



Rt Hon Michael Gove MP  
Secretary of State for Education  
Sanctuary Buildings  
Great Smith Street  
London  
SW1P 3BT  
By Email: Sec-OF-STATE.PS@education.gsi.gov.uk

21 December 2010

Dear Secretary of State

### **The role of schools in preventing violence against women and girls**

Bristol Fawcett, the local group for Fawcett Society members in the Bristol area, has been campaigning and working with local partners for a number of years to improve awareness and action in schools around issues of gender based violence (please see our website for more information: <http://www.bristolfawcett.org.uk/GenderinEducation.html>).

The members of Bristol Fawcett warmly welcome the Coalition Government's commitment to a strategic narrative on violence against women and girls (VAWG) and the Home Secretary's statement that *"This is not a Home Office issue alone. This is about schools, the NHS, Job Centres, prisons"*.

However, we are calling for greater action by the Department for Education in the overall strategy to ensure that schools are playing their part in the response to violence against women and girls.

Violence against women and girls is far more common in the UK than often realised. Each year across the UK, 3 million women experience some form of violence. It is an issue that cuts across all parts of society with serious and enduring consequences for individuals, families, communities and society as a whole. It is estimated that violence against women costs society £40 billion each year, including costs to the economy and human costs. Investing in prevention through education will save lives and reduce the costs associated with violence.

Violence against young women and girls, such as sexual harassment and bullying, teenage relationship abuse, sexual violence, forced marriage, domestic violence in the home and female genital mutilation places the educational attainment of girls at serious risk. A YouGov poll commissioned by the End Violence Against Women Coalition in October 2010 found that close to one in three 16-18-year-old girls have experienced unwanted sexual touching at school and 71% of 16-18-year-olds have heard sexual name-calling such as "slut" or "slag" towards girls at school daily or a few times per week. Moreover, the poll found that students rarely hear from teachers that these behaviours are unacceptable.

Attitudes that excuse and normalise violence against women and girls must be challenged early if we are to end violence against women and girls. Schools and academies have a

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Fawcett Society, Bristol Local Group.

critical part to play. There are clear ethical and legal obligations under the Gender Equality Duty (to be replaced by the Public Sector Equality Duty) and child protection laws to provide safe and supportive school environments for all students. The safety of girls in schools must be a priority for the Department for Education, along with a clear commitment to tackling and transforming attitudes that normalise violence against women and girls.

**Specifically, we call on you to make a commitment to:**

1. A senior policy lead in the Department for Education who is responsible for developing and implementing a department-wide action plan on violence against women and girls
2. A mechanism for violence against women and girls specialists to provide advice and support to the Department for Education
3. Violence against women and girls to be incorporated into the primary and secondary curriculum across all subjects, including Sex and Relationships Education, PSHE Education and Citizenship. This must address all forms of violence and challenge gender inequality and attitudes that excuse and normalise violence against women and girls.
4. Initial and ongoing training for teaching and non-teaching school staff and governors to increase awareness and build skills to challenge violence against women and girls.
5. Regular collection and release of data on young women's and girls' experiences of all forms of violence in school environments.
6. Develop specific strategies to ensure the safety and well-being of girls in Pupil Referral Units and consider alternative behaviour management strategies for girls.
7. Place violence against women and girls as a key part of the Department for Education's work on sexualisation of children, early intervention, child protection and parenting.
8. Ensure access to specialist violence against women and girls support services in the community.

It is critical that all parts of government play their part in eliminating violence against women and girls in the UK. We look forward to hearing from you about these concerns.

Yours sincerely,

For the members of Bristol Fawcett