



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Social Justice and Social Security Committee

Hon Lady Poole QC
Chair, Scottish COVID-19
Inquiry

Social Justice and Social Security Committee
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

Via email only

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25 April 2022

Dear Lady Poole QC,

The Committee welcomes your appointment to Chair the Independent COVID-19 Inquiry in Scotland, and recognises the expertise, knowledge and experience that you bring to this wide-ranging and challenging inquiry.

On [3 March this Committee held an evidence session](#) about violence against women and girls. The Committee heard from a number of stakeholders and organisations that work to end violence against women and support women who experience violence, including disabled women and girls and those from black and ethnic minority backgrounds. We heard about the impact of the coronavirus legislation on women and girls.

We also heard informally from the Lord Advocate, who spoke about court delays and her understanding of the issue of violence in relation to disabled women and girls.

The Committee is aware that the Criminal Justice Committee has looked into this topic, publishing its findings in their report '[Judged on Progress](#)'.

Our work complements that of the Criminal Justice Committee, with a focus on the broader impacts of the restrictions on women during the pandemic, such as how domestic labour and caring responsibilities confined women, and especially, rendered some more vulnerable.

Inclusion of domestic abuse and violence against women and girls in the COVID-19 Inquiry

The Committee understands that the aim of the independent COVID-19 Inquiry 'is to establish the facts of, and learn lessons from, the strategic response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Scotland'. Below, we set out the evidence provided to us.

Given the disturbing trends with regards to violence against women and girls, alongside the differential impact on women that the restrictions had, we wish to urge you to reconsider the scope of the inquiry to include consideration of the effects of, and strategic response to, the increase in harm done to women and girls during the pandemic.

The [latest published Scottish Government crime statistics](#) compare data since the start of the pandemic:

“Crimes under the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018 increased by 7% compared to February 2021 (from 128 to 137 crimes) and were 8% higher than in February 2020 (decreasing (sic) from 127 to 137 crimes).

Sexual crimes were 25% (or 260 crimes) higher compared to February 2021, increasing from 1,020 to 1,280 crimes. This was also 14% higher than in February 2020 (increasing from 1,124 crimes). Sexual assault saw the largest percentage increase since February 2021, increasing by 35% (from 315 to 424). This was 1% higher compared to February 2020 (from 418 to 424). Rape and attempted rape increased by 29% compared to February 2021, from 163 to 211 crimes, and increased by 13% compared to February 2020 (from 186 to 211 crimes).”

[Written evidence from Zero Tolerance](#) added that:

- In 2021, 13131 sexual crimes were reported to Police Scotland. Recorded sexual crimes have increased by 78% over the last 10 years.
- At least 39% of the sexual crimes recorded in 2020-21 related to a victim under the age of 18.
- 65,251 incidents of domestic abuse were recorded by Police Scotland in 2020-21, an increase of 4% on the previous year.
- In the year ending March 2019, disabled women were more than twice as likely to have experienced domestic abuse (17.3%) than non-disabled women (7.0%).
- In the three years ending March 2018, disabled women were almost twice as likely to have experienced any sexual assault in the last year (5.7%) than non-disabled women (3.0%).

Recognition of national focus on VAWG

The Committee recognises the efforts and work that the Scottish Government has initiated and supported to end violence against women and girls, such as the updated [Equally Safe Strategy](#), and taking up the recommendations of the [National](#)

[Advisory Council on Women and Girls](#). However, the Committee believe that the rise in reported cases of violence against women and girls during the pandemic, as evidenced through official statistics and support organisations, needs, as stated, to be considered as part of the work of the independent COVID-19 Inquiry, to inform how any future strategy or recommendations should respond to the impact of a pandemic or similar public health threat on violence against women.

As you will see from evidence presented below, central to this is the reprioritisation of mainstreaming across all policies. We believe that the Inquiry offers an opportunity to reset this work, given how the pandemic and the COVID-19 restrictions have differentially affected women and men.

Missing data on disabled and black and ethnic minoritized women

While the statistics on disabled women predate the pandemic, the Committee heard that more recent data does not exist and that data on violence against disabled women and data on violence against BME women is not routinely collected in Scotland.

The Committee also heard from organisations supporting BME women that:

“During the pandemic, Amina has seen a threefold increase in calls about women in crisis—I am sure that the same applies to Shakti Women’s Aid.”

We raised the issue of violence against disabled women with the Lord Advocate and the low rates of reporting. We summarised what was said in our informal meeting with her:

“the early stages of crime reporting relate to Police process. It is a sobering statistic that 90% of learning disabled people have been abused under the age of 18

It is the most vulnerable members of society who are at most risk. It is important to understand this power dynamic and opportunity of power play. Everything starts by understanding vulnerability within society and the moral, legal and prosecutorial responsibility to protect these people. We need to understand risk.”

Impact of all Covid measures on women

More fundamentally, witnesses argued that by excluding consideration of the issue in the Inquiry, the opportunity to understand how all the measures impacted on women would be missed.

Laura Thomson of Zero Tolerance said:

“the fact that the Covid inquiry does not incorporate gender equality throughout and that the issue is not specified, is very similar to the situation at the beginning of the pandemic, when women were an afterthought. Women had to be affected by domestic violence at high levels before different conditions were put in place for them”

The reprioritisation of mainstreaming across policy and practice

During the meeting, Eilidh Dickson, from Engender said:

“Throughout the pandemic, exactly as Laura Tomson mentioned, we have seen the failure of the mainstreaming obligations that the Scottish Government, like all public bodies, is required to pursue under the Equality Act 2010. In most instances, with some exceptions that I will come on to, we have seen a complete deprioritisation of mainstreaming, which is the process of thinking about how women and men will experience a policy differently and how policy and practice can be targeted, addressed or focused to realise the needs of different groups.”

We hope that you will consider the issues raised through the evidence we heard, and how they might be covered by the scope of the inquiry. We look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Elena Whitham'.

Elena Whitham MSP
Convener
Social Justice and Social Security Committee