

Chair: Amber Rudd MP

Speakers: Helen Grant MP (Minister for Women and Equalities); Mary-Ann Stephenson (former commissioner of the Women's National Commission); Debora Singer MBE (Policy and Research Manager, Asylum Aid)

THE ALL PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP ON SEX EQUALITY

Women's Voices to Government

Thursday 9 May 2013, Committee Room 6

Minutes

1. Registered attendees

Scarlet Harris, TUC	Clare Knights, Unison
Chris Green, White Ribbon Campaign	Baroness Prosser
Sophie Bennett, Object	Harriet Baldwin MP
Sharon Greene, Unison	Baroness Howe
Francesca Romita, WRC	Baroness Gibson
Caroline Adams, Parliamentary Labour Party	Fiona Mactaggart MP
Hannah Verghese, The Migrane Trust	Sandra Osborne MP
Ellie Cumbo, EAW	Anne Milton MP
Wanda Wyporska, The Association of Teachers and Lecturers	Mary Macleod MP
	Kate Green MP
Caroline Taylor, The Taylor Report	

Apologies from Lord Smith of Clifton, Vice-Chair of the APPG on Sex Equality, who was speaking on gender equality in the [Queen's Speech debate](#).

2. Amber Rudd MP (Chair)

- Amber Rudd MP introduced the meeting, which is last in a series on women's access to power.
- She introduced the speakers: Helen Grant, Minister for Women and Equalities, who will speak on the progress on Government's current and future strategy for strengthening women's voices;

Mary-Ann Stephenson, a former commissioner of the Women's National Commission; and Debora Singer, working for Asylum Aid with marginalized women.

- She noted the underrepresentation of women MPs and political journalists, and indicated that the latter may be a future topic for discussion at the APPG for Sex Equality.

3. Helen Grant MP (Minister for Women and Equalities)

- The Minister highlighted that she had been brought up by three strong matriarchal women who had taught her if you work hard, aim high, be resourceful, take risks you can achieve well in this country.
- However, as she grew older, she found if you are a women attempting to climb the corporate ladder or the political ladder, or start your own enterprise, there were a number of barriers that you face. In her 23 years as a family lawyer prior to becoming an MP, she also came across a considerable and extreme amount of gendered violence.
- The Minister emphasized that it was her great pleasure to be one of three Ministers for Women and Equalities and that these issues are close to her heart. The Government aims to eradicate all forms of gender inequality, and in order to do so, she recognizes that there is a need to listen, learn and respond to women's needs and concerns, which is why they set up the women's engagement programme to engage with women and women's groups.
- The Minister stated that the Government's women's engagement programme is run and managed by the Government Equalities Office, who work with other government departments. Engagement has involved roundtables, with around twenty have been organized so far for 2013, and 5 already having taken place; on women in the law, BME women in business, women in sport, disadvantaged groups, and younger and older women.
- They are also using the Women's Engagement newsletter as a crucial tool to engage with women, covering issues that will be of interest to women and flagging opportunities to engage, such as consultation. They send out over 2,000 of these newsletters and they estimate that they reach around 1 million women using this newsletter. They aim to increase this to 2 million. 'Newsflashes' are also a good way of profiling single issues, with a focuses so far on International Women's Day activities and the successful UN agreement on Violence against Women.
- The Government are also holding bilateral meetings between the GEO and NGOs, as well as ad hoc meetings with organizations such as the Women's Business Council. It also falls within the Equality and Human Rights Commission's remit to engage and consult with women, and the radical EHRC reforms aim to make it a fit vehicle for this.

- The Minister noted that the Government has international obligations under CEDAW, which they take very seriously. She flagged that the Government have had extensive engagement with women and their organizations prior to the March CEDAW meetings. There is also the CEDAW committee evidence session in July and the Government will exchange extensively with women and women's organizations ahead of this.
- The Minister highlighted that there are three ministers for Women and Equalities – herself, Jo Swinson and Maria Miller - who all have responsibilities in other government departments. Therefore, in addition to engaging with women directly, the Minister has opportunities within her justice portfolio to engage with issues of women's equalities, such as women in the criminal justice system.
- The Minister emphasized that the GEO and Ministers are very open minded about how the Government engage with women in the future.

4. Mary-Ann Stephenson (former commissioner of WNC)

- Mary-Ann Stephenson is a former commissioner of the Women's National Commission, which was established in 1969 and abolished in 2010. Mary-Ann began by stating that engagement with women via women's voluntary organizations is crucial, as women's organizations are best placed to facilitate direct engagement with women, especially marginalized women. In Coventry, Mary-Ann coordinates a network of women's organizations called Coventry Women's Voices, and will give examples from her experience with this.
- In Coventry, Foleshill Women's Training works with South Asian women in the poorest areas of the city, who have limited spoken English. The women's-only centre runs English classes, job skills training, health sessions, but also is able to organize and facilitate discussions with women who would not otherwise be engaged through mechanisms like online surveys. Also in Coventry is Valley House, which largely works with white working class teenage mothers, another group of women not often heard. These women trust Valley House and will take part in consultations if supported by staff there – some of them were even supported to attend a meeting at Westminster a year ago.
- Mary-Ann emphasized that the women's sector is very diverse – groups like the Women's Institute, the Mothers Union and so on represent a more middle England voice, but have direct understanding of issues caused by domestic violence, problems for carers, isolation caused by poor public transport, and rural poverty.
- She highlighted that as well as acting as a bridge between women and the Government, women's organizations can see overall patterns in the impact of policy and service delivery upon

