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British Psychological Society response to the Home Office

Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) strategy 2021-2024: Survey

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Under its Royal Charter, the objective of the British Psychological Society is "to promote the advancement and diffusion of the knowledge of psychology pure and applied and especially to promote the efficiency and usefulness of members by setting up a high standard of professional education and knowledge". We are committed to providing and disseminating evidence-based expertise and advice, engaging with policy and decision makers, and promoting the highest standards in learning and teaching, professional practice and research.

The British Psychological Society is an examining body granting certificates and diplomas in specialist areas of professional applied psychology.

Publication and Queries

We are content for our response, as well as our name and address, to be made public. We are also content for the Home Office to contact us in the future in relation to this inquiry.

Please direct all queries to:-

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About this Response

The response was led on behalf of the Society by: The Psychology of Women and Equalities Section of The British Psychological Society.

Lead: Dr Lisa Lazard

Contributors: Dr Tanya Beetham, Dr Lois Donnelly, Dr Lucy Thompson and Dr Emma Turley

British Psychological Society response to the Home Office

Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) strategy 2021-2024: Survey

Introduction	
	<p>In this document The Psychology of Women and Equalities Section (POWES) of the British Psychological Society (BPS) presents an initial response to the “Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy Call for Evidence – Public Survey”. In this initial response, POWES deems it necessary to urgently draw the Home Office’s attention to several shortcomings in both survey design and conceptualisation of VAWG. This approach will render data gathered from this survey impossible to analyse meaningfully therefore calling in to question any empirical conclusions. In addition to these issues, POWES highlights limitations in the ethical treatment of those who have experienced gendered violence.</p> <p>Within the public survey and introductory material provided on the government website, it states that the aim of the survey is to collect “public's views about violence and crimes that predominantly affect women and girls”. We would first like to draw the Home Office’s attention to the existing body of expert scholarship on this topic which do not seem to have been used to inform survey design (e.g. Burman, 2010; Gavey, 2018; McGlynn & Westmarland, 2018; Nicolson, 2019; Lazard, 2020). Underpinning the survey’s aim to capture public views is the idea that the data will inform the writing of a “new strategy about how we tackle these types of crimes”. However, it is unclear how data gathered based on the specific questions asked in this survey could inform this aim. This is because there are several issues with the survey which will substantially limit its to address this aim. We offer an explanation for this by deconstructing each question in terms of survey design implementation, methodological limitations and ethical considerations.</p> <p>We would also like to raise a troubling issue with this consultation process. We were sent a partial draft of the public survey which was different to the survey that has been released. We have commented on the released version of the survey on the government website. This oversight at the beginning of the process questions the comprehensiveness and rigour of this consultation process.</p>
	<p>We want to get a better understanding of the views of the general public in relation to what constitutes violence against women and girls and the different forms it can take. Which, if any, of the following behaviours do you think are crimes?</p> <p><i>Please select all the options that apply</i></p>
1.	<p>Members of the public cannot meaningfully answer this question because the wording presumes specialised legal knowledge e.g. “Which, if any, of the following behaviours do you think are crimes?”. It assumes that the response categories may or may not constitute existing criminal offences. If the intention was to ask whether these categories ‘should’ be crimes, there needs to be some indication of alternative ways of tackling VAWG which could include, for example, alternative modes of justice and change (e.g. restorative justice, community- based justice, specific forms of structural change). We are concerned that participant non-response would be taken as indicative that no intervention, criminal sanction or otherwise, is needed. However, such a conclusion cannot be drawn when alternatives are not built into the question format.</p>

The logic for the choice of response categories is unclear. While gendered violence is underpinned broadly by power relations that are intersectionally shaped, expert scholarship has consistently drawn attention to the complexities of each of the examples which makes conflation of these issues highly problematic. For example, the processes and practices underpinning experiences of forced marriage are substantially different to non-fatal strangulation. The examples provided are frequently very specific and sensationalised (e.g. relatively recent reporting of sexualised strangulation). The focus on sensationalised examples fails to engage with the realities of VAWG in which common incidents tend to be less extreme as has been consistently highlighted in #MeToo. The conflation of these categories in the design of this survey would certainly lend itself to response bias in which participants may orientate to more extreme forms of violence rather than less extreme incidents in order to produce a reasonable response. These responses are, however, highly likely to be an artefact of this survey's design. We are concerned about the lack of transparency in this survey's design in how violence is conceptualised and, importantly, who is constructed as violent. For example, a response which prioritises forced marriage may support a pattern of criminalisation of racially diverse and minority offenders which remains an on-going issue in criminal justice processes (e.g. Lazard, 2020; Ministry of Justice, 2015).

