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## **Liberal Democrat Response to Southwark's Women's Safety Survey**

### **Introduction**

I am writing this in response to the Women's Safety Survey - not only as a Liberal Democrat Councillor on behalf of the Liberal Democrat Council Group - but as a woman who is a long-term resident in Southwark and who has lived in multiple districts in the borough in the last 36 years.

As a passionate women's rights campaigner, and a founder of a domestic violence charity, I feel the need to drive Southwark on to truly make this a safe place to live and work for everyone – and for this council to take more and faster action in so doing.

I note that my fellow Councillors and I across all parties in Southwark have proposed, spoken to, pledged and passed motions over the past 3 years and before relating to the safety of women and other groups calling on this council to act. This includes (but is not limited to):

- The 'Promoting Equality and Valuing Diversity' motion at Council Assembly in July 2019
- The 'Misogyny as a Hate Crime' motion at Council Assembly in November 2020 and
- The cross-party emergency motion at Council Assembly in March 2021 – 'End Male Violence against Women and Girls'.

It is also just under 12 months ago that I responded to the Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy consultation by this same council in 2020. I also note the Women's Safety Charter principles mentioned in the survey.

I submit that not enough action has been taken by the council on the issue of women's safety in Southwark and on wider, but related, fronts such as domestic violence.

I have set out our response as follows – not to cover everything - but to point out some of many of the actions across key areas that we should be taking as a matter of urgency.

- My own experiences as a woman living in Southwark
- The importance of addressing gender-based violence not just for women
- Schools and the online situation of cyber bullying
- The role of the workplace
- Community impact on women's safety using our Latin American community as an example given my experience working with them
- The fear of reporting crimes for women

## **Experience of Being a Woman (Living, Working and Travelling) in Southwark and Situations That Can Make You Feel Unsafe**

As a resident of Southwark, I am very aware of the insecurity women feel in the borough. Many women of all ages find it unsafe to travel in the underground or to wait at a bus stop at night. This vulnerability is only exacerbated by recent incidents of moped crime, and telephone and handbag snatching. Furthermore, there is always the danger of having your drink spiked in pubs or bars.

I live near Elephant and Castle where I know people, including myself, who have been victims of crime. Neighbours have been mugged on the street (their watches and wallets were snatched). While, I have experienced on three different occasions harassment at night. One of these moments included being pushed by a woman on a bike and the other instances were perpetuated by drunken men. I, also, vividly remember being in a bus when I was pushed and insulted for speaking Spanish and for defending other women who had been badly verbally abused.

My personal experience, alongside similar recollections from others, makes it clear to me that there is much to do in Southwark to make it a safe place for all residents. No one should feel in danger on their journey home, nor should it be acceptable for any form of abuse to take place on the borough's streets.

We all have to be vigilant. We should not be scared of walking home in the evening or of crossing a park alone. I believe we can make a difference for our residents. We can start by:

- Lobbying TfL to improve lighting on streets, which are within their remit, in order to make it more difficult for abuse to take place.
- Reviewing council-owned streets and parks to improve lighting where poorly lit – especially near areas that have late night licensed venues.
- Calling on City Hall to announce a moratorium on all police station closures and a doubling of the number of dedicated ward officers.
- Bringing back community policing – not just during the day – but at night too.

## **Gender-Based Abuse or Violence, Sexual Harassment and Domestic Violence**

Violence against women and girls in all its forms is unacceptable.

‘Violence against women and girls’ includes: sexual violence, domestic violence, stalking and harassment, discrimination and abuse, female genital mutilation, forced marriage and so-called ‘honour-based violence’, trafficking and prostitution, and abuse of women and girls in online spaces.

It affects all communities and has an incalculable impact on the lives of those individuals affected, their families and the wider community. The tragic death of Sarah Everard has opened our eyes. And even more recently we have heard the news of an attack on another young woman, Sasha Johnson, the BLM activist shot in Peckham.

I welcome government announcements of taking steps to give "further reassurance" to women and girls in the wake of aforementioned violent acts. Nonetheless, I doubt that they will act on a sufficient-enough scale. We consequently have to be positive and investigate all the possible preventative avenues.