women, rather than just relying upon anecdotes; for example, Coventry Rape Crisis is able to identify when a number of women complain that the police have not investigated their rape allegation, rather than seeing them as isolated incidents. Similarly, if a single young woman with learning difficulties has her benefits sanctioned, a group working with people with learning difficulties might notice that there is increased pattern of benefit sanctions happening with their clients. At best, this suggests a series of mistakes in the Jobcentre, at worse, that vulnerable people are being targeted to hit an unofficial target for sanctions. This is why it is important to consult with women's organizations as well as individual women.

- Since the abolition of the Women's National Commission, this oversight of women's issues no longer exists to the same extent. When the WNC was abolished, it was said that there would be new, more direct engagement between Ministers and women (despite the fact that the WNC was already supporting direct engagement with women). The new platform is an e-Newsletter and ad hoc meetings with small groups of women. Mary-Ann had spoken to a number of women's organizations in Coventry that had been involved in the WNC, asking what they had heard from the Government in the last few years. The general response was 'nothing'. One woman said, 'We get a newsletter with pictures of Ministers meeting a few women's organizations in London, but this isn't engagement with us. We need to know what was said in those meetings, what concerns were being raised, and what the government plans to do about this. We also need to know how we can get to those meetings and what processes enable groups like us to participate.'
- With the loss of the WNC, there was the loss of a bridge between the Government and the voluntary sector. For example, when the Department of Health wanted to find out more about experience of women victims of violence, it commissioned the WNC to organize workshops with women whose voices were never normally heard. These workshops only happened because of the relationship of trust that had built up between local women's organizations and women, local women's organizations and the WNC. These women would never have engaged otherwise, having been let down by government services so many times.
- This genuinely positive engagement meant that the WNC was seen as a worthwhile body by women and women's organizations. Funding cuts to the women's sector have meant that consultations could be increasingly just another burden upon individual organizations, unless it is clear that they will have an impact and that women's voices are being listened to. Women's sector organizations can bring detailed analysis and expertise needed to inform government policy; for example, the Women's Budget Group repeatedly pointing out all the research and evidence showing that money paid to mothers is more likely to reach their children than that paid to fathers, which made the Treasury change their mind about the way they paid child tax credits. It was the WNC who facilitated these meetings with the Treasury, making sure that the Women's Budget Group got to see the right officials at the right time.

- Mary-Ann noted that this level of engagement is not happening at the moment and that women's organizations can flag unintended consequences of policy to government. She pointed to an example of a food bank recently been set up in a relatively prosperous small market town near Coventry, Kennelworth. The local women's organizations - the WI, Mother's Union, etc. - can tell you that the relatively prosperous appearance of the town hides a growing incidence of extreme poverty. She emphasized that these concerns will only be heard if the bridge operates in both directions – if there are opportunities for women to go to government and raise their concerns, as well as government consulting them.
- The WNC also set up specialist groups; the VAW working group, coordinated by the WNC, coordinated all the VAW agencies to provide a single voice to government. It operated on expertise, trust and understanding between women and their organizations. Although this work has been continued by EAW, the direct connection to government provided by the WNC has been lost.
- Mary-Ann emphasized that the WNC was embedded in policy making from its inception: it sat in on internal meetings, could flag up issues with government before consultations were published, could alert the women's sector of new policy developments. The WNC also uniquely brought together women from across the four nations of the UK to share experiences and insights. WEN Wales said they have not had contact with Westminster government for several years. Obviously some issues relate to the devolved government, but others do not: for example, welfare reform.
- Mary-Ann concluded by stating that the WNC was unique in the way in which it brought together women's organizations and issues, and it was regarded as a strong model for engagement by governments and women's organizations from across the world. She noted that women's organizations were offered a new improved platform for engagement with women and, from the perspective of women in Coventry, we are still waiting.

5. Debora Singer (Asylum Aid)

- Debora Singer works for Asylum Aid with marginalized groups of women. She began by pointing to a few examples of the positive impact of engaging women and women's groups. Fifteen years ago, a group of destitute women, academics and lawyers put together guidelines to show how women can be treated fairly in the asylum system. After a few years of lobbying, the Home Office adopted those guidelines and the UK is still one of the few countries in Europe that has guidelines like this. In a further example from a few years ago, the UK Border Agency and organizations like Southall Black Sisters were part of a working group that resulted in a domestic violence and destitution concession. This meant that women asylum seekers facing domestic violence had a way out. Both examples show the benefits of women and the organizations working with them speaking directly to policy makers and the Government.

