

Briefing for members of the Policy influencing Community of Interest on Domestic Abuse, August 2020

Rationale

In November, 2019, following the outcomes from MULO from around the world, the Worldwide Board approved Gender Justice as the overarching umbrella for MU policy influencing around the world for the coming Triennium

Following on from the pandemic, sadly, domestic abuse has been referred to as “the second pandemic”, with rates globally soaring as a result of lockdown. For this reason, the Board voted in May, 2020, for domestic abuse to be the particular focus for the next couple of years.

At the same time, conversations within Britain and Ireland and also around the world highlighted MU’s existing active and practical engagement with domestic abuse, for example in supporting refugees and communicating to people at risk how they could get help. In a number of countries, MU is seeking to work with others on major long-term behavioural change programmes which address domestic abuse. In Britain and Ireland, MU, as elsewhere, has a heritage of committed activism during the annual 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence, including domestic abuse. There is a strong feeling amongst Diocesan Presidents in the wake of the pandemic, that MU should build on this by finding opportunities to speak out about what needs to change. The first of these is the UK’s Domestic Abuse Bill, currently passing through Parliament.

The Domestic Abuse Bill

This first started to progress through Parliament in 2018, when MU made a short submission of evidence. It was put on hold during the Brexit negotiations, and came back in early 2020.

It reached the scrutiny stage in the House of Commons in June, when a coalition of specialist agencies submitted a large body of evidence (see attachment 1) and MU sent a letter to the Committee (see attachment 2)

It received a first hearing in the House of Lords in July, and is expected to continue its passage through the Lords in late September. Draft guidance, which accompanies the Bill, has also been issued and will be scrutinized alongside it

What have we done so far?

1. Within MU:

- There is currently no Policy specialist on the staff team, and there is unlikely to be one before the end of 2021, or until the finances of the Charity have sufficiently improved. So the CEO is leading from the staff perspective, alongside Worldwide Board member and Provincial President for All Ireland, June Butler.
- We have created a worldwide advisory group, which includes Jenny Brown, Church Advocacy lead for Christian Aid, with extensive experience of influencing and Mandy Marshall, formerly CEO of Restored and now Gender Justice Director for the Anglican Communion Office (ACO)

2. Externally:

We recognize our own capacity limitations, and the value of learning from others and working collaboratively wherever possible. We have therefore been reaching out to individuals and organisations who have high quality, experienced policy expertise, and benefiting from their advice . Groups we have spoken to include Women’s Aid, Restored, the Faith against VAWG Coalition and the Church of England.

We have partnered with the ACO to submit a paper with evidence of the increase of domestic abuse since the start of the pandemic in a range of countries across the globe, and included also examples of how MU is working to counter this. (Attachment 3, for information only)

3. The Domestic Abuse Bill.

This has been our focus in recent months **in Britain and Ireland.**

Our letter to the Scrutiny Committee built on themes already researched and submitted by others and focused on areas of injustice, inequality and discrimination.

We argued in particular that the definition of domestic abuse recognize its gendered nature; that the injustice of the “no recourse to public funds” policy be abolished for migrant women; that the family courts system should provide adequate protection for both survivors and their children, and that the default position for Universal Credit should be that survivors can access *separate* payments. Last, but by no means least, we called for the role of faith to be properly taken into consideration – both as a potential justification for domestic abuse, and also, very importantly, that faith-based organisations can be sources of support and advice for survivors

Good progress on a number of fronts has been made as the Bill has moved forward, but we remain very concerned about the **absence of protection for migrant women**, and the **lack of engagement with the faith community in this critical area**.

The CEO has met with Bishop Rachel Treweek, who is leading on this Bill for the Lords Spiritual. She would value the informed, grassroots voice of MU to support her call to her fellow bishops, and to other peers, as she seeks to raise their awareness of and engagement with the remaining key issues. In the longer term, she hopes to push for change within as well as beyond the institutional Church.

Possible next steps?

Immediate term

- Mid-late September, MU to write letters to Bishops (and potentially also MPs) to reinforce the messages from Bishop Rachel concerning the DA Bill and associated Guidance.
- Possible letter from CEO to Lords scrutiny committee.
- Possible contact by the CEO with the Domestic Abuse Commissioner
- 16 Days of Activism (November-December) may be an opportunity to build on this further in the UK and generate momentum globally on the issue
- National Day on 5th December will focus on 1:3 women globally suffering from domestic abuse

Longer term

- Potentially partner with Bishop Rachel’s team as they work within C of E structures. This could involve submitting questions to parishes and dioceses about what is being done within the Church, to address and reduce domestic abuse; perhaps also helping local churches to improve their ability to signpost to appropriate specialist support
- Explore with others what other opportunities might exist for MU to influence for positive change around the issue, and how those might be pursued.

Guidance is sought from the Group on:

- whether the proposed steps make sense and would be areas in which dioceses could engage
- how best MU could engage in influencing to combat domestic abuse going forward
- whether it would be helpful to have a smaller steering group to take forward (whilst keeping all informed) – and any volunteers or recommendations?