

Freedom Curtailed: Coercive Control & Economic Abuse

In anticipation of the Government's upcoming violence against women and girls strategy (VAWG), The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Access to Justice hosted an expert panel on VAWG on Wednesday 22 October 2025. Specifically, the panel focused on coercive control and economic abuse – a highly prominent issue with growing understanding in policy.

Speakers

Lord Bach – Chair of APPG on Access to Justice, and Panel Chair

Jess Phillips MP – Home Office Minister for Safeguarding and VAWG

Gina Miller – Justice Campaigner, Author, Founder of MoneyShe

Sam Smethers – CEO of Surviving Economic Abuse

David Challen – Domestic Abuse Advisor, Campaigner, Author

Discussion

Lord Bach

Lord Bach opened the meeting by welcoming attendees to the panel organised by the Legal Aid Practitioners Group for the Access to Justice All-Party Parliamentary Group, which he chairs. He noted that the panel brought together an exceptionally strong group of speakers, each a leading expert in their field.

Lord Bach reflected on the continuing impact of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 (LASPO), observing that, despite some minor improvements since its introduction, the legislation continues to have serious consequences, particularly in the area of violence against women and girls. He remarked that reform of legal aid remains one of the most neglected areas of policy and expressed hope that the government would address this.

Lord Bach then introduced the first speaker, Jess Phillips MP, Member for Birmingham Yardley, and Minister for Safeguarding and Violence Against Women and Girls in the Home Office.

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Jess Phillips MP

The Minister began by acknowledging that much of the access to justice agenda falls within the Ministry of Justice, rather than her own Home Office portfolio. She explained that she works closely with her counterpart, Alex Davies-Jones, the Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Minister at the Ministry of Justice, and that together they lead a cross-government group developing the VAWG strategy for the next decade.

She emphasised that the strategy must be ambitious and enduring rather than a short-term plan that would be forgotten within a year. Phillips noted that publication had been delayed partly because of her own insistence on making the strategy more ambitious and substantive.

The Minister then turned to the recent announcement that the Government intends to repeal the presumption of parental involvement from the Children Act 1989, in a move to protect children from abusive parents. She spoke movingly about accompanying campaigner Claire Throssell MBE, whose sons were murdered by their abusive father following failings in the family courts, to meet the Prime Minister, reflecting on the years of tireless campaigning that has finally led to a change in the presumption of parental involvement.

The Minister discussed the growing recognition of economic abuse as a serious and complex form of control, crediting people and organisations in the room such as SEA for their pioneering work. She noted that financial and civil law barriers often prevent progress for victims and that economic abuse is frequently weaponised through the court system.

The Minister continued, describing the progress being made through new measures such as domestic abuse protection orders, highlighting a case in Manchester where a breach of an order led to a perpetrator being imprisoned within a week, something that would once have been unthinkable. These examples, she said, show what can be achieved when the justice system acts swiftly and does not rely on victims to carry the administrative and emotional burden themselves.

The Minister stressed that the system too often leaves victims feeling they have fewer rights than their abusers, whether in civil, family, or criminal courts. The process of evidence-gathering and pushing for better decisions, she said, falls on those least equipped to bear it. She expressed deep concern for the many cases that go unseen because victims simply give up, lacking the resilience or resources to continue.

She spoke about the importance of improving first responses to victims such as placing domestic abuse specialists in 999 control rooms. The Minister credited the police with

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having made the most progress of any agency in tackling VAWG, while noting that much work remains to be done. However, she cautioned that improving the police response without simultaneous reform of the courts would be “opening an enormous door into an empty room”.

Preventing violence in the first place, she said, must remain the government’s most urgent priority. That means focusing on perpetrators, holding them accountable, and shifting the burden away from victims. She noted that improvements in rape charging rates, while welcome, still leave many victims without their day in court, and that the entire justice ecosystem must function better together.

The Minister concluded by stressing that progress in both the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice must go “hand in glove”. Reforms such as changing the presumption of contact in family law represent fundamental shifts in how people access justice, she said, and such change is never easy or quick. As a policymaker, she urged campaigners to focus on practical, achievable measures that can deliver real change within realistic timelines.

Gina Miller

Gina Miller began by expressing gratitude for the invitation and explained that she would speak both from personal experience as a survivor and from her ongoing advocacy.

She recounted her experience as a victim of domestic and economic abuse, describing how the person who should have loved and protected her had instead sought to control and harm her. She said that 25 years ago she never imagined still needing to tell her story, and yet, with the rise of technology, economic abuse has become even more sophisticated and pervasive.

Gina described the profound isolation victims face when systems disbelieve and retraumatise them. She recalled being dismissed by police who assumed that women of her background could not be victims. Such attitudes, she said, persist today and continue to fuel dangerous myths.