- The main organization enabling marginalized groups to speak to Government was the WNC. Debora Singer was a partner of the WNC as part of Asylum Aid since 2004. At that time, the VAW sector was very fragmented and what was apparent was that the WNC was able to pull groups together and bring together proposals for an integrated strategy on VAW. The work the WNC did through focus groups resulted in a report called 'Still We Rise', which is a really good example of women's voices being brought directly to government - including women asylum seekers talking about destitution forcing them into prostitution. This contributed to the first Violence Against Women strategy for government in 2009.
- Debora also highlighted that being part of the WNC reduced the marginalization that women of BME groups and asylum seekers face, as the WNC put those issues into the women's agenda, providing a forum to meet ministers, talk to civil servants directly and hold them to account. The WNC also helped identify policy disparities and coordinate between women's groups. It was very important for smaller women's organizations, which were included and given access to government.
- Debora noted that since the WNC was abolished, there has been no forum and no single body to comment with a single voice on issues. She also felt that there has been a lack of transparency from government on its engagement strategy: for example, the way in which Ministers have selected organizations to engage with in meetings. Many organizations have not been made aware of roundtables, nor how to engage with them, including Asylum Aid, who have been unable to get the GEO into discussions with the UK Border Agency and themselves.
- She was concerned that the impact of this is being seen in policy: government policies are not lining up for women and we are seeing discrepancies and fragmentation, but there is no way to raise this with government. For example, if you are a victim of domestic/sexual violence, the police ought to believe victims – and government have made lots of statements to this effect recently. However, the key reason that women are refused asylum in the UK is because they are not believed when they make claims based on sexual violence in their home countries.
- Debora called for a widening of the framework of engagement to involve marginalized women, who might be harder to reach through digital engagement. To do this, she called for well resourced mechanisms involving a wide range of organizations and a renewed Women's Voices to Government agenda from government.

6. Questions and discussions

- Harriet Baldwin MP stated that she follows women's issues closely, but had never heard of the WNC until today. While she acknowledged the importance of women's organizations inputting directly into government and ministers, she also raised the importance of bottom up

engagement by women's organisations with local MPs as a powerful mechanism for change – for example, organizing local letter writing campaigns of their members.

- Mary-Ann Stephenson pointed out that WNC was an insider organization started by civil servants and aimed at influencing government, with very little public profile, at least initially. When it was closed down, they chose not to launch a public campaign around the gender architecture of government. However, she highlighted that women's organizations in Coventry are constantly writing to the local MP on the loss of local services, although not always with great effect.
- Debora Singer added that with the asylum campaign, 'Missed Out', the WNC would have been able to influence central government with much greater effect than 300 MPs hearing from 800 people.
- Baroness Prosser emphasized that with the loss of the WNC came a loss of collective learning which had a huge impact on government policy and the provision of services. The WNC built up a database and played a coordinating role for the women's sector by introducing groups, sharing resources and also coordinating across government. She noted that the GEO does not perform the same function as the WNC as a hub of women's sector information. This role has now been fragmented and decentralized, but it is unclear to whom the function of the WNC has been devolved. She argued that, in many ways, the whole network has collapsed, with women's organizations struggling in the absence of a coordinating body and a single voice to help overcome the challenges they face. The WNC's budget was just £350,000 a year, but it was immensely valuable and its abolition was a waste.
- It was raised that women's organizations do not know how to proactively engage with the GEO and the engagement agenda is not transparent – for example, the process and basis on which organizations are selected to attend roundtables.
- The Minister acknowledged that the WNC was very valuable and performed much good work over the years. She echoed other MPs present in stating that they had never heard of the WNC until being in parliament. She also stated that good engagement from government is happening, and that while there are limits to what they can achieve with their resources, they are ambitious. She agreed that trust and collective learning are critical and offered to meet with Debora Singer and Mary-Ann Stephenson to discuss taking an engagement programme further.
- Helen Reardon Bond, head of gender equality policy and inclusion at the GEO, stated that the Government's Strengthening Women's Voices consultation had yielded mixed results on an IT platform, and that further research had shown that a newsletter was a better platform than a website to reach women. A women's engagement newsletter which could be featured on women's organizations websites would reach more women. She also noted that this meeting

was timely, as the GEO are open to discussion about the next steps on their women's engagement strategy and are committed to improving the model of engagement going forwards.

7. Concluding comments

- Mary-Ann Stephenson highlighted the importance of cross-government engagement, not just from one minister. She noted that although many women did not know what the WNC was, they did know the women's organization to which they belonged – and these were part of the WNC. Therefore the WNC was not some remote organization, but directly engaged with women through their organisations. It was also pointed out that women would no more have heard of the GEO than the WNC.
- Amber Rudd noted that the loss of the WNC had led to a lack of coordination and influencing opportunities for women's sector organizations. She highlighted the potential for Helen Grant, Helen Reardon Bond, Baroness Prosser, Mary-Ann Stephenson and Debora Singer to organize a further meeting on women's engagement.