These episodes of violence are all too common. In the UK, Sarah was one of 118 women to have died this year as a result of gendered violence. To add to this, 80% of women of all ages have been sexually harassed in public, with 90% of these women not reporting it as they do not believe it will make a difference. Even more shocking is the fact that one in five women will be raped in their lifetime.

Many forms of abuse are committed disproportionately against women and girls, and the perpetrators are usually men. Violence against women and girls occurs in every society around the world. Women’s further inequality as a result of wealth, social class, sexuality, gender identity, ethnicity, disability, mental health, and age, makes them more likely to experience violence and less likely to access justice and support.

Domestic abuse, in particular, is a subject which I have deep experience of through the work of my charity Su Mano Amiga. We define domestic abuse as an incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening, degrading and violent behaviour, including sexual violence, in the majority of cases by a partner or ex-partner, but also by a family member or carer. It is very common. In the vast majority of cases it is experienced by women and is perpetrated by men. Domestic abuse can include, but is not limited to, the following: coercive control (a pattern of intimidation, degradation, isolation and control with the use or threat of physical or sexual violence), psychological and/or emotional abuse, physical or sexual abuse, financial or economic abuse, harassment and stalking and online or digital abuse.

I have learnt how domestic abuse often relies on isolating the victim: the perpetrator will work to weaken connections with family and friends, making it extremely difficult for the sufferer to seek support. They will often try to reduce a victim’s contact with the outside world to prevent them from recognising that the behaviour is abusive and wrong. Isolation then leads victims to become extremely dependent on their controlling partner.

These tendencies were magnified by lockdowns in the past year. Referrals to the Southwark Domestic Abuse Advocacy and Support Service for survivor support rose by 25% year on year between 1st April and 30th June in 2020. For victims aged 16 to 25, referrals jumped by

46%. What makes this all the worse is that Southwark has a particular problem with domestic abuse and has some of the highest volumes of abuse in London. My charity experience shows that cases of domestic abuse escalated to more than 50% from the previous year.

To help stop this, first of all, we should be very clear that the fighting of every kind of domestic violence deserves support and resources. However, the link between hatred of women and domestic violence is glaringly obvious. We must recognise the root of domestic abuse. What the evidence tells us is that disproportionately it is women and girls who are the victims or who are often repeat victims.

Misogyny (i.e. hatred of women) has always been an unwelcome aspect of society. Unfortunately, it has never been made a hate crime. If we make misogyny a hate crime, in the same way that racial or religious hatred are motivated crimes, we would be acknowledging how hatred and hostility of women causes harm.

It is also worth noting that women are not alone in gender specific safety. Although there has been some research published looking specifically at same-sex domestic abuse and the prevalence rate of domestic abuse for lesbians, gay men and (to a lesser extent) bisexual people, there has been no published research focussed solely on transgender people's experiences of domestic abuse in the UK. General research, nonetheless, estimates that 73% of transgender people have experienced transphobic harassment. One survey found that 46% of respondents had experienced transphobic abuse within a domestic relationship. This has to be accounted for too when doing any work on women's safety.

I, therefore, ask for at least the following:

- To rapidly expand the safe spaces programme as a council for women, girls and other vulnerable groups in Southwark fleeing violence.
- To keep campaigning to give free travel to anyone fleeing domestic abuse on TfL and London Rail services.
- To continue pushing for misogyny to become a hate crime, as led by Liberal Democrat MP Wera Hobhouse who presented the Hate Crime (Misogyny) Bill 2019-21 in March 2020.
- To recognise how misogyny intersects with anti-black racism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, homophobia and other forms of discrimination in order to map and understand how other forms of abuse affect women in specific and intersectional ways.
- To promote greater inter-governmental work. Ministers have announced that police forces will be asked to record and identify crimes of violence. I believe that local government such as Southwark Council, London Councils and central government should work together to achieve this.

