

**Совет по правам человека****Пятьдесят девятая сессия**

16 июня — 11 июля 2025 года

Пункт 3 повестки дня

**Поощрение и защита всех прав человека,  
гражданских, политических, экономических,  
социальных и культурных прав,  
включая право на развитие****Посещение Соединенного Королевства Великобритании  
и Северной Ирландии****Доклад Специального докладчика по вопросу о насилии  
в отношении женщин и девочек, его причинах и последствиях  
Рим ас-Салем\* \*\* \*\*\****Резюме*

Специальный докладчик по вопросу о насилии в отношении женщин и девочек, его причинах и последствиях Рим ас-Салем посетила с официальным визитом Соединенное Королевство Великобритании и Северной Ирландии с 12 по 21 февраля 2024 года. В настоящем докладе она оценивает ситуацию в плане насилия в отношении женщин и девочек в стране, выявляет пробелы и проблемы и рекомендует меры по более эффективному предотвращению насилия в отношении женщин и девочек и реагированию на него.

- \* Резюме настоящего доклада распространяется на всех официальных языках. Сам доклад, содержащийся в приложении к резюме, распространяется только на том языке, на котором он был представлен.
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- \*\*\* Настоящий доклад был представлен структурам конференционного обслуживания для обработки после установленного срока по техническим причинам, не зависящим от представляющего подразделения.



## Приложение

### **Доклад Специального докладчика по вопросу о насилии в отношении женщин и девочек, его причинах и последствиях Рим ас-Салем о ее посещении Соединенного Королевства Великобритании и Северной Ирландии**

#### **I. Introduction**

##### **A. Visit**

1. The Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences, Reem Alsalem, conducted an official visit to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland from 12 to 21 February 2024, at the invitation of the Government. She visited London, Birmingham, Manchester (England), Glasgow, Edinburgh (Scotland), Belfast (Northern Ireland) and Cardiff (Wales), where she met with both State and non-State actors (see appendix).

2. The Special Rapporteur expresses her gratitude to the Government of the United Kingdom and the devolved governments for their excellent engagement and frank dialogue. She also thanks international entities, academia, civil society and women's organizations for sharing their insights, and especially those survivors who recounted their often painful experiences of violence and discrimination.

3. In the present report, the Special Rapporteur analyses the laws and policies in place during the visit, under the previous Government. Following the elections in July 2024, the new Government proposed positive steps to advance the rights of women and girls. In compiling the present report, the Special Rapporteur has taken into consideration important developments that have taken place since her visit.

#### **II. Political configuration that impacts the approach to ending violence against women and girls**

4. The United Kingdom has long been considered a stalwart supporter of gender equality, having been one of the first countries in the world to give women the right to vote, over 100 years ago. It has a robust legal framework for the advancement of gender equality, starting with the Equality Act of 2010 that applies across the whole country and which prohibits direct and indirect discrimination.<sup>1</sup> It interacts with the Equality Act of 2006 and the Human Rights Act of 1998 to enforce respect for human rights and combat discrimination.<sup>2</sup> A single Equality Act is yet to be introduced in Northern Ireland.

5. That overall framework is complemented by legislation and policies in the devolved governments, along with additional countrywide legislation that attempts to tackle current and emerging forms of violence against women and girls.

6. References to violence against women and girls are scattered throughout different pieces of legislation relating both to reserved and devolved matters, resulting in its fragmentation. Several senior officials hold positions that deal with some but not all aspects of violence against women and girls. In addition, violence against women and girls and

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.gov.uk/equality-act-2010-guidance>.

<sup>2</sup> Article 14 of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (European Convention on Human Rights), directly enforceable through the Human Rights Act, prohibits discrimination.

women's issues are partly devolved, which has an impact on the coordination and harmonization of policies.

7. The United Kingdom has a decentralized administration system of devolution of powers.<sup>3</sup> The devolved governments of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, have their own legislature and executive, thus permitting each jurisdiction to make decisions and deliver public services independently in many areas, while the Parliament of the United Kingdom retains reserved powers. The system of asymmetric devolution means that specified areas of responsibility are devolved to some or all of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

8. Concerning violence against women and girls, the Home Secretary oversees policing and crime reduction and leads on policies related to violence against women and girls in England and Wales. The Minister for Women and Equalities addresses equality under the Equality Act, which excludes Northern Ireland and does not cover all severe cases of discrimination against women and girls. The Domestic Abuse Commissioner and the Minister for Safeguarding and Violence against Women and Girls focus on issues related to violence against women and girls primarily in England and Wales. Likewise, the National Police Chiefs' Council lead on violence against women and girls has a mandate limited to England and Wales.

9. The political structure of the United Kingdom affects its response to violence against women and girls. Devolved governments can create localized related policies; however, measures to address violence against women and girls is not statutory and there is no clear approach to non-devolved issues, such as equality, immigration and asylum. That leads to inconsistencies in key legislation, such as the Equality Act and the Nationality and Borders Act of 2022. Devolved governments interpret those laws differently, with varying political commitment. Local authorities lack firm duties, dedicated funding and specific responsibilities for violence against women and girls, only adhering to a broad principle of equality and fairness. The Special Rapporteur welcomes the explicit commitment made by the current Government to halve violence against women and girls in a decade and the numerous initiatives that it has taken to date on that front. Nevertheless, important gaps exist between the devolved jurisdictions in terms of the laws and policies that exist.

### III. Relevant, disaggregated data, including on sex

10. The lack of legislative clarity on sex hampers data collection on violence against women and girls. Police data, while disaggregated by crime and location, often conflates sex with gender for data on victims and perpetrators. The Special Rapporteur identifies this gap as the biggest barrier to ending violence against women and girls, obscuring trends and intersectional vulnerabilities.

11. The conflation of sex and gender data in particular – prioritizing self-identified gender – erases biological sex records, distorting the male-driven nature of violence against women and girls and hindering root-cause analysis. The recent Review of Data, Statistics and Research on Sex and Gender<sup>4</sup> reveals systemic data flaws, with violent males logged as female offenders due to gender identity policies (for example, 49 “female” rape convictions over a decade to June 2023, despite the legal definition of rape).<sup>5</sup> At least 16 of 46 police forces follow guidance favouring self-identified gender, skewing the very low rate of sexual and gender-based violence crimes committed by females. The conflation of sex- and gender-related data and the recent elimination of single sex spaces for women undermines crime statistics and policy effectiveness in relation to violence against women and girls.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The legislative frameworks for devolution were originally set out in the Scotland Act 1998, the Government of Wales Act 1998 and the Northern Ireland Act 1998, although all three have subsequently been amended.

<sup>4</sup> Government of the United Kingdom, *Review of data, statistics and research on sex and gender* (March 2025).

<sup>5</sup> Sexual Offences Act 2003.

<sup>6</sup> See Matilda Gosling and Sex Matters, *Women's services: a sector silenced* (January 2024).

12. Sex- or gender-blind policies, driven by poor data, neglect the specific needs of women and girls, increasing risks in safety and participation and leading to self-exclusion. That is evident in the erosion of single-sex spaces, such as prisons and shelters for survivors of violence.<sup>7</sup>

13. At the time of the Special Rapporteur's visit, the meaning of sex in the United Kingdom Equality Act 2010 was unchanged. On 16 April 2025, the United Kingdom Supreme Court issued a judgment in the case of *For Women Scotland Ltd. v. the Scottish Ministers*, determining that, for the purposes of the Equality Act 2010, "sex" is binary and must be understood as bearing its ordinary meaning as biological sex, and that the terms "woman" and "man" are to be understood as referring to biological females and males respectively. The Court also ruled that the government of Scotland was acting unlawfully by treating men who identify as women and who hold a gender recognition certificate as women for the purposes of a law aimed at improving the inclusion of women on public boards. The Special Rapporteur has welcomed that ruling.<sup>8</sup>

## IV. Relevant legal and policy frameworks

### A. Incorporation and implementation of international legal obligations

14. The United Kingdom is party to seven of the nine core human rights treaties, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, together with the Optional Protocol thereto, ratified in 2004. It has yet to ratify other core United Nations human rights treaties, including the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families.