The sub question "Are there any behaviours not listed above that you believe should be considered a crime, that currently are not?" again requires specialised knowledge of criminal law to answer this question. The word 'behaviour' assumes that specific incidents are isolatable which distracts attention from the ways in which VAWG is relational and thus requires consideration of the structural conditions that enable it. Questions such as these cannot capture the well-established patterns of common relational processes and practices in instantiations of VAWG.

Are there any behaviours not listed above that you believe should be considered a crime, that currently are not?

2. As with question 1, members of the public would be unable to meaningful respond to this question because prevalence requires specialised knowledge. We would like to ask what the data on public understandings of frequency will achieve? It is unclear what purpose this question is serving and how this information will be useful to strategy development. Question 2 explicitly established the response options as crimes whereas in question 1 this is not the case. This creates the impression of testing participants' existing knowledge rather than seeking perspectives or understandings.

We are extremely concerned with the treatment of victims/survivors in this survey. The questions lack sensitivity to the perspectives of those who have experienced VAWG. This is best exemplified by the inclusion of 'so called' before 'honour-based violence' in the wording. This reads as a questioning of the validity of these experiences. Whilst we acknowledge that this is intended to highlight a definitional concern, it is also the case that such wording serves as secondary victimisation¹ of those who experience it. Secondary victimisation in Criminal Prosecution Service practices are well-documented which renders questionable the choice to include this as a definition (e.g. Spencer, 2019). We are deeply concerned that ethical considerations relating to risk/harm of those who have experienced violence have not been sufficiently built into survey design.

We want to get a better understanding of the views of the general public in relation to how prevalent these behaviours are. Do you think the following crimes happen more or less often in England and Wales than 5 years ago? Please think about them in general and not the level of reporting to police or convictions.

	<i>Please select one option for each statement</i>
3.	The response options conflate understandings of characteristics of victims/survivors (e.g. Someone with a disability can be more vulnerable to violence against women and girls than someone without a disability) with broader definitional issues of some forms of VAWG (e.g. Domestic abuse has to involve physical violence for it to be considered domestic abuse). These items are not comparable and thus the utility of the data is highly questionable. The basis for inclusion or exclusion of victims/survivors is unclear. It is also unclear why a limited range of forms of VAWG is included here but a wider range is explored in earlier questions. While the logic of conflating forms of VAWG is highly questionable, so too is a lack of consistency underpinning question standardisation. We would therefore ask what purpose this question is intending to serve and why might this be useful? This should be transparent to participants when asking them to respond to a highly sensitive topic.
	We are interested in understanding views about online forms of violence against women and girls. Online abuse is any type of abuse that happens on the internet and includes crimes such as trolling. It can happen across any device that's connected to the web, like computers, tablets and mobile phones. And it can happen anywhere online, including on social media. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about online violence against women and girls
4.	This question contains factually incorrect information (e.g. we are unaware of 'trolling' as specific crime). The response format contains outdated understandings of on and offline life. Forms of online violence are not straightforwardly comparable to offline violence. For example, some forms of online VAWG cannot happen offline. Inattention to the specificities of these forms of violence render questionable the meaningfulness of the data collected in relation to this question.
	We want to get a better understanding of the views of the general public in relation to accessing support. How confident would you feel in being able to access support if you, a friend or family member was a victim of any form of violence against women and girls?
5.	There is a lack of clarity as to what is meant by support (e.g. peer, family support, grassroots activist support, state support, private paid support, legal support) as well as what support is for (e.g. support for different forms of VAWG is highly variable). These forms of support are not comparable which raises questions about what can be meaningfully derived from this question. The response format does not capture important nuances around certain kinds of access and the realities of barriers to access. For example, state support available differs substantially across geography. There is no clear understanding of the processes of support or access to them which should necessarily underpin this question.
	To what extent do you agree that victims of all types of violence against women and girls need more support than is currently available?
6.	As with question 5, there is a lack of clarity regarding what constitutes support (see above)