She warned that coercive control is rising sharply among young people aged 18 to 21, calling it a national travesty that transcends class, race, and education. She urged awareness of the early signs of control and the urgent need for systems that respond with belief and support rather than suspicion and blame.

Gina shared how she was only able to survive because of her daughter with special

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needs, explaining that she once lived for three weeks in a car with her child after fleeing abuse, unable to access housing or open a bank account because she lacked documentation. Technology, she warned, now allows abusers to track victims and control their finances remotely, while financial institutions often fail to recognise the signs.

She called for greater awareness and training across banks and businesses, as well as for recognition of the intergenerational trauma caused when children witness abuse. She spoke candidly about the enduring psychological impact, saying that even decades later she still experiences nightmares of her abuser.

Turning to practical policy changes, Gina called for reform of legal aid and family courts. She criticised the legal aid deserts across the country and described the current system as failing women. She urged amendment of section 25 of the Matrimonial Causes Act to ensure all forms of domestic abuse are explicitly recognised, and removal of the requirement under section 22ZA for victims to prove they cannot obtain a loan before receiving assistance. She also called for the abolition of onerous evidence barriers and for proper regulation of experts in family courts.

Gina emphasised that risk assessment tools must include non-physical forms of abuse and reiterated that domestic and economic abuse cut across class boundaries. She closed by highlighting the gendered nature of online harm, warning that abusers exploit women's self-doubt and lack of confidence and called for urgent reform in digital safety and awareness.

Sam Smethers

Sam Smethers began by commending Gina Miller's courage and by acknowledging SEA's founder, Dr Nicola Sharp-Jeffs, who was present and whose pioneering work has shaped much of the progress in this field.

She reflected that the presumption of contact in family courts had long been a fundamental flaw in the system, and that changing it was essential. Too many of the system's core assumptions, she said, have been wrong for so long, leading to cascading failures across interconnected systems.

Sam described how systemic failures across justice, welfare, and financial mechanisms consistently let victim-survivors down. Access to justice, she said, is essential to enabling victims to safely leave and fully separate from abusers. Full separation is often a long, uncertain process, with many survivors still facing economic and coercive abuse years after

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leaving. Sam shared examples of women trapped in joint mortgages, denied child maintenance, or forced to hand children over to dangerous ex-partners.

Sam argued that the justice system routinely enables post-separation abuse. Economic abuse, though recognised in law, remains under-investigated and rarely prosecuted. She noted how even successful prosecutions rarely bring victims a sense of justice: “I’ve been told “He’ll come out of prison financially fine, while I’m left with the debt in my name.””

Sam cited the Domestic Abuse Commissioner’s recent report, which found that domestic abuse pervades family courts and that their entrenched “pro-contact” culture must change. She described the perverse reality in which victims are advised not to disclose economic abuse in court for fear of being accused of parental alienation. Courts, she said, are being “played” by abusers, often becoming “playgrounds for coercive control”.

She called for mandatory training for judges and legal professionals so that the gravity of coercive control is properly understood, arguing that safeguards must be built into court processes to prevent abusers from manipulating them through non-disclosure, delays, or vexatious claims.

Sam highlighted the inadequacy of legal aid for victims, sharing the example of a deaf woman forced to lip-read her abuser in court because she could not afford representation. She also called for removal of the means test for domestic abuse survivors and for clearer, more practical guidance on evidencing abuse.

Finally, Sam urged bold reform, particularly of cohabitation law, arguing that a new system must not replicate the failures of the current one. She ended by reaffirming her organisation’s determination to work with government to deliver the change survivors urgently need.

David Challen

David Challen thanked the organisers and his fellow panellists, particularly Gina Miller, for their powerful testimonies. He spoke as an adult child survivor of domestic abuse, noting that only recently have children been recognised as victims in their own right.

He described how his mother lived under his father’s coercive control for 40 years, during which economic abuse was a key lever of domination. Growing up, he said the harm was mental and emotional rather than physical. David reflected on the importance of language, noting that 2025 marks ten years since coercive control legislation was

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introduced and five years since the Domestic Abuse Act expanded protection post-separation. Language, he said, gives victims and society the means to define and recognise harm.

David recounted how his father controlled every aspect of family life, from finances to autonomy, to pace of life, all while presenting a respectable façade to the outside world. He described how the fog of control seeps into children and normalises violence – a concept which took him years to understand that what he had experienced was abuse.

David described how economic dependence prevented his mother from leaving and how, after finally inheriting money from her mother, she gained the financial means to escape. His father responded by coercing her into signing a post-nuptial agreement that stripped her of assets: a final act of control that preceded the tragedy which later brought national attention to coercive control.