15. The United Kingdom has engaged with other international frameworks and conventions aimed at protecting women's rights and promoting gender equality, including the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The United Kingdom has ratified the European Convention on Human Rights and is subject to the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights. It is also a party to regional human rights treaties, most notably the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) and the Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190). While welcoming its ratification, the Special Rapporteur is concerned by the decision to include reservations on two key articles (44 and 59) that provide for support and protection for migrant women.<sup>9</sup>

### B. Domestic and intimate partner violence

16. In the most recent Crime Survey for England and Wales it was estimated that approximately 1.6 million women aged 16 and over had experienced domestic abuse in 2024.<sup>10</sup> The most prevalent forms of domestic violence included physical abuse, psychological abuse, coercive control, sexual violence and economic abuse. Physical abuse remains worryingly common. Coercive control – underpinned by emotional and psychological abuse – has been recognized as a distinct crime since 2015. Sexual violence, including rape by intimate partners, affects one in four women over their lifetimes,<sup>11</sup> while economic abuse is increasingly reported, including in post-separation situations.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk/news/news/our-statement-on-the-edinburgh-rape-crisis-national-service-standards-report/>.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/05/special-rapporteur-welcomes-landmark-uk-judgment-sex-based-protections>.

<sup>9</sup> See <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/istanbul-convention-preventing-and-combating-violence-against-women-and-domestic-violence/>.

<sup>10</sup> Available from Office for National Statistics.

<sup>11</sup> See Rape Crisis England and Wales for rape and sexual assault statistics.

<sup>12</sup> Ministry of Justice, *Assessing Risk of Harm to Children and Parents in Private Law Children Cases. Final Report* (June 2020).

17. Domestic and intimate partner violence is addressed through a patchwork of legislation rather than a single domestic violence offence. The cornerstone is the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, which applies across England and Wales and provides a statutory definition of domestic abuse, encompassing physical, sexual, emotional, psychological and economic abuse, and coercive or controlling behaviour. It introduced measures, such as domestic abuse protection notices and orders, to protect victims. The Act also underpins the domestic violence disclosure scheme, allowing individuals to request information about a partner's abusive history, and extends coercive control offences to post-separation contexts. In Scotland, the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018 specifically criminalizes coercive control, with a maximum penalty of 14 years, while Northern Ireland mirrors it with its Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act 2021, adding non-fatal strangulation as an offence. Wales has its own Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015.

18. The Offences against the Person Act 1861 covers assaults, such as those occasioning bodily harm that may also be inflicted on women and girls in domestic settings. The Sexual Offences Act 2003 governs rape and sexual assault, with aggravated sentencing when committed in a domestic setting. The Serious Crime Act 2015 in England and Wales criminalizes controlling or coercive behaviour. Additional laws, such as the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 and the Online Safety Act 2023, address stalking and non-consensual intimate image abuse. The Special Rapporteur welcomes the publication in February 2025 of the review of online pornography, which recognizes many of its harms and supports the implementation of its recommendations relating to victim support, criminalization and enforcement. She also supports the need to close a loophole in the existing legislation that allows pornographic content that is illegal offline to be completely legal online.<sup>13</sup>

19. The Children Act 1989 mandates that courts prioritize the welfare of the child, with domestic abuse heavily influencing outcomes. The Family Law Act 1996 enables victims to seek non-molestation orders (barring contact or violence) and occupation orders (excluding abusers from the home), directly impacting custody arrangements. The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 reinforces this by recognizing children as victims, prompting courts to limit or supervise contact with abusive parents. In Scotland, the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 similarly prioritizes child welfare, while Northern Ireland is aligned through the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. Courts may also issue restraining orders under the Sentencing Act 2020 after conviction, affecting visitation rights.

### C. Violence against women and children in custody cases

20. In the context of custody cases, forms of violence against women and girls intensify and evolve. Coercive control frequently persists after a separation,<sup>14</sup> with abusers manipulating legal proceedings or using child contact to harass victims, significantly affecting the outcome of domestic abuse cases in family courts.<sup>15</sup> Physical and emotional abuse allegations often surface during disputes, where claims of “parental alienation” are weaponized to discredit victims, leading to unsupervised contact or custody for abusive parents in contested cases.<sup>16</sup> This revictimizes women and children, with one in three custody cases involving domestic abuse resulting in forced contact with abusers.

21. Significant legislative and policy reforms are reshaping how the family courts handle accusations of parental alienation and violence in custody cases. The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 in England and Wales, alongside the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018 and the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act 2021 in Northern Ireland, prioritize coercive

<sup>13</sup> CEASE/Centre to End All Sexual Exploitation, *Profits before People: How the Pornography Industry is Normalising and Monetising Sexual Violence* (2024).

<sup>14</sup> See Samantha Jeffries, “In the best interests of the abuser: coercive control, child custody proceedings and the ‘expert’ assessments that guide judicial determinations”, *Laws*, vol. 5, No. 1 (March 2016).

<sup>15</sup> See Shazia Choudhry and Daniela Rodriguez Gutierrez, *The Family Justice Response to Domestic Abuse. A Six Country Empirical Study of the Experiences of Survivors, Judges, Lawyers and Court Appointed Experts* (2024).

<sup>16</sup> See <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/family-court-statistics-quarterly>.

control and recognize children as victims, pushing courts to focus on evidence of abuse rather than counterclaims of parental alienation. The Special Rapporteur welcomes the fact that in its December 2024 guidance, the Family Justice Council rejected the blanket application of “parental alienation syndrome” and has mandated courts to assess whether a child’s rejection of a parent stems from abuse, while barring unregulated psychologists. The Ministry of Justice is carrying out a civil legal aid review that also seeks to bolster survivor support, addressing financial barriers in such disputes.

22. A multimillion pound expansion of the Pathfinder pilot scheme in 2025 shows the approach is working, with cases being resolved 11 weeks quicker than before and the backlog of cases reducing by 50 per cent across both Dorset and North Wales.<sup>17</sup> The March 2025 proposal of the Family Procedure Rule Committee targets unregulated experts. However, court backlogs amounted to 27,445 new child custody cases in the first quarter of 2024<sup>18</sup> and 11-month delays and disparities between the devolved governments – strained resources in Northern Ireland and rural gaps in Scotland – hinder progress. The alienation probe carried out by the Ministry of Justice and the 2025 guidance from the Office of Communications (Ofcom) signal the potential for more reform.

#### **D. Harmful practices, rape, sexual abuse and exploitation**

23. The legal framework of the United Kingdom for combating rape and sexual violence is built on key statutes across its various jurisdictions: the Sexual Offences Act 2003 for England and Wales, the Sexual Offences (Scotland) Act 2009 and the Sexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 2008. These laws define rape, with maximum penalties of life imprisonment. They also cover sexual assault, coercion and offences against children and vulnerable adults, emphasizing consent as a cornerstone. Criminal justice is devolved to Scotland and Northern Ireland, while England and Wales support policing and victim services initiatives, such as Operation Soteria, which is aimed at better handling and outcomes of rape cases. Additional legislation bolsters this framework. The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 (England and Wales) addresses sexual violence within domestic settings, while the Online Safety Act 2023 targets online offences, such as non-consensual intimate image-sharing, including deepfakes. The latter act does not, however, prohibit the creation of such images.<sup>19</sup>

24. Despite these robust laws, their effectiveness in preventing rape and sexual violence remains limited. In the year ending March 2024, 4.1 per cent of people aged 16 and over in England and Wales had experienced actual or attempted rape once or more since the age of 16. That equates to approximately 2 million people. Prevalence for female victims was higher, with 7.8 per cent of women experiencing rape. Figures on the prevalence of rape, excluding attempted rape, were 6.6 per cent for women.<sup>20</sup> Home Office statistics for the year ending March 2024 indicated that the proportion of rape offences assigned a charge or resulting in a summons was 2.6 per cent, representing an increase from 2.1 per cent for the year ending March 2023. Evidential hurdles, alongside resource cuts to the police and the Crown Prosecution Services, and court delays averaging over 1,000 days, undermine deterrence and the delivery of justice.

