



## In support of women's refuges

**Baroness Claire Fox** warns that proposed legislation to help councils protect women facing domestic violence could end up with unintended consequences

The brutal and tragic murder of Sarah Everard has started a national conversation on violence against women. Some of this seems overblown and teeters on scaremongering.

I do not recognise this picture of femicide – an ‘epidemic of misogyny’ and institutionalised women-hating.

Kidnap and murder of lone women walking at night is rare. When the names of women killed at the hands of a man over the past year was read out by MP Jess Phillips in the House of Commons, the vast majority were women killed in domestic violence scenarios. Should Sarah’s murder be put into the same category? Might that be potentially insensitive and insulting to her boyfriend and male members of her family? Regardless, it was a reminder that domestic abuse is a real scourge and it is why the new Domestic Abuse Bill that is proceeding through the House of Lords, is important.

There is much to admire in the legislation. However, I have spoken about some reservations, such as over-broad definitions of both the terms ‘domestic’ and ‘abuse’ and the continued hybridisation of civil and criminal law that allows people to be criminalised without reaching the threshold of criminal proof. For all that, I was pleased to see the new statutory duty on local authorities to provide accommodation-based services for victims of domestic abuse and their children.

But there’s a catch: many in the Lords raised fears that this could have unintended consequences; that local authorities might simply redistribute funding away from community services in order to meet that statutory need.

It is estimated that accommodation-based

services only cover 25% of support available to domestic abuse victims.

Fleeing to a refuge is often a desperate last resort. We shouldn’t expect the norm to mean victims reorganising their lives and making themselves homeless. Those 75% of community services offer choices.

It would be a cruel irony if well-intended Government’s duty pushed cash-strapped councils into the *Sophie’s Choice* of sacrificing independent domestic violence advisers, outreach support workers and community drop-in services to fulfil a legal obligation to accommodation services.

### Rules associated with inclusive equality are now confused, and worse, they have become tangled up in controversies over biological sex and gender

Funding isn’t the only threat. Even accommodation-based domestic abuse services – when they are for women – are at risk from other factors that the new legal duty on councils will not resolve. The Bill, like so much public policy, is scrupulously gender neutral, only noting once – and then in guidance notes – that women are the majority of those at risk of domestic abuse.

Beyond Parliament, this non-gendered approach has led councils to prioritise inclusive service provision that caters for the needs of all. This can lead to the perverse outcome that women’s refuges are in danger

of losing funding for not being inclusive enough.

This trend is partly because, as newly launched organisation Sex Matters notes, many public bodies are misinterpreting the Equality Act 2010 which clearly protects single-sex exemptions such as women-only services. But rules associated with inclusive equality are now confused, and worse, they have become tangled up in controversies over biological sex and gender. The worry is that local authorities are hiding behind inclusive procurement to avoid those controversies.

Even some service providers themselves seem reluctant to communicate their women-only services clearly, for fear that when they do, councils will use this against them.

As Labour peer Lord Philip Hunt stated bluntly: ‘Local authorities have misinterpreted the Act and are threatening many small charities trying to provide these services at local level, and people there are frightened to speak up because they believe that they will be attacked and, if they are not careful on social media, accused of transphobia.’

Sarah Everard’s death should not make us conclude that all women are under threat. But where a minority of women do face violence, councils can do more than rhetorical posturing, instead heroically supporting practical, life saving, solutions for female victims of domestic abuse. Long live women’s refuges. ■

*Baroness Claire Fox is a member of the House of Lords and director of the Institute of Ideas*

@Fox\_Claire

## soapbox



By Andrew Carter

As we look forward to lockdown ending this summer, political attention is turning to how we repair the economic damage done to our cities.

Understandably, there is a lot of focus on how to support the economies of cities and towns in the North and the Midlands – the places Government has pledged to level up – but it is an unfortunate reality that nowhere has escaped the pandemic’s damage and everywhere will need support in the years ahead. In London, around 500,000 people have lost their job in the past year and Crawley has the largest share of furloughed workers in the UK.

There’s a very real worry that without targeted support, previously more prosperous places such as these will be levelled down post-pandemic, which would reduce the prosperity of the whole country.

So, what do they need to recover? A recent paper Centre for Cities published with the Fast Growth Cities Group of councils – Oxford, Cambridge, Norwich, Milton Keynes, Swindon and Peterborough – suggests a mix of short and long-term measures.

In the next few months Government should continue to support firms, particularly in retail and hospitality, as they open up by maintaining the furlough and other business support programmes. This will be important as it is possible that many of them will not see pre-pandemic levels of custom for the foreseeable future – particularly those that rely on international tourists such as Norwich, Oxford and Cambridge.

In the longer-term the Government should further strengthen the economies of more affluent cities with programmes to upskill the workforce in higher paid and emerging industries. COVID-19 has reminded us how exposed many people’s incomes are to economic downturns, and the fewer qualifications someone has the riskier their position is. This isn’t just a problem for people in northern England: a higher share of adults in Peterborough have no formal qualifications than in either Blackpool or Wakefield.

If we are to build back better from COVID-19 then we can’t take our more prosperous cities for granted – to do this would hurt them, the levelling up agenda and the country. ■

*Andrew Carter is chief executive of Centre for Cities*

@CentreforCities