

# **UK: What needs to happen to end violence against women?: Karen Ingala Smith**

Wednesday 25 October 2023, by [SMITH Karen Ingala](#) (Date first published: 8 February 2020).

**Karen Ingala Smith has been recording the names of and commemorating all UK women killed by men since 2012. She is co-founder of the Femicide Census. Karen is CEO of Nia, a London charity supporting women who have been subjected to sexual and domestic violence and abuse, including prostitution.**

**This is Karen's contribution to one of the five panel discussions at Women's Liberation 2020.**

## **What needs to happen to end violence against women and girls?**

Men's violence against women and girls is both a cause and consequence of sex inequality. Whilst perpetrators must be held responsible for their actions and behaviours; men's violence against women is not reducible simply to individual acts perpetrated by individual men, but is a key instrument of men's domination of women, supported and normalised by patriarchal institutions, attitudes and social norms and values.

The notion that all forms of men's violence against women and girls – rape and other forms of sexual violence, intimate-partner violence and abuse, prostitution, FGM, pornography etc – are connected in a patriarchal society – has, over the last couple of decades, entered mainstream policy and service provision – and that's good, in fact it now has its own acronym: VAWG. But before I continue, I have to say that I hate how 'vawg' has become a word and the way that it has illustrates what often happens when concepts that originated in feminist analysis move into the mainstream.

I hate how 'vawg' has become a word because it allows users to disconnect from VIOLENCE against WOMEN and GIRLS. It hides the violence, it's no longer spoken. I hate how 'vawg' has become a word because it allows users to hide the agent – MEN. As Mary Daly, said, "naming the agent is required for an adequate analysis of atrocities." I hate how 'vawg' has become a word because I am not particularly fond of acronyms and jargon. Acronyms make important information inaccessible to those not in the know. And this does not serve women's interests. The feminist concept, the continuum of men's violence against women, enters the mainstream and some of the critical aspects of the concept are cast aside.

The concept of a continuum of sexual violence was first outlined by Liz Kelly in 1988 and in spite of how much I despise the way that the term 'vawg' has evolved, seeing the connections between all forms of men's violence against women and girls, is an absolutely critical step in ending that violence. But it is an early step in a very long road and there are constantly drives to push us backwards. For example, in 2010, the then coalition government launched its strategy, the Call to End Violence against Women and Girls, but less than a decade later, the conservative government was developing its Domestic Violence Bill and the clear upfront and acknowledged connection was

overshadowed. I think this is a bad and backwards move, but I'm not here to talk about bad and backwards moves, I'm supposed to be constructively looking for solutions.

So, if we leave aside overthrowing patriarchy, the radical feminist solution, not because I don't think that would provide the answer but because it feels out of reach to me and anyway, we can't afford to wait until patriarchy is overthrown to make changes, we need to start with firstly, connecting the forms of men's violence; secondly, naming the agent; and third, recognising the patriarchal context and the critical role of sex inequalities. For feminists, identifying this is the easy bit.

The next bit is harder. Carol Hagermann-White developed a model to explain factors at play in violence against women and girls (men's violence, as I'd prefer us to say every time) that I find very useful. She groups the factors into four main subsets:

1. Overall structures in the social order, macro level
2. The social norms and practises that regulate daily life, meso level
3. Day to day interactions in the immediate environment, micro level
4. People's individual life histories, ontogenetic level.

And so, if we accept this model, it follows that the interventions that we need to make will need to address all these levels simultaneously and in a consciously connected way. To expand on that, and I can't do this justice in the time I have, but I hope I can give you a flavour:

1. **Addressing overall structures in the social order, the macro level interventions**, requires policy responses that tackle all formal and substantive forms of sex inequality, normative models of heterosexual masculinity and femininity, the sexualisation and objectification of women and girls, women's rights - and also include intersecting structural inequalities around class, poverty, race.
2. **To recast the social norms and practises that regulate daily life, the meso level reforms**, we need to do away with male entitlement, we need to improve criminal justice responses, from the laws themselves to conviction rates, making sure most if not all perpetrators are held to account by the state. We need to eliminate discriminatory practice, overhaul attitudes to pornography and prostitution, in fact abolish prostitution, and ensure all services and interventions are informed by a feminist approach - including those outside the core anti-violence agenda (for example, welfare reforms, must also be considered from a sexual equality and anti-men's violence against women perspective, it's clear that for something like universal credit, this didn't happen).
3. **With interventions at the micro level**, we need to look at how the media represents women and violence against women, abandon sex-role stereotypes, challenge myths around sex inequality and men's violence against women and girls, break down peer support (at all ages) that enables men's violence against women and girls and reinforces sex inequality, make sure our specialist services are adequately resourced, and look at employment and education practises;
4. **And finally, with individuals**, we need to look at the attitudes and beliefs of each individual, how they are formed and how they can be changed, how we rear children, how we deal with and address early childhood trauma. We must make sure perpetrators are held to account by their family and peers and make sure the emotional and cognitive abilities for reflection, critical thinking and taking personal responsibility for our actions are developed and nurtured in all of us.

Tinkering about piecemeal with any of the things I've pointed out will not make a long term or significant change. We need a visionary, brave, cross-cutting, long-term and unashamedly woman-centred approach. It will have to be multi-disciplinary, it will have to have cross party support

because changes like this go beyond what can be achieved in a governmental term.

Do I believe it is possible? I don't know. Do I believe it is likely? No. There just isn't the will. Patriarchal societies, in which men hold primary power and predominate in roles of political leadership, authority, social privilege and control of resources, ensure that power stays with the powerful and advantaged; it's the same with socio-economic class, it's the same with race. Sure, there will continue to be steps to address men's violence against women and girls. Mostly these will have originated from feminists. But as we saw with the continuum of men's violence against women, usually they're watered down if they become formal policy responses – and that's if they ever do at all. As Audre Lorde said “the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.”

The best trick patriarchy ever played is convincing most people that it does not exist. Sadly, most people are not feminists – but we are and we see it. And we are not going away. And whether we realistically expect to end men's violence against women, girls and children or not, it isn't going to and we can't let it stop us fighting.

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**Karen Ingala Smith**

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**P.S.**

Woman's Place UK

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