25. The Special Rapporteur noted achievements, such as clearer legal definitions (for example, on abolishing marital rape exemptions); the high conviction rates achieved by dedicated units, such as Scotland’s domestic abuse taskforces; and the 20 per cent increase in rape charges in the pilot areas that has resulted from the suspect-focused investigations of Operation Soteria. Multi-agency collaboration, involving the police, Crown Prosecution Service, academics and third-sector organizations, significantly enhanced the outcomes of

<sup>17</sup> Ministry of Justice, “Thousands of children to be supported thanks to multi-million expansion of innovation in family courts”, 3 February 2025.

<sup>18</sup> Family Court Statistics Quarterly, January–March 2024.

<sup>19</sup> CEASE, *Profits before People*.

<sup>20</sup> See <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/rape-levels-of-prosecutions/>.

Operation Soteria by providing evidence-based insights, improving victim support and strengthening coordination.<sup>21</sup>

26. The Special Rapporteur, however, noted continued limitations manifested by the low conviction rates for rape (1.6 per cent in England and Wales); court delays (333 days on average); a low level of reporting, particularly among marginalized women, (16 per cent for sexual assaults); the erosion of trust due to misconduct scandals; victim-blaming attitudes; and systemic backlogs (11,918 sexual offence cases pending in 2024). Rural access to specialist services is also lacking.<sup>22</sup>

27. With regard to harmful practices, female genital mutilation has been a specific criminal offence since 1985. Furthermore, child marriage is illegal in the United Kingdom, with the England and Wales 2022 Act setting the marriage age at 18 and criminalizing violations with up to seven years in prison. Scotland allows marriage at 16 under the 1977 Act, but forced marriage is banned across the United Kingdom by the 2014 Act, with the same penalty. While the Forced Marriage Unit has managed hundreds of cases per year and trained thousands of officials on tackling forced marriage, the inconsistent implementation across regions undermines the policy's impact.

## E. Trafficking, asylum and slavery

28. The legal framework against human trafficking is robust, integrating criminal justice and victim protection. The Modern Slavery Act 2015 criminalizes trafficking and provides statutory protections, while the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 strengthens asylum rights for victims of trafficking, particularly women and girls. Initiatives, such as the support for migrant victims scheme, launched in 2021, assist migrant victims with no recourse to public funds. Such efforts align with the country's international commitments, ensuring a gender-sensitive approach.

29. Key achievements include rising prosecutions under the Modern Slavery Act, with cases increasing from 174 in 2016/17 to 294 in 2021/22. The national referral mechanism identified 19,125 potential victims in 2024; 26 per cent of those referred were female.<sup>23</sup> The support for the migrant victims scheme provided critical support to 425 victims and received extended funding into 2023/24. In Scotland, courtroom protections have helped to reduce victim retraumatization, encouraging higher testimony rates. There is concern, however, that record numbers of persons are turning down the opportunity to be identified as victims and are therefore not receiving support services.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, the extent of trafficking for exploitation in pornography remains underappreciated.<sup>25</sup> There is currently no legal obligation for pornography companies to ensure that anyone who appears in pornographic content is over the age of 18 and has given their consent. That needs to be rectified as a matter of urgency to protect women and girls from abuse and violence. The ability to rescind consent and have content removed at any time should also be included.<sup>26</sup>

30. Furthermore, gaps remain in victim support, with only 45 per cent of confirmed victims receiving long-term aid. The support for migrant victims scheme, although effective, is temporary and limited in scope. The Nationality and Borders Act and the 2023 Illegal Migration Act risk undermining protections by enabling the detention and deportation of trafficking victims arriving irregularly. Prevention efforts remain underfunded, victims have no access to free legal aid and legal protections vary by region, with England and Wales

<sup>21</sup> See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/operation-soteria-year-one-report/operation-soteria-bluestone-year-one-report-accessible-version>.

<sup>22</sup> See Ania Moroz and Tamar Dinisman, "Suffering for justice: sexual violence victim-survivors' experiences of going to court and cross-examination" (Cardiff, Victim Support, October 2024).

<sup>23</sup> Home Office, "Modern slavery: national referral mechanism and duty to notify statistics UK, end of year summary 2024", 6 March 2025.

<sup>24</sup> See <https://www.salvationarmy.org.uk/news/concerning-trends-identification-modern-slavery-victims>.

<sup>25</sup> Gabrielle Bertin, *Creating a Safer World: The Challenge of Regulating Online Pornography*, (February 2025).

<sup>26</sup> See CEASE, *Profits before People*.

lacking the mandatory courtroom safeguards in Scotland. Data gaps in trafficking-related asylum claims further hinder policy evaluation, limiting improvements.

## **F. Femicide**

31. While up-to-date data is lacking, it is estimated that over 2,000 women have been killed by men since 2009, averaging one murder every three days.<sup>27</sup> The United Kingdom does not have a dedicated legal framework differentiating femicide from other forms of homicide, but cases are prosecuted under murder and manslaughter laws, with sentencing guidelines recognizing coercive control, stalking and “overkill” as aggravating factors. Domestic homicide reviews investigate gender-based killings to improve prevention strategies. While campaigns and experts advocate for femicide to be legally recognized as a distinct crime, the Government currently treats it under general homicide laws.

## **G. Stalking**

32. Stalking is criminalized across the United Kingdom, with specific offences introduced through the Protection from Harassment Act 1997, Protection of Freedoms Act 2012 (England and Wales), Criminal Justice and Licensing (Scotland) Act 2010 and Protection from Stalking Act (Northern Ireland) 2022. These laws define stalking behaviours and introduce measures, such as protection orders to restrict perpetrators before conviction. Despite stronger legal frameworks, enforcement remains inconsistent, with low conviction rates and frequent misclassification of stalking as harassment. Many cases do not progress to prosecution due to evidentiary challenges and gaps in police training. Although 1.8 million people experience stalking annually in England and Wales, only one in five cases are reported and conviction rates remain low. While over 126,000 stalking and harassment offences were recorded in 2022/23,<sup>28</sup> the gap between reporting and successful prosecution highlights the need for better enforcement and victim support.

## **H. Harassment in the workplace**

33. Workplace harassment of women is a significant problem, with a 2023 poll revealing that 58 per cent of women have experienced harassment and 43 per cent have faced multiple sexual harassment incidents,<sup>29</sup> yet four out of five avoided reporting, due to fears of not being believed or of career repercussions. The Equality Act 2010 classifies sexual harassment as unlawful discrimination and the Worker Protection Act 2023, mandates employers to take “reasonable steps” to prevent it, with breaches potentially increasing tribunal awards. Devolved legislation, such as the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 in England and Wales, indirectly supports workplace safety by addressing coercive control, while the “Equally Safe at Work” initiative in Scotland urges employers to improve their employment practices to advance gender equality at work and prevent violence against women,<sup>30</sup> showcasing targeted enforcement strengths. In Northern Ireland, regulations were introduced in 2008 to amend the Sex Discrimination (Northern Ireland) Order 1976 to expressly prohibit sexual harassment in the workplace.

## **I. Prostitution of women**

34. The legal framework surrounding prostitution varies across regions, reflecting a complex and nuanced approach. In England, Wales and Scotland, the act of selling sexual

<sup>27</sup> See <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/mar/09/the-observer-view-femicide-will-only-end-when-we-stop-letting-killers-off-lightly>.

<sup>28</sup> Oliva Konotey-Ahulu, “Sexual offences recorded in UK soar following high profile scandals”, Bloomberg, 20 July 2023.

<sup>29</sup> See <https://www.tuc.org.uk/news/new-tuc-poll-2-3-young-women-have-experienced-sexual-harassment-bullying-or-verbal-abuse-work>.