## **Schools and Cyberbullying**

Recent surveys have revealed shocking accounts of escalating online violence against girls and women, with respondents exposed to explicit messages, pornographic photos, cyberstalking and other forms of internet abuse. Attacks are most common on Facebook, followed by Instagram and WhatsApp.

Abuse causes problems at school. When asked who was perpetrating the violence, half said they experienced harassment from people at school or work. A high percentage blamed a friend or former partners. Many said they had been harassed by anonymous social media users. For girls who identified as LGBTIQ+ online, close to half said they experienced harassment due to their sexual or gender identity, and a greater number of girls who identified as an ethnic minority said they had been specifically targeted because of this.

To help stop this we should:

- Ensure every school has measures in place to prevent all forms of bullying.
- Regularly publish advice about cyberbullying, as the council, on social media for all ages but especially youth and gender specific groups.
- Improve sex education in schools, which would entail sessions targeted at boys to give them better understanding of the issues that affect women and girls.

## **Women in the workplace**

More and more of us have started to question the way women are treated in the workplace, the way we are objectified in public, and how sexism is ingrained into society. This whole area deserves a study in itself of how the council should act– but I will make some brief points.

To help tackle this issue we should at least:

- Be engaging as a council with all Southwark businesses and ensuring that they are encouraged to help women feel safe in their workplace and when travelling.
- Be developing community awareness programmes that include businesses and resident groups.

## **Community Groups Such as Latin Americans in Southwark**

We live in a diverse community and this is what I love about living in London and especially Southwark. However, we continue to witness challenges to our core principles and values.

We need to support efforts to welcome the ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious diversity in our societies and make use of it to bolster social cohesion and growth.

For example, Southwark has over 8,000 Latin Americans living in the borough. Although female Latin Americans are not the only women facing unsafe conditions, they frequently struggle with the specific obstacle that is their language barrier. In my experience, Spanish speakers have often been targets of abuse. While, it is also evident that the lack of Spanish

speakers in relevant services presents a hurdle for Latin Americans when it comes to communicating and being able to report crime.

I, therefore, ask for the following:

- That Southwark endeavour to provide as much Spanish-language material as possible and to promote greater availability of translators for necessary services.
- That the council encourage the learning of other languages across Southwark and promote the understanding of communities, their religions and cultures.
- That council data records Latin American ethnicity, so as to provide more accurate statistics and to enable people of this ethnicity to feel part of the community.

## **Reporting Crimes Against Women**

UN Women suggests 97% of young women in the UK have been sexually harassed; very few report it. Almost every woman has tales of encounters ranging from verbal abuse to physical assaults that often date back to childhood.

No woman should live in fear of violence, and every girl should grow up knowing she is safe, so that she can have the best start in life.

To improve the situation, measures should be taken to:

- Explore the possibility of making appropriate rooms in council-owned or managed buildings available free of charge to the police as a safe space for informal meetings with members of the public.
- Explore the possibility of working with the NHS, faith groups and other relevant organisations to support them in making appropriate rooms available to the police as a safe space for informal meetings with members of the public.
- Improve victims' access to justice, including steps to facilitate reporting of crime and harassment to the police.
- Improve crime recording by law enforcement and prosecution by criminal justice.
- Ensure that relevant penalties and sanctions are effective, proportionate and dissuasive.
- Do more as a council to work with Southwark and Lambeth Borough Command Units on improving women's safety in Southwark.

## **Conclusion**

Women's safety requires the cooperation and engagement of multiple sectors of society including (but not limited to) the criminal justice system, education, health services, police and specialised support services for victims.

It requires promotion of equality and the elimination of gender stereotypes, challenging engrained and institutionalised attitudes towards violence, and the cooperation and

coordination of multiple services for victims. It is toward this purpose that we will need to focus our work.

Women will not be able to trust that they are safe until misogyny and racism are tackled. Ultimately, we must drive out violence against women and girls in our borough, and make every part of the criminal justice system work better to protect and defend them. The protection of women from harassment and other crimes of violence is an urgent necessity.

Southwark Council must do everything in its power to bring relief to suffering by taking faster and more effective actions such as those set out above without delay.