Violence against Women and Girls

Sarah Wollaston (Totnes, Conservative) Click hear to see Sarah speak

As a former police victim examiner and doctor, I have seen deeply traumatised women in the middle of the night in the immediate aftermath of horrific sexual violence. I have also, as a doctor, met women in their 80s and 90s who are still suffering a lifetime of consequences. There is nothing new about sexual violence, but what has changed is the normalisation and acceptance of sexual violence within our society, and that is something that we really have to address. I am proud to be a patron of Devon Rape Crisis, and I welcome the £40 million that has gone towards setting up a network of rape crisis centres around the country. When I was a victim examiner, that was not available.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham, Conservative)

I am shocked that my hon. Friend suggests that there is a normalisation of violence. Will she define exactly what she means?

Sarah Wollaston (Totnes, Conservative)

That is an important point, but before I come to it, I would like to pay tribute to the 27 remarkable, talented and skilled volunteer women who work for Devon Rape Crisis in my area.

I will address my hon. Friend's point. What do I mean by "normalisation"? Well, for example, 80% of 15 to 17-year-old boys are now regularly accessing hardcore pornography. To my mind, that constitutes normalisation, as does the issue of sexting, which my hon. Friend Claire Perry mentioned, and the extent to which it goes unchallenged. One might say that this is a milder example, but when I go into the Tea Rooms in the House of Commons and see colleagues reading newspapers with images that objectify women, I find that offensive. I find it a normalisation that across the country young girls are sitting in households where they see such sexualisation of women as a normal portrayal of women. People may find me prudish, but I assure hon. Members that there is nothing that makes me blush. These are not blushes, but anger. That is what I would term as normalisation, and I hope I have answered the question from my hon. Friend Bob Stewart.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham, Conservative)

I thank my hon. Friend for her explanation.

Sarah Wollaston (Totnes, Conservative)

That is wonderful.

It is crucial that we challenge through education the normalisation of sexualisation and violence towards women, but it has to be the right education. We need to make better use of peer educators. It is no use having an embarrassed teacher who blushes when talking about sex and sexual violence. Often, the best educators are peer educators, particularly
those who have been victims and are prepared to talk about the impact that has had on their lives. We want the right people delivering that education, and of course "the right people" includes families. As my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes pointed out, parents should be aware of what their children are accessing and not be embarrassed to talk to them and challenge attitudes as they develop.

We also need to do something about prosecution and the number of people being brought to book for such crimes. Partly, that is about encouraging women to report crimes. From having spoken to women, I know how incredibly challenging that can be and how brave women have to be to come forward and go through the criminal justice system, so it is disappointing that there seems to be a perception in some quarters that women should not be encouraged to report these crimes. In my opinion, that amounts to collusion in a process that says, "Don't report!" We need to challenge those attitudes and provide the kind of support given by Rape Crisis and the professionals in sexual assault referral centres across the country.

In conclusion, we need to challenge attitudes, encourage reporting, put an end to normalisation and see an improvement in the support provided through our criminal justice system in order to ensure that perpetrators of sexual crimes against women know that they will pay for their crimes.

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