<sup>30</sup> See <https://www.equallysafeatwork.scot/about/>.

services (prostitution) itself is legal, meaning individuals can exchange sexual services for money or goods without committing an offence. However, numerous associated activities are criminalized under various statutes: soliciting in public (Street Offences Act 1959), kerb-crawling (Sexual Offences Act 2003), brothel-keeping (Sexual Offences Act 1956), causing or inciting prostitution for gain and paying for coerced sex (Sexual Offences Act 2003) are all illegal, with strict liability for the latter.

35. Since 2015, Northern Ireland has diverged by adopting a version of the Nordic model under the Human Trafficking and Exploitation Act. This makes it illegal to pay for sexual services, shifting criminal liability onto buyers, while decriminalizing the act of selling sex, aiming to reduce demand and protect vulnerable individuals.

36. The overarching policy of the Government of the United Kingdom, particularly in England and Wales, frames prostitution within its strategy on violence against women and girls, recognizing it as a gendered issue often linked to exploitation, trafficking and violence. The focus is on tackling harm and exploitation, while offering support for exiting prostitution, rather than blanket criminalization of sex workers themselves.

37. Online prostitution<sup>31</sup> is regulated by the Sexual Offences Act 2003 (covering exploitation and trafficking), the Street Offences Act 1959 (extending to online solicitation), and the Online Safety Act 2023, which mandates platforms to remove illegal content. Northern Ireland banned paying for sex online as of 2015. Since her visit, the Special Rapporteur has been informed that there are ongoing discussions aimed at introducing legal reforms that call for regularization of prostitution, including an analysis of the Nordic model, and possible introduction of a licensing system for online prostitution.

## **J. Surrogacy**

38. Surrogacy laws are governed by the Surrogacy Arrangements Act 1985 and the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008, which apply uniformly across England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, despite family law being devolved. These laws establish the surrogate as the legal mother at birth, requiring the intended parents to obtain a parental order post-birth to gain legal parenthood, provided there is a genetic link and the surrogate consents. The system prohibits commercial surrogacy, allowing only “reasonable expenses” (typically £10,000–£15,000) and bans for-profit third-party arrangements, with non-profit organizations facilitating ethical matches.

39. That altruistic approach was reportedly aimed at reducing exploitation compared to commercial systems by introducing judicial oversight. However, challenges remain, including vague definitions that mask financial pressures, surrogacy agreements that are legally unenforceable and socioeconomic disparities that create vulnerabilities. Younger women continue to be targeted with advertisements to donate their eggs without being sufficiently informed about the health risks involved. Many British couples turn to international surrogacy arrangements in countries such as Ukraine or the United States of America, where weaker regulations heighten the risks of surrogate exploitation and child trafficking, exposing gaps in the reach and clarity of the domestic framework. Exploitation persists abroad and domestically, but the scale remains unknown. Recent proposals from the Law Commission of England and Wales and the Scottish Law Commission of March 2023 for domestic surrogacy arrangements are currently stalled.

## **K. Violence against children**

40. The legal framework in the United Kingdom for protecting children from violence, including sexual and gender-based violence, is robust and varies across its devolved regions, rooted in laws such as the Children Act 1989 (England and Wales), Children (Scotland) Act 1995, and Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, which prioritize child welfare. The Sexual Offences Act 2003 imposes life sentences for child sexual abuse, while domestic abuse laws (for example, the Domestic Abuse Act 2021) recognize children witnessing coercive control

<sup>31</sup> The Special Rapporteur understands pornography to be online prostitution.

as victims, with penalties of up to 14 years. Laws such as the Female Genital Mutilation Act 2003 and Modern Slavery Act 2015 tackle gender-specific violence. While the Online Safety Act 2023 addresses digital exploitation, there has been an alarming increase in child sexual abuse material online.<sup>32</sup> The Special Rapporteur welcomes the numerous guidance documents that were issued by Ofcom as part of its phased implementation of the Online Safety Act 2023. Grooming, addressed under the Sexual Offences Act 2003, is targeted under the Sexual Offences Act 2023. The Ofcom's codes, effective since 17 March 2025, attempt to combat grooming more effectively through a range of measures.<sup>33</sup>

41. Child prostitution is treated as exploitation under the Sexual Offences Act 2003 and Modern Slavery Act 2015, with penalties of up to life for trafficking, while the Policing and Crime Act 2009 decriminalizes exploited children. The Online Safety Act 2023 curbs related online content, while the 2015 Human Trafficking and Exploitation Act in Scotland and the 2022 Justice (Sexual Offences and Trafficking Victims) Act in Northern Ireland strengthen responses, achieving a 15 per cent rise in convictions. However, implementation is challenging due to difficulty in accessing rural areas, cultural barriers and resource gaps. Multi-agency safeguarding varies, with the "Equally Safe" strategy and high conviction rates in Scotland contrasting with a post-troubles lag in Northern Ireland and court delays in England.

42. Despite robust laws, gaps persist across the United Kingdom. Sexual abuse affects 1 in 20 children<sup>34</sup> and sexual and gender-based violence, such as female genital mutilation, continue. Custody cases often involve coercive control of children or their mothers<sup>35</sup> and court backlogs retraumatize victims (by April 2025, 1,646 child rape cases were pending to go to the Crown Court).<sup>36</sup> Operations such as Stovewood show promise in dealing with grooming and child sexual exploitation, but achievements are undercut by the low level of reporting and inconsistent resources across regions.

## **L. Truth, justice and reparations in the case of forced adoptions of children in Northern Ireland**

43. The Special Rapporteur is aware of the ongoing efforts to render truth, justice and reparations for the forced adoption of babies who were taken from their mothers without their consent by religious organizations and State institutions in mother and baby homes and the Magdalene laundries. An estimated 14,000 women and girls were impacted between 1922 and 1990. On 5 October 2021 the Truth Recovery Design Panel published its report into mother and baby institutions and the Magdalene laundries. The recommendations in the report included the establishment of a truth recovery investigation, record preservation and reparation measures.<sup>37</sup> At the time of writing, the Panel had collected testimonies from over 140 individuals since 2021. The Special Rapporteur urges the authorities to learn lessons from similar inquiries and processes, such as the one carried out by Ireland, to ensure that justice is rendered.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>32</sup> See <https://www.iwf.org.uk/news-media/news/call-for-prime-minister-to-intervene-as-iwf-uncovers-record-levels-of-online-child-sexual-abuse-imagery/>.

<sup>33</sup> See <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/online-safety/illegal-and-harmful-content/tech-firms-must-clamp-down-on-illegal-online-materials>.

<sup>34</sup> See <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/statistics-briefings/child-sexual-abuse>.

<sup>35</sup> See Adrienne Barnett, *Domestic abuse and private law cases: A literature review* (Ministry of Justice, 2020).

<sup>36</sup> See [https://rapecrisis.org.uk/get-informed/breaking-point/?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://rapecrisis.org.uk/get-informed/breaking-point/?utm_source=chatgpt.com).

<sup>37</sup> See <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/articles/truth-recovery-design-panel>.

<sup>38</sup> See <https://ombudsman.ie/en/publication/c1c36-opportunity-lost-magdalen-restorative-justice-scheme-investigation/>.

## V. Prevention, protection and response services

### A. Prevention

44. The violence against women and girls strategy of the Government of the United Kingdom emphasizes prevention, previously allocating £6.6 million over three years (2022–2025) to it. However, significant challenges persist, including framing violence against women and girls predominantly as a criminal justice issue and focusing on punishing offenders rather than investing adequately in the systemic and societal changes required to address the root causes of such violence. Prevention efforts remain underfunded, while the implementation of protective measures, victim compensation and rehabilitation is weak. This punitive approach, coupled with poor enforcement of court judgments and protection orders, fosters a sense of impunity for perpetrators, undermining progress.

45. Specialist services for girls and young women under 25, who face disproportionate rates of domestic abuse, are critical but insufficient. Statutory agencies are positioned to identify and intervene early, but without robust investment many women at risk are left without support, leading to trauma, school exclusion or entanglement in the criminal justice system. Efforts to shift harmful social norms, particularly among boys and men, such as the “Equally Safe” strategy in Scotland, which aims to ensure that young people develop mutually respectful, responsible and confident relationships, are to be commended. However, the £6.6 million invested in such policies pales against the scale of need and of sexual and gender-based violence.

