

Liberal Democrats Response to the End Violence Against Women Coalition

If elected, how would your Government ensure that every woman and girl at risk of, or who has survived abuse, can access a high quality support service, whether it be crisis accommodation, counselling for abuse that happened many years ago or legal advocacy and advice? And, given the known funding crisis facing many of these local, independent and women-led services, will you consider new laws or provisions to enforce commissioning guidelines which hold local commissioners to account for the decisions they make?

We all have a duty to do what we can to prevent violence and abuse against women and girls, and to support victims. We must make sure that women and girls across the country have access to Rape Crisis Centres and other vital services. The Liberal Democrats will provide government funding for a national rape crisis helpline with increased opening hours and advertisement, so that victims can get the support they need whenever they need it. We'll also conduct an urgent review of the government's recent changes to Legal Aid, to make sure that victims of domestic and other violence have proper legal representation.

In Coalition we also took steps to ensure support, both legal and practical, was available to survivors of abuse and those at risk. For example, we piloted then rolled out 'Clare's law' - , allowing an individual to ask the police to check whether a new or existing partner has a violent past ('right to ask'). We also introduced a change in the definition of domestic violence and abuse widening it to include young people aged 16 to 17 who exhibited coercive control – a pattern of controlling behaviour.

But abuse takes many forms and that is why we have worked to end forced marriage and FGM at home and abroad. Lynne Featherstone, first as a Minister in the Department for International Development and then in the Home Office championed work to end FGM in a generation – introducing better laws and training for those on the front line, and working with partners to end forced marriage wherever it happens.

If elected, would your Government continue to make changes to the criminal justice system to ensure that survivors have access to justice and perpetrators are held to account for these very serious crimes? This means urgently acting to stop the use of victim-blaming sexual history and other evidence used to undermine rape survivors. It means ensuring all women have access to legal aid and advocacy for as long as they need it. And it means instructing local areas not to roll out restorative justice for these crimes unless women's organisations are confident it is being done in a way which will not harm survivors.

We must make the criminal justice system work as it should: listening to and supporting victims, and making sure that offenders are brought to justice. The Liberal Democrats will urgently review the way cases of sexual and domestic violence are handled. That review should look to improve every step of the process: investigation, prosecution, procedures and rules of evidence – including the use of sexual history and medical evidence. We will also review the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act, to ensure that no victims are left without legal support and forced to take on their abuser or attacker in court themselves.

In the last Parliament it was the Liberal Democrats that secured a review from the Government on the use of section 41 of the Youth and Criminal Evidence Act 1999, which allows a victim's sexual history to be used as evidence against them. At the time our Justice Spokesperson who led the fight on this said, this practice "raised fears that complainants will be deterred from reporting rape because they might be cross-examined about their sexual history". We are clear that everything should be done to ensure that victims come forward and seek justice.

If elected, would your Government make it a priority for all public services, especially the health service, schools and the welfare system, to play their part in tackling abuse? This means health workers being trained not to miss abuse. It means welfare policy which doesn't stigmatise women or minimise the impact of abuse. It means schools delivering high quality Relationships and Sex Education which is accompanied by better school policies and training in detecting and responding to abuse. And, it means asylum and immigration systems which do not deter women from seeking protection.

As with so many problems, combatting violence against women and girls begins at school. The Liberal Democrats will make sure all schools teach age-appropriate Sex and Relationship Education, as part of a slimmed-down core curriculum that we will extend to academies and free schools. As part of this, children will be taught about sexual consent, as well as issues surrounding online pornography that can contribute to sexual violence.

It is horrifying that the Conservative government has introduced a policy whereby, in order to receive the benefits they are entitled to, mothers who have experienced sexual assault have to fill in an eight-page form affirming that their child was conceived through rape. The Liberal Democrats will abolish that appalling form by scrapping the Conservatives' policy of limiting family benefits to the first two children.

Many women who come to the UK as domestic workers are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse by their employers. The Liberal Democrats are committed to ending that abuse, and we will train police and prosecutors to identify and support victims of modern slavery. We will also provide information meetings to give overseas domestic workers a proper understanding of their rights and advice on how to get help. To make sure victims are properly supported and are not prevented from coming forward, we will give those workers recourse to public funds if they are victims of abuse.

The Liberal Democrats are determined to tackle violence against women and girls, not only in Britain but around the world. Central to our foreign policy is support, protection and equal rights for women and girls, and we will work to end female genital mutilation worldwide within a generation.

If elected, would your Government ensure that women and girls' rights are protected in any negotiations to leave the EU? This means that the many advances in equality and human rights

law which benefit women in the UK are protected and there is no slip backwards because of Brexit.

The Liberal Democrats are fully committed to defending the rights and equalities of every person in the UK and around the world. Many of the protections we enjoy today are based on EU law and the judgments of the European Court of Justice, and we will fight to ensure that those protections are not undermined when we leave the EU. We will oppose any attempt to withdraw from the European Convention on Human Rights or to abolish or water down the Human Rights Act. Instead, we will strengthen the UK's commitment to international human rights law.

However, Theresa May's extreme Brexit agenda risks undermining these protections and wrecking the future for all of us. The choices she makes in the negotiations will affect every aspect of life in this country for decades to come. That's why we want to give you the final say on the final Brexit deal in a referendum. The British people should decide the country's future, not politicians. And if you don't like the deal, you should have the option to reject it and remain in the EU.