	<p>comments). The generality of the focus of the question (all types of VAWG) renders it meaningless. Participants cannot communicate via the response format provided what support or which forms of VAWG they are referring to which is crucial for developing a coherent strategy for support in practice.</p>
	<p>If you think victims require more support, please feel free to tell us more about what support you think is required here</p>
7.	<p>This open-ended question does not attend to different forms of VAWG which has been a somewhat inconsistent focus throughout the survey. Prior questions prime respondents to attend to more extreme forms of VAWG which, in turn, may limit participants in terms of the type of support they may choose to talk about. The framing of the survey, with its limited focus on criminalisation, excludes consideration of forms to which criminalisation may appear unnecessary or a heavy handed response to grey area violence which #MeToo has highlighted. The focus on extreme forms of violence and a turn to criminalisation appears to undermine and reverse key issues raised in #MeToo which focused on structural and cultural changes to everyday normalised practice which cannot be achieved through the prioritisation of criminal justice responses. While we acknowledge the wider strategy document discusses some actions towards systemic cultural change, the overwhelming emphasis, however, remains on criminalisation – we intend to address these issues with the wider strategy in the follow up consultation document.</p>
	<p>To what extent do you agree with the following statements</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Government and those responsible for addressing these crimes (including the police, courts, schools, social care etc) take violence against women and girls involving physical violence or harm more seriously than those that do not involve physical violence or harm - The Government and those responsible for addressing these crimes (including the police, courts, schools, social care etc) take online forms of violence against women and girls as seriously as when it happens offline - The Government and those responsible for addressing these crimes (including the police, courts, schools, social care etc) take all forms of violence against women and girls seriously
8.	<p>The purpose of this question is not transparent. We are concerned about how exactly this data is going to be used. Will a majority of positive responses be taken as implying that further action is not needed? Will a majority of negative responses be taken as justification for further criminalisation? Both these readings are highly problematic and need to be empirically substantiated and informed by expert scholarship.</p>
	<p>Which, if any, of the following do you think should be the most important priorities for the Government in tackling all forms of violence against women and girls? Please select top 3 ranking with 1 the most important</p>
9.	<p>The rank ordering of these priorities ignores the ways in which these issues are inextricably interrelated. The framing of these priorities is not attentive to grey area sexual violence, which as mentioned earlier, was prioritised and highlighted in #MeToo. Policing and criminal justice responses are virtually impossible to implement in relation to many forms of sexual and gendered violence. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, these responses are not necessarily</p>

	appropriate or desirable. We would urge the Home Office to actively engage with existing scholarship and expertise in VAWG in any further strategy reform.
	<p>We know that some people may want to share their experiences. This section of the survey includes a question on whether you have experienced any of the crimes mentioned in the survey so far. You may find being asked this question upsetting. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not wish to.</p> <p>Please click 'skip this section' now if you do not wish to continue, or select 'prefer not to say' at any questions you are not comfortable with. Information on support services and how to contact them is listed at the end of the survey should you wish to seek help and advice after completing this survey.</p>
10.	<p>While we acknowledge that the inclusion of briefing information is intended to address ethics, we are deeply concerned with the lack of sensitivity in phrasing and, indeed, with the inattention to risk/harm in the wording of this question in particular and within the survey more broadly. The lack of sensitivity built into the survey design is exemplified in the fact that if a participant became distressed at this point, they would still need to click through the rest of the survey (e.g. demographic information) before they can access the support information. If participants wish to continue they are presented with question 11: "We want to understand the views of people who have or have not been victims of these types of crime. Have you been a victim of any of the crimes mentioned in the survey?". We are concerned that the survey takes you on to the same set of questions however you respond to this question. While we understand that it is responsible to analyse the data separately depending on how the question is answered, we remain concerned that this data will be taken as evidence that a full consultation with victims/survivors has taken place. We would strenuously argue that this would be misleading. For example, the question which follows (<i>question 12. Is there anything else you want to tell us that you think would be helpful for the Government to be aware of, to help inform future policy making on violence against women and girls?</i>) does not actively prioritise victim/survivor knowledge, experiences and voices. This is deeply concerning if strategy is not developed which actively attends and prioritises victim/survivor knowledge and insight.</p>
	End of Survey page
11.	<p>The survey ends with a list of support resources. However, there is a disproportionate number of resources are dedicated to men which appears to be an oversight since the survey is specifically on VAWG. The survey ends abruptly without a written debrief or information where complaints about the survey and process can be made. This is a breach of standard ethical procedure.</p>
	General comments
12.	<p>We would like to express concern about the general design of this survey. The design of this survey is lacking input from victim/survivor consultants as well as from experts in the field. We consider this a tremendous oversight in a strategy which is premised on challenging power relations and processes underpinning VAWG. Importantly, we would like to draw your attention to the simplistic treatment of ethical considerations in the design of a survey of this kind. The ethical attention built into the survey is basic and does not consider risk or harm to participants as a result of engaging with the survey. Again, this appears to be a tremendous oversight given that the strategy should aim to improve victim/survivor experiences post victimisation. Methodologically, as we have drawn attention to in this</p>

review of the survey, any conclusions drawn from data collected are questionable because of a clear lack of coherent purpose, consistency and standardisation of questions and response formats.

A further and important methodological limitation results from the population sampling used. Such an approach to data collection is inherently biased. Random or strategic sampling is essential for a survey of this type. **We are troubled by the potential distortion of any findings given this fundamental flaw in the sampling design. For these reasons, we would recommend against the use of this survey to inform future strategy and policy on violence against women and girls.** As a group of researchers in the area of women and violence, we remain open to further consultation on the governmental response to VAWG.

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End.