### B. Effective access to justice

46. The ability of the United Kingdom justice system to address violence against women and girls is hampered by low reporting rates, poor conviction outcomes, systemic issues, such as court delays averaging 695 days, and gender bias. The higher domestic abuse prosecution rate in Scotland<sup>39</sup> offers some promise, but prosecutions of sexual violence lag across all regions. Continued mistrust in policing in Northern Ireland is compounded by underfunding since the end of the troubles, while England and Wales face a caseload crisis. From October to December 2024, the number of sexual offences waiting to go to the Crown Court stood at 1,981, constituting an increase of 41 per cent in two years.

47. The Victims and Prisoners Act 2024 enhances victim rights across the country, complementing practical measures, such as pre-recorded cross-examinations in Crown Courts and the 24/7 helplines launched in 2022. These efforts aim to reduce victim trauma and increase reporting, with police referrals to the Crown Prosecution Service up 162 per cent since 2019, reflecting improved collaboration and awareness.

48. Nevertheless, stigma and inadequate police training deepen survivor disillusionment: there are legitimate concerns that the family courts favour abusers through “parental alienation” claims, forcing children into unsafe contact and silencing victims. Trust in the justice system was recently undermined by the release of thousands of prisoners between October 2023 and 30 March 2025. While sexual offenders and serious domestic abusers were largely excluded, a small number of those released, estimated to be in the hundreds, may have committed gender-based violence due to sentencing nuances or errors. Safety and operational challenges included high recall rates, victim safety concerns, probation overload and persistent overcrowding.

49. Police and prosecution responses falter due to inconsistent training and resource shortages. Initiatives such as Operation Soteria in England and Wales, aim to focus on suspects but patchy implementation and rural access gaps, evident in Scotland and Northern Ireland, limit effectiveness. The Crown Prosecution Service and the Scottish procurators

<sup>39</sup> See <https://careappointments.com/care-news/scotland/199107/nearly-all-domestic-abuse-charges-in-scotland-were-prosecuted-in-the-past-year/>.

fiscal often drop cases that lack perfect evidence, while court backlogs and forensic delays retraumatize survivors.

50. Systemic failures hit women and girls in vulnerable situations hardest, including those with disabilities.<sup>40</sup> Black, minoritized, migrant, refugee and trafficked survivors face heightened barriers with weak statutory rights and low prosecution rates. The reduced access to legal aid, tailored support and guaranteed protections, such as courtroom screens, leaves them doubly victimized. Resource disparities widen regional gaps, with urban areas outpacing rural support. In addition, devolved approaches have built-in strengths and weaknesses: for example, the Domestic Abuse Act 2018 and “Equally Safe” strategy in Scotland blend justice with prevention, although rural isolation persists. The Northern Ireland 2022 Justice (Sexual Offences and Trafficking Victims) Act and the recommendations from the Gillen Review seek sensitivity, but cultural norms and funding lags stall progress. England and Wales, with the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, grapple with scale – low numbers of rape convictions and urban-rural divides dominate.

### **C. Participation of civil society organizations, including women’s organizations**

51. The United Kingdom has a very vibrant civil society with internationally recognized and respected women’s rights groups. Despite this, their role and contribution to combating violence against women and girls has been curtailed in recent years by a series of developments and policies that included the lockdown measures during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, reduced funding and a tendering process introduced by the Government that has intensified competition and anxiety among front-line organizations. Women’s and victims’ organizations are expected to “do more with less”. Many grass-roots organizations that the Special Rapporteur met with, including those representing black and minoritized women, noted that consultations with government entities had become tokenistic. While they might be consulted, their recommendations were often not retained and their expertise and specialization not fully appreciated.

### **D. Funding**

52. Central sources of funding come largely from the Ministry of Justice, the Home Office and the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government. As part of the restoration of the devolved institutions in Northern Ireland, the Government of the United Kingdom has pledged £1 billion to stabilize public services.<sup>41</sup> The reliance on annual budgets does not unfortunately address the wider need for long-term stability. Devolution to local governments on issues such as service provision has reportedly led to changes in commissioning models, including open tendering and short-term commissioning, and the increased participation of sectors that do not necessarily have the expertise to provide responsive and appropriate services. Such competition results in commissioners and funders gambling with the lives of women and girls, changing providers in order to cut costs, disrupting life-saving services and losing the vital expertise and experience of specialist services in supporting survivors.

53. Women’s organizations are forced to underwrite contractual delivery, leaving them in a precarious financial situation. Due to the policy of no recourse to public funds in the United Kingdom, grass-roots organizations are stepping in, using scarce, non-public funds, shifting the burden from the State to an overstretched sector. The Special Rapporteur is concerned that such an approach violates the country’s human rights obligations under the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the Equality Act 2010, the Istanbul Convention and the Human Rights Act 1998.

<sup>40</sup> See Victims’ Commissioner, “Annual victims’ survey 2023” (August 2024).

<sup>41</sup> See <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/secretary-of-state-returning-executive-can-unleash-northern-irelands-potential>

## VI. Exposure of specific groups of women and girls to violence

54. During her visit, the Special Rapporteur identified groups of women and girls who encounter multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and violence and are particularly exposed to higher levels of violence against women than other groups.

### A. Black and minoritized women

55. The most recent census in 2021 indicated that the minority ethnic population in the United Kingdom was 18 per cent. The Home Office homicide index shows that 22 per cent of the 249 female victims of violence recorded between March 2020 and March 2022 were from minority ethnic groups.<sup>42</sup> Women of African descent are frequently targeted for online toxicity and abuse, dehumanization on social media, digital misogyny and algorithmic discrimination.<sup>43</sup> Infant and maternal mortality rates are higher among ethnic minorities, in particular in infants and women of African or Asian descent.<sup>44</sup>

56. Furthermore, black, minoritized and migrant women in England experience higher rates of domestic homicide and need specialist support, but are often not able to access it. Government responses to the abuse faced by such women have focused selectively on some forms, such as forced marriage, honour killings and female genital mutilation, failing to address other forms of violence experienced in a meaningful, intersectional and sustained manner. For example, there is no recognition of religious coercive control and therefore no provision of faith-literate support.<sup>45</sup> Wider structural barriers to effective assistance and protection, such as institutional and systematic racism and restrictive immigration policies, have been disregarded.<sup>46</sup>

### B. Women and girls with disabilities

57. Women and girls with disabilities in the United Kingdom are particularly vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence, discrimination and abuse, yet the response from the authorities is often inadequate. The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities raised concerns in 2017, stating that the rights of women and girls with disabilities had not been systematically integrated into gender equality and disability agendas, with a lack of data and measures addressing the compounded effects of multiple and intersectional discrimination.<sup>47</sup> Women and girls with psychosocial disabilities face significant obstacles when attempting to access justice. The prevalent practice of restricting legal capacity makes it difficult for those women to initiate or participate in legal proceedings and their testimonies are often met with scepticism. Service providers also tend to be slow in responding to financial abuse, further exacerbating vulnerability.<sup>48</sup>

58. Girls with disabilities are exposed to high levels of violence and abuse. Challenges in seeking protection and justice are compounded by their age, additional vulnerabilities and the lack of tailored support. The deaf and disabled survivors of violence often face significant barriers in accessing refuge, with less than 1 per cent of refuge vacancies being wheelchair accessible. Disabled girls are particularly impacted by such barriers, which hinder their ability to find safety and receive justice, in part due to the underfunding of such services.<sup>49</sup> Equally concerning is the abuse of children with disabilities in care situations, where the

<sup>42</sup> United Kingdom Parliament, debate on female domestic homicides: Black, Asian and ethnic-minority overrepresentation, Hansard, vol. 385, 22 January 2024.

<sup>43</sup> See [A/HRC/54/67/Add.2](#).

<sup>44</sup> [CERD/C/GBR/CO/24-26](#), para. 43.

<sup>45</sup> See Natasha Mulvihill and others, "United Kingdom victim-survivor experiences of intimate partner spiritual abuse and religious coercive control and implications for practice", *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, vol. 23, No. 5 (2022).

