**

As suggested above, we urge the government to:

- Lead a prevention programme, in partnership with VAWG and children's services that includes compulsory sex and relationships education across all schools. Such a programme should aim to change attitudes about violence, gender stereotypes and gender equality, enable young people to identify violence and abuse within their relationships and to seek support.
- Develop public campaigns to raise awareness of violence and abuse and the support services that are available.
- Resource age and gender specific support provision, including specialist services for young people that understand and respond appropriately to violence that occurs within young people's relationships and peer networks.
- Develop a targeted approach to violence within young people's relationships, to ensure that young people feel safe and able to seek support, whilst ensuring that they are not disproportionately criminalised.
- Provide mandatory, consistent and on-going training on violence against women and girls to police staff at all levels, and practitioners within the wider criminal justice system. Training should be designed and delivered in partnership with VAWG and

children's service providers and should include specific training on the dynamics of abuse experienced by young people.

- Ensure engagement with children's social care, youth offending teams, youth services and schools to support young people through the criminal justice system.

#### **4. Does the current law sufficiently capture the Government's non-statutory definition of domestic abuse?**

There are sufficient laws in place to prosecute cases captured by the Government's non-statutory definition of domestic abuse. However, the law must be implemented effectively within a wider strategy to address violence against women and girls.

If the government does decide to strengthen the law on domestic abuse, there are specific questions that must be considered in order to develop an effective response to violence experienced by young people:

- Is the law change applicable to the dynamics of violence between young people, which do not necessarily mirror adult relationships?
- Would a law change be delivered in tandem with a government led prevention programme including compulsory sex and relationships education across all schools?
- How will government ensure children's services such as children's social care, youth offending teams, youth services and schools are involved in supporting young people through the criminal justice system?
- How will government develop a specific approach to protect young people from abuse whilst ensuring that they are not disproportionately criminalised?
- How will the government ensure that young people feel safe and able to seek support when they experience abuse?

To discuss anything from this consultation response in further detail please contact Lia Latchford, Policy and Campaigns Co-ordinator, at [lia@msunderstood.org.uk](mailto:lia@msunderstood.org.uk).