Before she became an MP, Sarah was a forensic medical examiner for Devon and Cornwall police, and spent many long nights with women and some men who had been the victims of horrendous sexual and physical violence. Sarah is convinced that the odds are heavily stacked against the victims, and anonymity would especially protect serial offenders.

FULL TEXT

Sarah Wollaston (Totnes, Conservative)

I congratulate Caroline Flint on her speech and on the passion with which she spoke during the Adjournment debate that she initiated. Many right hon. and hon. Members have brought special expertise to the debate, either as barristers or from a background in social work. My background is that I am a doctor. For five years, I was a forensic medical examiner for Devon and Cornwall police and spent many long nights with women and some men who had been the victims of horrendous sexual and physical violence. I have also been a family doctor for many years and have been a practitioner for 24 years in total.

I have lost count of the number of women—they are mostly women—whom I have seen who have not made an allegation of rape. The reasons are many and complex. I can testify that the vast majority of those crimes go unreported, because of misplaced feelings of guilt, real fear of reprisals, a belief that the victims will not be believed and, in many cases, just a sense that they want to put something so horrible in a box on the shelf and never visit it. That is the truth of the matter.

I pay tribute to the many women who have the courage to go forward and make a complaint. I want to point out something that the women saw had in common. Many of them told me that the reason they were going through what is, quite frankly, a very unpleasant examination after a horrendous experience was not for themselves, but because they believed that it would protect other women. I ask the Minister to consider why those women would report a rape if they thought that there was no possibility that other women might benefit.

I completely understand the many arguments made in favour of protecting the innocent who are subject to false allegations, but we need to remember that the odds are heavily stacked in their favour. For every 100 women I saw—I believed the vast majority of them—I can count on the fingers of one hand the number who had their day in court and saw a conviction. We need to be clear that the scales are already tipped in favour of the defendant in a rape case. We need to be very careful that we do not add a further barrier to women coming forward and making allegations.

The second point I should like to make is on the difficulty in this country with serial offenders. Many hon. Members have referred to John Worboys, who drugged his victims in the back of his taxi, but let us be clear that the No. 1 date rape drug remains alcohol. Many rape offenders are serial offenders—they are frequent fliers. When I examined women in the presence of police, it became clear that many of those whom the women named as the person who had attacked them were known to the police and had form. We need to be
careful that we do not put further barriers in the way of identifying such people so that others can come forward with their experiences.

Those were the two main points that I wanted to make today. Many hon. Members have said that this is not a gender issue, and I agree. However, we need to be careful that we do not make it a political issue. I have some reservations about the way in which some Members have tried to make it so. I would like the Minister to consider free votes, because that is the best way to take the political heat out of the argument and to focus on the real issue of who we want to protect. I request that he look carefully at my suggestion.