<sup>46</sup> See [CERD/C/GBR/CO/24-26](#).

<sup>47</sup> See [CRPD/C/GBR/CO/1](#).

<sup>48</sup> See <https://www.wbg.org.uk/article/cuts-to-social-security-for-disabled-women/>.

<sup>49</sup> Women's Aid, *The Domestic Abuse Report 2023: The Annual Audit*.

abuse may be overlooked. Since the visit, the Special Rapporteur has been concerned by the recently announced intention to make further cuts to disability welfare spending, which will disproportionately affect women and girls with disabilities. Disabled women could see an estimated 11 per cent drop in their living standards, equating to over £4,000 annually.<sup>50</sup>

### C. Women in politics

59. Women's participation in politics has increased. In 2024, the proportion of female Members of Parliament (MPs) in the United Kingdom Parliament was estimated to be 41 per cent – a 7 per cent increase over 2019. Nevertheless, violence against women in politics continues to be significant, marked by physical threats, online abuse and harassment. Female MPs, especially women of colour, face even higher levels of abuse, particularly online. A 2021 survey found that 63 per cent of 500 female politicians had experienced serious threats and sexual harassment.<sup>51</sup> Another survey pointed to the increase in gendered abuse spikes online, noting 35 per cent more abusive comments targeting female MPs in 2022 than previously. The 2024 election saw intensified intimidation, deterring women's participation. The violence is worsened by an adversarial political culture and lax social media oversight. The Online Safety Act 2023 and the Elections Act 2022 aim to curb threats, and Operation Bridger provides security, but enforcement is weak. In 2024, women in the United Kingdom were half as likely as men to participate politically online.

### D. Migrant and refugee women

60. The Special Rapporteur is concerned about the extreme vulnerability and risks that migrant and refugee women have been subjected to by the series of recent migration and asylum-related policies, increasing their exposure to violence and hostility. The Illegal Migration Act 2023, in particular, has served to undermine the ability of women and girls who are fleeing conflict and gender-based persecution, to find protection and safety in the United Kingdom. Furthermore, it has increased the risks of trafficking, violence and sexual exploitation, and forced victims to remain in the clutch of their abusers. Women affected by female genital mutilation also experience retraumatization during asylum interviews and are subjected to invasive genital examinations.<sup>52</sup>

61. Single women and girls who are housed in temporary accommodation subcontracted by the Home Office are particularly vulnerable to trafficking and sexual exploitation, and many go missing.<sup>53</sup>

62. The Special Rapporteur is particularly concerned that migrant women and girls with uncertain immigration status are excluded from receiving State support, as set out in the rule of “no recourse to public funds”, driving many into destitution and homelessness. Exceptions to that rule exist but are rare and short term. The same applies to those women who enter the country on the basis of marriage, who must remain in that relationship for two years to regularize their residence and be able to access State support. Women who enter the United Kingdom on a spousal visa are required to remain in the relationship for five years in order to regularize their immigration status and access State support – a requirement that leaves many vulnerable to abuse and without protection. Although there are an estimated 32,000 victim-survivors with no recourse to public funds in urgent need of support, the existing safety net is limited to specific cohorts.<sup>54</sup>

63. One significant deterrent that discourages women and girls with insecure legal status, or whose residence is dependent on their partners, from coming forward and seeking

<sup>50</sup> Women's Budget Group, “Cuts to social security for disabled women” (25 March 2025).

<sup>51</sup> For example, the 2016 murder of MP Jo Cox.

<sup>52</sup> See Emmaleena Käkälä, “Strategies of denial: Women's experiences of culture of disbelief and discreditation in the treatment of asylum claims on the grounds of female genital cutting (FGC)”, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 48, No. 3 (2022).

<sup>53</sup> See <https://www.refugeewomen.co.uk/coercion-and-control/>.

<sup>54</sup> See Kath Scanlon and others, *Cost-benefit analysis of extending support to domestic abuse victims with NRPf. A technical report for the Domestic Abuse Commissioner* (December 2022).

assistance is the fact that the police and other public servants will share information regarding their migratory status with the Home Office, leading to legitimate fears that this will end in them being removed/deported.

64. Because migration and asylum have not been devolved but remain controlled by the Home Office, it is impossible for the authorities in the devolved governments to monitor the situation of asylum-seekers and refugees in their regions appropriately and to engage meaningfully to improve their situation.

## **E. Muslim women and girls**

65. The Special Rapporteur's findings highlight a troubling pattern of abuse targeting Muslim women and girls, particularly those with poor mental health or a history of prior victimization. Within certain community settings, men exploit religious beliefs and practices to manipulate, coerce and silence their victims. Examples include forcing women into secret religious marriages for sexual exploitation and extorting money through blackmail after sexual abuse. Women in religious marriages also face significant hurdles when seeking divorce, compounded by the persistent issue of forced marriages.

66. Muslim women and girls in the United Kingdom, especially those visibly identifiable by their attire, endure widespread discrimination and violence fuelled by hate. Women reportedly constitute about 60 per cent of victims in recorded anti-Muslim hate crimes. They are subjected to verbal abuse and harassment, particularly in public spaces. Workplace discrimination adds to a "triple penalty" of gender, ethnicity and religion, limiting employment opportunities and advancement.

68. Significant barriers hinder Muslim women and girls from reporting and accessing help and protection, such as distrust in the authorities, fear of reprisal and cultural stigmatization around "honour" and shame, with estimates suggesting that up to 50 per cent of hate crimes go unreported. Language difficulties and unfamiliarity with support services further isolate many. Victims often find police responses lacking, with complaints dismissed or inadequately addressed. Support programmes fail to account for the intersectional needs of gender, faith and ethnicity, while community pressures and fear of ostracism deter women from seeking external assistance.

69. Finally, women who are perceived as affiliated with Daesh fighters have frequently been stripped of their British nationality and refused repatriation. In some cases, they have been separated from their children, if the latter have been repatriated.

## **F. Women and girls in sport**

70. Women in United Kingdom sports faced notable discrimination, abuse and violence between 2020 and 2025, with systemic issues evident in several cases. The British Gymnastics scandal (2020–2022) exposed the abuse of female gymnasts, prompting the 2022 Whyte Review and a £4 million compensation scheme. Female swimmers reported body-shaming in Swim England, while female footballers faced misogynistic abuse during the 2021 European Football Championship and the 2023 World Cup. Safety fears among female runners were noted in a 2022 Women and Equalities Committee report, although exact data is lacking.

71. Women athletes continue to be denied fair, dignified and safe opportunities, as policies on the inclusion of males who identify as females in sport vary. Some entities, such as the Football Association, allow transgender women in female categories, while by 2023, UK Athletics and others had shifted to female-at-birth policies for fairness.

72. Efforts to improve safety include the Online Safety Act 2023, unevenly enforced, and the post-2022 reforms of British Gymnastics. The Sport England 2024 cultural audits and the Football Association's "Respect" campaign cut grassroots abuse by 15 per cent. The Women and Equalities Committee launched a taskforce and the "This Girl Can" campaign increased participation in exercise by 10 per cent.

## G. Older women

73. National statistics reveal that an estimated 375,000 people aged over 60 in England and Wales reported domestic abuse between April 2022 and March 2023,<sup>55</sup> yet that abuse is often invisible. According to Age UK, nearly two thirds (63 per cent) of adult family homicide victims are aged 55 and over, with older people as likely to be subjected to abuse by an adult child or grandchild as they are by an intimate partner.<sup>56</sup> The National Institute for Health and Care Research revealed that the abuse of some older victims had started when it was still considered a “family matter” and older women might also be less likely to disclose abuse, whether by a partner, child or grandchild. Nineteen per cent of women killed by men when the victim was aged over 70 and 13 per cent of victims killed aged over 80 were killed by a current or former intimate partner.<sup>57</sup>

## H. Women and girls expressing themselves on sex and gender identity

74. Women and girls, as well as their male allies, who wish to reassert their needs and rights based on their sex and have asserted the immutable nature of sex, have been ostracized, attacked and punished by State and non-State actors, including political parties, universities, private employers and the media, for their beliefs and opinions. However, a number of women who lost their jobs because of their views were vindicated, as tribunals confirmed their unfair dismissal or discrimination against them.

