

Ms K Buck MP and Mr P Bone MP  
House of Commons  
London  
SW1A 0AA

Dear Ms Buck and Mr Bone

9th June, 2020

**Domestic Abuse Bill**

On behalf of Mothers' Union (MU) I am writing to you as co-Chairs of the Public Bill Committee currently scrutinizing the Domestic Abuse Bill ('the Bill').

MU is a global, women-led Christian movement with over four million members worldwide, of whom 50,000 live in the United Kingdom. Our vision is of a world where God's love is shown through loving, respectful and flourishing relationships, and much of our work is in the areas of supporting stable family life and the protection of children. We have a strategic focus on countering gender-based violence, including domestic abuse, which affects so many people in the UK and around the world, and has tragically been exacerbated by Covid-19.

MU has already co-signed letters initiated by IC Change urging the Prime Minister and the Minister for Safeguarding to ratify the Istanbul Convention. Like others we see the Convention as setting the 'gold standard' on violence against women and domestic abuse, and we particularly relate to its emphasis on equality, human rights and non-discrimination. The Bill is a very positive step towards ratification, but needs further amendment if it is to reach this gold standard.

We endorse the contents of the joint evidence of specialist organisations, and the briefing by Women's Aid, which have been submitted to the Committee. As a faith-driven organisation, we would urge that in its deliberations the Committee apply to the entirety of the Bill the lens of justice, which incorporates equality, human rights and non-discrimination, for victims and survivors of domestic abuse. The following are examples illustrating our wider concern:

**Definition of domestic abuse:** Victims of domestic abuse are predominantly women and girls. The government's commitment to recognise this in statutory guidance is welcome but not sufficient: *the legal definition, in the Bill, must explicitly acknowledge the gendered nature of domestic abuse, and ensure that all survivors can access support that is appropriate to each individual, regardless of gender, sexual orientation or other protected characteristic.*

**Migrant women:** women with insecure immigration status suffering violence and abuse are routinely refused access to support of any kind, owing to NRPF conditions. It is neither just nor acceptable that simply by virtue of their immigration status they are put at such grave risk, forced to choose between homelessness or destitution on the one hand and returning to the perpetrator on the other. *The NRPF policy must be abolished and all survivors, regardless of status, must be entitled to support and protection.*

**Family courts:** the inconsistency in application, and the complexity of, 'special measures' provisions in the courts result in a failure to protect survivors in their experience of the court systems. Such deficiencies can retraumatise survivors and are not conducive to their full

participation in proceedings with potentially life-changing outcomes. *The Bill should therefore guarantee access in family and civil courts to special measures for survivors of domestic abuse.* In addition, we are concerned that the presumption of contact with children by both parents is in practice prioritized over consideration of the child's best interests. *The Bill should correct this in order to protect children at risk from an abusive parent. It should also explicitly acknowledge that children can be victims of domestic abuse, not simply observers.*

**Universal credit (UC):** under the current system UC is payable only to one person in a household. If this is the perpetrator the possibility of coercive control is increased. There are serious risks to a survivor in seeking a 'split payment' when the perpetrator discovers the application. The government's encouragement to main carers to receive UC direct is insufficient and does not solve the problem. *The Bill must therefore provide for separate payments of UC to be the default position.* Furthermore, the five-week wait for Universal Credit leaves victims without money for food and other essentials and can therefore force them to remain with the perpetrator. Advance payments, being loans, worsen an already precarious financial situation. *Advance payments to survivors of domestic abuse should be grants, not loans.*

Throughout the Bill, justice, equality and non-discrimination should be key. As Somiya Basar said in her evidence to the Committee on 4<sup>th</sup> June: 'The only qualification to be in the system to be able to obtain help should be that we are human beings and we should be treated that way.'

Finally, the Bill fails to address the fact that religious beliefs could be used as a justification for domestic abuse; it also ignores the potential for faith-based organisations and their leaders, who are well-placed to recognise signs of domestic abuse in their communities, to signpost survivors to local services. Awareness both of the signs of GBV and of the support which is available varies considerably across faith-based organisations and communities and we therefore would recommend that:

- nationally-organised training should be quickly put in place to enable faith leaders to respond in line with best practice;
- faith literacy training should be made available to those making decisions and offering support in relation to complaints of domestic abuse so they are more confident in this area; and
- the Commissioner's Advisory Group, and the Local Partnership Boards, should both include faith representatives.

We wish you productive discussions as you scrutinise the Bill.

Yours sincerely



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