

## Petition 1307

### Response from Petitioners to submission by Scottish Government in response to written questions from the Petitions Committee meeting of 18<sup>th</sup> May 2010.

Before we address the above we will respond to some of the statements made at the Petitions Committee meeting on May 18<sup>th</sup>.

***Nigel Don:***

*“The conclusion that I draw is that there is a need for more research into the issue. I just do not think that we know enough about it, and the honest correspondents also recognise that.”*

We welcome this statement. In our previous submission to the Petitions Committee we offered to arrange an event where some of the most respected UK researchers in domestic abuse could present robust, up to date findings so that MSPs and other decision/policy makers might be better informed.

We are pleased to say that the Minister, Alex Neil, has agreed to facilitate such an event and Alison Waugh and John Forsyth are currently working with Lesley Irving and Jillian Gilchrist of the Equality and Violence Against Women Team, to arrange it. As well as updating knowledge, this event will help us all clarify what further research may be needed.

***Rhona Brankin:***

*‘One question that we should ask the Government is whether it has done any gendered analysis of the situation.’*

To our knowledge the Scottish Government’s *only* analysis of the situation is a ‘gendered’ analysis.

*‘I would not want us to accept that there should necessarily be some sort of dismantling of the Government’s approach to violence against women in recognising that men also experience violence.’*

We have never suggested ‘dismantling’ the Government’s approach to domestic violence; we merely ask that it cease to exclude or dismiss the experience of abused men and their children.

***John Wilson:***

*‘We have to get the message out to individuals who need such support and advice, but we also need to address the underlying problem of the lack of facilities or support systems for men and their children to fall back on.’*

This is our aim too.

**Bill Butler:**

*'...some of the evidence that we received from the petitioners was controversial, to say the least. I certainly did not accept all of it.'*

Having endeavoured to ensure all evidence presented was correct we were anxious to discover what it was that Mr Butler did not accept so that any inaccuracies could be rectified or statements justified. Alison Waugh emailed Mr Butler in early June and invited him to list the areas of our evidence and references with which he had problems but no reply has as yet been received.

*'...I will take some persuading to accept the views expressed by the two—if you like—professional folk who were the petitioners. Indeed, I might never be persuaded. I did not find their evidence at all convincing in any regard. Is that clear enough for the record, convener?'*

We want it on the record: that Mr Butler has failed to clarify what aspect of our evidence he believes to be incorrect or misleading; that we are extremely shocked by Mr Butler's statements and his clear implication that we as petitioners are somehow acting in bad faith. We were not at the table and therefore not in a position to defend ourselves and guess that "professional folk who were the petitioners" was not intended as a compliment.

It is clear that we have funded all our efforts, time and commitment up to this point from our own resources in addition to our own jobs. We have been pressed, paid or funded by no one to raise this petition. We do not understand why Mr Butler saw fit to make the aside at all.

It should not be necessary for us to remind the committee that our motives in this endeavour arose entirely from a deeply felt need to help address a situation that has been destroying the lives of many men in Scotland and their families – men we know personally and men who have been in touch because they have heard about our efforts. It is not a comfortable message to hear but having discovered it we feel morally compelled to bring it to your attention.

*'Although we can ask the Government whether it wants to examine some of the issues and carry out more research, I think that we should be very careful indeed about accepting the premise on which the petitioners based their petition.'*

We trust the Government is not being asked to reject the research evidence that lends credence to our case and if Mr Butler thinks our premise is anything other than we have explicitly stated – that all people in Scotland on the receiving end of domestic violence and/or abuse should receive the recognition, acknowledgement and support that they need regardless of sex – then he should state it. Our petition of course explicitly asks the government to accept that premise and demonstrate leadership by amending the current public narrative accordingly.

We also have a query from the meeting: Nigel Don mentioned the Caledonian Programme for men and 'the connection's women's programme'. We are not familiar with the latter and wonder if we might have further information, please.

## Submissions

In our previous response to the committee we expressed major concern about some of the submissions, in particular those from local authority services clearly unaware of the plight faced by men who experience domestic abuse and apparently unwilling even to recognise their existence. We are disappointed that the Scottish Government has not yet commented on the wide disparity in understanding and attitude towards men and their children displayed by respondents.

We are told in the most recent government submission that, 'Under the Concordat the Scottish Government cannot advise local authorities to act in a particular way.' The local authority attitudes expressed in the submissions do appear to reflect, perhaps even more vehemently, those expressed in the stream of publications on domestic violence emanating from predecessor administrations over the past decade when there appears to have been less inhibition about imposing requirements on local authorities, the NHS and other parts of the public sector. These publications as well as those of the current administration certainly appear to have been taken as 'advice' – on addressing the needs of abused women and their children only.

Now we are told the Scottish Government can 'lead by example'. To ascertain what the substance of that example might be, we list below all the actions, commitments and statements expressed so far.