## I. Lesbian women and girls

75. Lesbian women and girls have are being vilified in some corners of society on account of their same-sex attraction, which risks undoing decades of progress made on combating homophobia. Furthermore, and as is indicated in the Cass Review report, many young women who express a desire to “transition” socially and/or medically may in fact be same-sex attracted, or experiencing other issues, such as neurodiversity or dealing with past trauma.<sup>58</sup> In its recent judgment, the Supreme Court stated that the term “lesbian” refers to a female who is sexually attracted to other females, with “female” defined by biological sex, and supported the right to maintain female-only spaces.

## J. Women deprived of liberty

76. Many incarcerated women in England and Wales have histories of trauma, yet prisons often lack adequate mental health support. The 2018 Female Offender Strategy seeks to divert vulnerable women from custody, but this does not apply in Scotland, where custodial sentences remain common. Insufficient mental health services contribute to high rates of self-harm and suicide among women deprived of liberty. In addition, black and minoritized women are overrepresented in prisons and immigration detention, highlighting systemic inequalities.

77. Mothers or pregnant women deprived of liberty face significant challenges, with many separated from their children, leading to emotional distress. Pregnant women often experience inadequate prenatal and postnatal care, and mother and baby units are limited, typically accommodating women with children aged less than 18 months. The conditions in such units are poor.

78. Despite these challenges, some promising initiatives exist. The Special Rapporteur was encouraged by the approach adopted by the Liliac Centre in Glasgow which provides a gender-specific, trauma-informed environment designed to support women and young people

<sup>55</sup> See Office of National Statistics, Domestic abuse in England and Wales overview: November 2024.

<sup>56</sup> Age UK, “No age limit: The hidden face of domestic abuse”.

<sup>57</sup> See “Femicide census 2021”.

<sup>58</sup> H. Cass, *Independent review of gender identity services for children and young people: final report* (2024).

needing only a low level of supervision. With its focus on rehabilitation rather than punishment, the Centre offers a stark contrast to the traditional prison system, providing a safer and more supportive space for women who have often been victims of violence. The Special Rapporteur believes this approach should be expanded across the United Kingdom.

79. In February 2023, the Government of the United Kingdom implemented a new policy stipulating that transgender women with male genitalia or those convicted of sexual or violent offences would no longer be housed in women's prisons, except for some cases requiring ministerial approval. The Special Rapporteur welcomes this policy. As of 31 March 2024, there were 295 transgender prisoners in England and Wales, with 83 per cent identifying as male and 17 per cent as female.<sup>59</sup>

## K. Prostituted women

80. A high proportion of women and girls in prostitution are trafficked into prostitution.<sup>60</sup> They are often migrant women from Eastern European countries. Identifying the age, ethnicity or other protected characteristics of adult trafficking victims remains challenging due to the limited data available from the national referral mechanism.<sup>61</sup> Such challenges hinder the development of anti-trafficking measures. The Home Affairs Committee's 2023 inquiry into human trafficking heard that 75 per cent of victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation were advertised online and that websites advertising prostitution were the most significant enabler of sex trafficking.

## L. Mothers in custody battles

81. Mothers who have lost the care of their children as a result of custody cases struggle to come to terms with the loss. They face systematic challenges in accessing justice, exacerbated by legal aid cuts, court biases and a failure to prioritize child safety in cases involving domestic abuse. The Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 removed legal aid from most private family law cases, forcing many parents, especially mothers, to represent themselves. Many mothers in custody disputes cannot afford lawyers to represent them in court. By 2017, 21,852 parents had applied for private law child arrangement cases without legal representation – a 134 per cent increase over 2011.<sup>62</sup> The lack of legal support disproportionately affects lower-income mothers. The result is often prolonged cases, psychological distress, denial of justice and a growing family court backlog, which stood at over 100,000 children as at 2013.<sup>63</sup> The lack of justice has forced many mothers to leave the United Kingdom for jurisdictions not covered by the Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction.

82. Beyond legal barriers, the family courts have been criticized for prioritizing parental contact and involvement over the safety of children, sometimes granting access to fathers despite serious allegations and even findings of abuse. The courts have repeatedly disregarded evidence of domestic violence, with mothers being advised not to raise allegations of domestic violence or child sexual abuse in case they are accused of "parental alienation". Mothers are also threatened with the removal of their children if they seek to protect them by limiting contact with abusive fathers. In many cases, children's voices are not heard or listened to. Such cases expose deep flaws in the system, where the presumption of parental involvement can override safeguarding concerns.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Ministry of Justice, "HM Prison and Probation Service offender equalities report 2023/24", p. 10.

<sup>60</sup> See <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/64627/pdf>.

<sup>61</sup> See <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/7290/human-trafficking/publications/>.

<sup>62</sup> See <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2019-06-10/262429/>.

<sup>63</sup> The Law Society, "More than 100,000 children trapped in family court backlog", 28 March 2024.

<sup>64</sup> Elizabeth Dalgarno and others, "'Let's excuse abusive men from abusing and enable sexual abuse': Child sexual abuse investigations in England's private family courts", *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law*, vol. 46, No. 3 (2024).

## M. Girls

83. Girls in the United Kingdom are disproportionately vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence, facing a spectrum of abuse including sexual abuse, rape and online and offline grooming, as scandals, such as those that occurred in Rochdale, Rotherham and Telford, demonstrate. In those cases, girls were subjected to upskirting,<sup>65</sup> drugging linked to rape and exploitation, and strangulation. Strangulation, a stand-alone offence since 2022, is reported by one in five domestic abuse victims under the age of 18 and often involves girls in coercive relationships. In a 2021 survey, 90 per cent of girls had reportedly experienced sexist name-calling, unwanted sexual comments or touching in school settings.<sup>66</sup> In 2024, it was estimated that 1 in 20 children had experienced sexual abuse, with girls comprising 90 per cent of victims. Rape cases involving girls under 16 account for 40 per cent of reports of rape. Unfortunately, the lack of successful prosecutions, combined with victim blaming, stifles justice.

84. As was highlighted in the Cass Review, an increasing number of children and young people, including girls, have been referred to the National Health Service about their gender identity. According to the Cass report, between 2009 and 2016, the number of adolescent girls referred to gender identity development services increased from 15 to 1,071. Accordingly, teenage girls have been impacted by anxiety and depression in recent years, as they are more prone to low self-esteem and body image dissatisfaction than boys.<sup>67</sup>

## VII. Foreign policy on ending violence against women and girls

85. The Women, Peace and Security National Action Plan (2023–2027) seeks to implement Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) by reducing the impact of conflict on women and girls and enhancing their roles in peacebuilding. It outlines five objectives: boosting women's participation in decision-making; preventing gender-based violence; addressing women's needs in humanitarian crises; improving responsiveness to women of security and justice systems; and tackling the gendered effects of transnational threats such as terrorism and climate insecurity. Through the previous National Action Plan (2018–2022) the United Kingdom supported women's inclusion in peace processes, drove global efforts against conflict-related sexual violence through the Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative and funded women's leadership in humanitarian responses. Funding for security sector reforms and humanitarian aid, including £113 million for programmes to combat gender-based violence,<sup>68</sup> constitute important contributions.

86. The International Women and Girls Strategy 2023–2030 commits to advancing gender equality globally, focusing on education and empowerment, and ending violence against women. Delivering on those objectives will be impacted by the additional cuts that are foreseen in the official development assistance (ODA) budget. In 2020, the United Kingdom reduced its ODA commitment from 0.7 per cent to 0.5 per cent of gross national income, which negatively affected women and girls impacted by multiple crises – a trend that is likely to continue in 2025.