He continued, highlighting how economic abuse is a major predictor of domestic homicide and how current legal aid structures perpetuate harm by denying victims equal access to justice. Many women, he said, are criminalised as a direct result of abuse and often coerced into offending.

In closing, David called for reform of legal aid, greater recognition of adult child survivors, and better training for judges and professionals. He warned that young people leaving school or university are ill-equipped to recognise coercive control, and urged society to confront the issue collectively.

Q&A

Question 1

Sally Hobson, Senior Criminal Practitioner at The 36 Group and member of the Criminal Bar Association, commended progress in the courts but expressed concern about delays and the treatment of victims during trials, asking whether the government would introduce targets to address delays in the criminal justice system.

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Question 2

Ceri Parker-Carruthers Family Law Clinic Manager from Dad's House raised the issue of financial remedies in family law, urging the government to heed the Law Commission's proposals and consider conduct as a meaningful factor in financial settlements.

Jess Phillips MP

The Minister responded by acknowledging both comments and expressing appreciation for the progress achieved over the past decade, while recognising the exhaustion of those who had fought for change. She explained that setting clear targets, such as the goal to halve violence against women and girls within ten years, helps focus attention and resources.

While The Minister could not give detailed answers on specific justice matters, she undertook to raise these issues with the Ministry of Justice. She spoke highly of the new Justice Secretary, Rt Hon David Lammy, describing him as deeply committed to the VAWG agenda. The Minister noted that the government is reviewing Lord Leveson's recommendations, including the reintroduction of specialist domestic abuse courts, and discussed practical challenges such as the lack of remand in most VAWG cases, which contributes to delay. On financial remedy reform, The Minister admitted candidly that it was not her area of expertise but promised to ensure the question was passed to those responsible.

Question 3

Policing, Crime and Justice Journalist, Danny Shaw, asked about the delay in publishing the government's VAWG strategy.

Jess Phillips MP

The Minister replied that the delay was hers, explaining that she refused to publish until she was completely satisfied. She said the strategy would not be released until it contained concrete commitments backed by budget allocations but confirmed it would be published before the end of the year. The Minister then left to attend her other commitments

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Sam Smethers

After the Minister's departure, Sam added that reform of financial remedy proceedings remains a key priority for her organisation and that discussions with Ministry of Justice officials are ongoing.

Gina Miller

Gina highlighted the importance of pension sharing in divorce settlements, noting that it is frequently overlooked despite being one of the largest assets in most households. She described continued post-separation control in her own case, including forged signatures and fraudulent loans, and called for greater vigilance from financial institutions and professional advisers.

David Challen

David reflected on the many people his mother had spoken to before her case including friends, colleagues, medical professionals, and how those conversations lacked the language and awareness to recognise abuse. He noted that coercive control charge rates remain low and that more must be done through police and community education to improve understanding and prevention.

Question 4

Jenny Beck KC (Hon), Director at Beck Fitzgerald Solicitors, stressed the need for mandatory, standardised training across all parts of the justice system to ensure consistent understanding of domestic abuse, arguing that comprehension standards should be required before practitioners are permitted to operate in this field. She also urged expansion of legal aid to support family law practitioners working at the preventive stage.

Question 5

Dr Nicola Sharp-Jeffs OBE spoke next, drawing on her work with the Domestic Homicide Review Quality Assurance Board. She said every review she has read shows systemic failure and that economic abuse is now being recognised in each case, marking progress

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since earlier years when it was ignored. She reiterated that economic safety underpins physical safety and urged the government to recognise this in its international strategies.

Question 5

Aleisha Ebrahimi, Senior Policy Advisor to the Domestic Abuse Commissioner, added that although economic abuse is legally recognised, it is often not seen as serious enough to prompt legal intervention. She pointed to the [Domestic Abuse Commissioner's recent report](#), which found high prevalence of domestic abuse in family court proceedings. She emphasised that the family courts have a duty to identify abuse proactively and that arbitrary divisions between financial and child proceedings prevent joined-up protection for victims.

Closing reflections

Sam Smethers

Sam closed by praising the Domestic Abuse Commissioner's report for exposing systemic failures and emphasised the need for the forthcoming VAWG strategy to reflect the interconnected nature of economic and physical abuse.

Gina Miller

Gina reiterated that prevention and education must begin early, within homes, schools, and universities - particularly given the alarming rise of coercive behaviour among young people.

David Challen

David concluded by underlining the need to recognise young people in abusive relationships as victims in their own right and to address the public's limited understanding of coercive control, including among juries.

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Lord Bach

In closing, Lord Bach thanked all speakers, organisers and attendees for their contributions. He acknowledged the effort of those who queued to attend and described the discussion as both powerful and worthwhile, before formally concluding the meeting.