Firstly from the Scottish Government's response to the petition:

- Funding for one year for a helpline for male victims 'in order to both provide much needed support for men experiencing abuse, and also to gather information about their service needs to inform future funding decisions'.  
*(However we are concerned that initial information released to the committee so far from this helpline places undue emphasis on categorising callers, a procedure not mentioned by women's abuse helplines. See appendix.)*
- A commitment also to seek and use data from the other organisations involved in supporting abused men
- Consideration to be given to an advertising campaign highlighting the experience of male victims
- A commitment to hold one or more Round Table meeting(s) for groups working with male victims and male victims themselves to discuss experiences and service needs. We are working with the Equality & VAW Team on this.
- A commitment to host a seminar for MSPs and possibly other policy makers involving a range of researchers to examine current evidence and identify any gaps. We are working with the Equality & VAW Team on this.
- 'These meetings will also be used to inform future actions.'

We have received further indications of government intentions in correspondence from Alex Neil and from the Violence Against Women Team:

- ‘...a commitment was given to “reviewing the information we put into the public domain about domestic abuse and revising it to ensure it makes more explicit reference to the experiences of male victims.”
- “Work on the website is currently underway and we are taking a gender neutral approach.”
- “...children in this particular experience [affected by domestic abuse/violence against their father or male carer] don’t get access to support. We need to think about what we can do to remedy that.”
- “Materials produced for use in schools in future will highlight men’s experience of domestic abuse.”
- “Guidance to Training Consortia and Multi Agency Partnerships will be reviewed and possibly revised to place more emphasis on men’s experiences.”
- “Information about making men’s experiences of domestic abuse more prominent will be provided to Training Consortia through the regular electronic newsletter.”
- “We have started to take steps to recognise appropriately the needs of male victims in Scotland and we will continue to consider their needs as we move forward with our plans for services into the next spending review period.”

All these statements were made by Alex Neil or members of the E&VAW Team and we welcome both the acknowledgement that change is needed and the expressed desire to effect these changes in the approach to domestic abuse.

That is the minimum that abused men in Scotland, and their children, deserve.

Scotland may in future justify recognition as a world leader in addressing domestic abuse: an informed and inclusive approach is far more likely to lead to a reduction in the prevalence of all domestic abuse to the benefit of society as a whole.

We are under no illusion that there will be pressure on the Scottish Government to restrict itself to fine words and to look for reasons to undermine the claim of abused men and their children for equality of recognition and support.

In this regard we are particularly concerned about the data supplied to the committee by the Mens Advice Line purporting to classify men who call the helpline. (See appendix.)

Alex Neil has demonstrated commendable leadership in taking this important initiative forward against formidable resistance and we appreciate the current cooperation and goodwill of the members of the Equality and VAW Team. We thank the members of the Committee and all others who have supported this petition.

## Appendix

The Men's Advice Line have asked us not to refer to their process of categorising callers to their helpline as a 'screening tool'. We have accommodated their request though the Petitions Committee should be aware their "Respect Toolkit" clearly indicates that the callers and the contents of the calls are being screened by the call handler who then makes entries in a series of pro forma categories drawn up by Respect. This process is generally known as a tool. Respect uses the terms tools and kit throughout their Respect Toolkit.

We think this process is entirely unacceptable and urge the Petitions Committee to advise the Men's Advice Line not to provide these data about Scottish callers.

We have three reasons for urging the committee to take this issue seriously:

Firstly, the data is already being represented (and misrepresented by being inaccurately quoted by organisations that do not want to accept that men can be victims) to suggest that men who do claim to have been abused are probably lying.

Secondly, we see no evidence presented by the Respect Toolkit that there is any robust means of evaluating and validating their interpretation of the data.

The Respect Toolkit explicitly states, [p vi Appendix 4] "... our starting position is this:  
1. Any service aimed at supporting male victims must be founded in an understanding that domestic violence is gender based and not gender neutral ..."

While the claims made by a caller about the conduct of his partner cannot be checked and therefore the categorisation is incapable of verification Respect states that its toolkit has been verified by the Bristol University Centre for Gender and Violence Research which also explicitly takes a gendered analysis of the subject:

"Using a gendered analysis of violence against women, we situate our work, wherever possible, within an activist framework". [University of Bristol website.]

We do not find it a robust methodology to have the propositions of one organisation that insists on a gendered analysis premise tested by another that shares the same premise. In Scottish terms, there is a corroboration problem!

Thirdly, we see screening as appropriate and important for agencies that actually provide services but not appropriate or verifiable for a helpline. Further, we see it as unacceptable that this procedure be applied to only one helpline – for men on the receiving end of abuse – and not for any of the many other helplines available, including those for women on the receiving end of abuse.

In passing it is worth noting that at least two of the 'perpetrator not victim' categories acknowledge some degree of violence by the caller's partner though by definition this information would never appear in the statistics published by any helpline for women claiming to be victims of domestic violence. This is clearly an absurd situation for the Scottish Government to maintain.

We urge the petitions committee to draw these methodological and political problems to the attention of the Scottish Government on the basis they cut across its primary wish to find out what services and forms of support will be most useful for abused men and their children.

A man on the receiving end of abuse and/or violence should have no higher hurdle to clear and no greater institutional resistance to overcome than a woman.