87. The Special Rapporteur notes with grave concern that the United Kingdom continues to export arms to countries that commit serious violations against women and girls. The Export Control Act 2002, which underpins the strategic export licensing criteria, requires the Government to deny licences if there is a clear risk of the arms being used for internal repression, serious violations of international humanitarian law or gender-based violence, as

<sup>65</sup> Upskirting is criminalized under the Voyeurism (Offences) Act 2019.

<sup>66</sup> Ofsted, *Review of Sexual Abuse in Schools and Colleges* (2021).

<sup>67</sup> See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2024/04/uk-implementation-cass-report-key-protecting-girls-serious-harm>.

<sup>68</sup> See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-women-peace-and-security-national-action-plan-2023-to-2027>.

outlined in criterion 2, alongside compliance with international obligations, such as the Arms Trade Treaty, under criterion 1.<sup>69</sup>

## VIII. Conclusions and recommendations

88. Based on the findings set out above and in a spirit of cooperation and dialogue, the Special Rapporteur provides the following recommendations to the Government of the United Kingdom:

(a) Fully incorporate the Istanbul Convention into domestic law by lifting the reservations on articles 44 and 59, enact comprehensive legislation to ensure consistent, nationwide compliance and repeal the Illegal Migration Act;

(b) Establish a ministry for women and equality and adopt a comprehensive countrywide strategy on violence against women and girls that is rights-based and has a strong intersectional approach. It must also have timelines and an adequate budget, and address prevention. Robust coordination and oversight structures regarding violence against women and girls, should also be implemented across all regions. The government machinery dealing with it must have a formal interface with civil society and women's organizations;

(c) Abolish the policy of no recourse to public funds to ensure that the most vulnerable women and girls have access to minimum assistance and support. Ensure that funding related to ending violence against women and girls, including for frontline service providers, is placed on a statutory footing to protect this vital investment. Payment of the relevant funds must be done in a timely manner;

(d) Repeal the Illegal Migration Act and ensure access to services irrespective of migratory status, in part by instituting a firewall policy that would prevent the automatic or routine sharing of migratory status information between service providers (including healthcare professionals, social workers and victim support services) and the Home Office or law enforcement agencies;

(e) Ensure that the accommodation of asylum-seekers meets adequate minimum standards, including the protection of residents against mistreatment, exploitation and abuse, including sexual abuse;

(f) Accelerate the conclusion of the inquiry into the mother and baby homes in Northern Ireland, ensuring effective access to truth, justice and reparations and taking into consideration lessons learned from similar inquiries;

(g) Urgently and swiftly prohibit the use of "parental alienation" and related pseudo-science concepts, appoint only experts who are fully qualified psychologists or psychiatrists regulated by the Health and Care Professions Council and that have regular accredited domestic abuse training. Ensure an end to parental involvement between abusive parents and their children at all costs. Prohibit the removal of children from the parent they live with for the purpose of restarting, repairing or improving the child's relationship with the other parent;

(h) Ensure that public and private institutions, including employers, healthcare providers and other institutions, such as prisons, uphold the ruling of the Supreme Court on the Equality Act, including, inter alia, the provision of female-only spaces, recording sex as a distinct variable from gender identity. Provide the necessary support and guidance to all segments of society to increase understanding of the implications of the ruling;

(i) Ensure that women's organizations are able to effectively participate in all decisions that affect women and girls. Women and girls must be able to speak on all issues, including sex and gender identity, without fear, intimidation or reprisals;

<sup>69</sup> See <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2021-12-08/hcws449>.

(j) Urgently improve healthcare and support systems for women in detention, particularly in relation to mothers and pregnant women, ensuring better outcomes for both them and their children;

(k) Ensure that all domestic and intimate partner violence cases are investigated in a timely and efficient manner, that perpetrators are prosecuted and, if they are convicted, are punished with appropriate sanctions. Ensure that victims have access to effective remedies and means of protection, including strong police protection, adequate emergency shelter, rehabilitative services, legal assistance and other support services;

(l) Adopt standards on training for law enforcement and the judiciary on gender bias, including on mothers in the context of custody cases, as well as on other forms of violence, such as coercive control and stalking. Such training must be provided by specialists. Prohibit the use of “parental alienation” in family courts and stop using unregulated experts;

(m) Conduct more police training on the Crown Prosecution Service protocol on stalking, run background checks on new hires in law enforcement and end impunity for any crimes committed;

(n) Consider adopting the Nordic model for prostitution, focusing on the criminalization of the purchase of sexual acts and decriminalizing prostituted women, as well as supporting and scaling up exit strategies. Extend the rules governing physical prostitution to online prostitution and ensure that possession of non-consensual intimate images is considered a criminal offence. Consider establishing an online safety commission to support the individuals affected and make policy recommendations;

(o) Explicitly criminalize femicide and consider establishing a femicide watch or observatory on violence against women in close cooperation with the National Human Rights and Equality Commission and representatives of civil society;

(p) Implement the recommendations of the Cass Review, including by ensuring that any legislation and policies on the transitioning of persons, as well as future policies on conversion therapy, do not result in criminalizing holistic support and inquiry for persons dealing with neurodiversity or past trauma. No one should rapidly be put on the path of medical transitioning. The clinical trials for puberty blockers must benefit from the insights of an independent ethics committee set up to oversee the experiments. Provide persons who have de-transitioned with holistic support;

(q) Take immediate measures to address misogyny in schools and adopt a robust curriculum on promoting respectful, equal relationships, including a sex and health education curriculum that explicitly covers sexual harassment and online abuse. Ensure mandatory training for teachers and staff on recognizing the early signs of abuse and ensure that cases are dealt with swiftly and that parents are involved;

(r) Ensure the full implementation of effective protection orders and grant the competent authorities the power to issue them for all forms of violence against women and domestic violence;

(s) Strengthen child protection measures, including for girls, by adopting child-sensitive approaches, screen the background of persons coming into contact with children for sexual harm and improve the identification and support of victims;

(t) Ensure mandated reporting of suspected grooming, with penalties, expand the Grooming Gangs Taskforce with sustained funding and ethnicity profiling, and establish permanent victim-led inquiries to address previous failures;

(u) Conduct a comprehensive analysis of the relevant research and data before adopting the proposed surrogacy bill, including the potential for exploitation in surrogacy arrangements locally, the negative consequences of removing a child from its birth mother at delivery and the ramifications of removing the name of the birth mother as a legal parent. In the meantime, commercial surrogacy agencies in the United Kingdom should be stopped and United Kingdom citizens and residents should be advised not to use commercial surrogacy abroad;

(v) **Enhance the support provided to victims of slavery by providing personalized, long-term assistance, commissioning and publishing reliable data, while amending recent migration-related legislation to prioritize victim identification over immigration control;**

(w) **Conduct studies to gain a better understanding of the scale of forced marriages in the United Kingdom, including by creating a task force to coordinate the relevant agencies, mandate training for frontline staff to spot coercion, run a targeted education campaign on marriage laws and fund safe spaces with legal, housing and counselling support for victims, ensuring protection orders are enforced.**

## Appendix

### **List of stakeholders the Special Rapporteur met with during her visit to the United Kingdom**

1. In England, she met the Under Secretary of State, Minister for Victims and safeguarding; the Minister for Women and Equalities; the Joint Committee for Human Rights; the Police National Lead for violence against women and girls; and representatives from the Government Equalities Office, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office; the Ministry of Justice; the Crown Prosecution Service; the Domestic Abuse Commissioner, and held an online meeting on 21 March 2025 with the National Health Service of England and the Department of Health and Social Care. The Special Rapporteur regrets not meeting the Ministry of Education or visiting an immigration removal centre during her visit.

2. In Scotland, she engaged with the Scottish Government Equality Unit, Justice Directorate, and National Health Service representatives, and visited the Lillias women's detention centre in Glasgow. In Northern Ireland, she met Junior Ministers, the Regional Steering Group on Sexual and Domestic Violence, and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). In Wales, she consulted the Minister for Social Justice and the Violence Against Women team. She also met the Equality and Human Rights Commission (England), Scottish Human Rights Commission, and Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, appreciating the United Kingdom Government's cooperation and openness during the visit.

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