

Women's Commission, Notes on Safety Formal Public Review

Date and time: Tuesday 9th December 2025, 5:30 PM to 8:30 PM

Location: Tower Hamlets Town Hall

Commissioners in attendance:

Manzila Uddin (Chair), Safia Jama, Chiho Sharp, Nazia Khatun

Members present in person:

Cllr Abu Talha Chowdhury (Cabinet Member for Safer Communities) and Cllr Sabina Akthar (Cabinet Member for Health, Wellbeing and Social Care)

Officers present in person:

Afazul Hoque (Head of Corporate Strategy and Communities), Claire Christopher (Senior Strategy and Policy Officer), Samia Uddin (Impact Graduate Trainee), Shelina Bahar (Nari Centre Support Lead), Menara Ahmed (VAWG, Dom Abuse & Women's Safety Manager), Tom Lewis (Head of Regulatory Services), Sripriya Sudhakar (Director of Planning and Building Control).

External key witnesses present in person:

Yasmin Lalani, Shahina Chowdhury, Minara Uddin-Meghna

Approximately 17 attendees present in audience seating (in person).

Apologies:

1. Introduction and welcome

The Chair welcomed everyone and set out the format of the meeting. All Commissioners introduced themselves.

2. Evidence on the lived experience of women

Claire Christopher, senior strategy and policy officer leading on the women's commission, summarised the commission's engagement activities since March 2025, safety insights and recommendations from residents. Further details and the presentation are available in the agenda pack.

Discussion:

Key discussion points made by Commissioners and audience included:

- Commissioners highlighted how powerful and safe the engagement sessions were, allowing women to speak openly and confidentially.
- Commissioners stressed the need to empower women to report and to strengthen collaboration with police, so communities understand the value of intelligence-gathering even when perpetrators are not identified.
- Young people in schools reported similar experiences to adult women, showing the persistence of safety issues across generations.
- Online harms were raised as a growing concern, including exposure to harmful content and the scale of unregulated pornographic sites.

3. London Borough of Tower Hamlets

Councillor Abu Talha (Cabinet Member for Safer Communities) reaffirmed the council's commitment to tackling violence against women and girls and stressed the importance of listening to women to identify gaps in safety.

Menara Ahmed (VAWG, Dom Abuse & Women's Safety Manager) outlined the new focus on women's safety in public spaces within the VAWG strategy, noting limited resources, challenges in measuring impact, and the need for borough-wide collaboration.

Tom Lewis (Head of Regulatory Services) reported that the licensing team, working with the VAWG team, updated the borough's licensing policy to address sexual harassment by promoting zero-tolerance measures, reporting requirements, and staff training.

Discussion:

Key discussion points made by Commissioners, speakers, and audience included:

- Commissioners raised concerns about women and girls still feeling unsafe in public spaces and asked how the Local Plan improves lighting, parks, and gender-inclusive design.

- Other speakers questioned the balance of work, noting too much focus on training women and not enough on prevention and engaging men and boys.
- They pressed for clearer impact measures, stronger male-allyship efforts, and data on male participation in workshops and training.
- Commissioners highlighted ongoing safety issues in nightlife areas and asked whether licensing work is adequately protecting young women visiting the borough.
- Speakers responded that gender-inclusive design work is extensive, male engagement exists but needs scaling, and licensing teams are delivering WAVE training and zero-tolerance expectations.
- Audience and panel emphasised that partnership working, and increased resources are essential to achieving real improvements.

4. London Borough of Tower Hamlets – Planning and design

Sripriya Sudhakar, Director of Planning and Building Control, emphasised that urban design and planning fundamentally shape how safe people feel as they move from the private realm of home into public spaces, drawing on both her professional expertise and lived experience in India and the UK.

Discussion:

Key discussion points made by Commissioners, speakers, and audience included:

- Women's reported feelings of safety have increased, though significant concerns remain, especially after dark and in specific estates and public spaces.
- Young girls continue to experience sexual harassment and assault in public areas, whether reported or not.
- A recent far-right disruption of a public meeting highlighted additional safety risks for ethnic minority and visibly identifiable women.
- Speakers reflected on the compounded challenges faced by minority women, including racism, Islamophobia, and longstanding community trauma.
- A gap in engagement with university students and schools was identified, with a proposal to run a workshop or discussion in the new year.
- Commissioners emphasised the value of linking with Queen Mary University to strengthen student engagement and ensure consistent communication.

5. Metropolitan Police

Yasmin Lalani (Detective Chief Inspector) outlined the Met Police's work during the 16 Days of Activism on VAWG and emphasised the need for partnership working to improve outcomes. She focused on offering a clear explanation of court processes, closer collaboration with the CPS, and practical support such as mentoring, training sessions, and engagement with local students and communities.

Discussion:

Key discussion points made by Commissioners, speakers, and audience included:

- Concerns raised about women not coming forward to report abuse.
- DCI Yasmin Lalani offered to attend community groups (mosques, churches, centres) to build trust and encourage reporting.
- Domestic abuse reports have increased by 30% in the borough this year.
- Serious sexual offences also rising; need for stronger community engagement and reporting mechanisms.
- Trust deficit between police and communities highlighted; recruitment of diverse officers seen as critical but challenging.

6. Newark Youth

Minara Uddin-Meghna described the fear and insecurity young women and girls experience in public spaces, heightened by harassment, racism, Islamophobia, and recent far-right activity.

7. Women's Voice for Change

Shahina Chowdhury stressed that prevention should focus on root causes within families and communities rather than placing responsibility on women. She called for hubs to educate boys and men, address mental-health stigma, and work through mosques and community spaces to prevent harmful behaviours.

Discussion:

Key discussion points made by Commissioners, speakers, and audience included:

- Services (housing, maternity, safeguarding) under severe cutbacks, limiting effectiveness.
- Police racism and lack of trust raised as ongoing barriers to engagement.
- Recruitment difficulties for police officers from minority backgrounds highlighted.
- Need for accountability across institutions i.e. councils, employers, MPs and not just the Commission.

8. Reflections and Recommendations

A summary of the reflections and recommendations made by Commissioners, speakers, and audience is shared below:

Reflections on the session

- Persistent trust gap between police and communities undermines reporting and safety outcomes.

- Mental health crisis among young people is overtaking domestic abuse as a referral issue, with serious implications for families.
- Cultural stigma and shame continue to silence victims, especially in cases of child-to-parent abuse.
- Institutional accountability is fragmented; communities feel burdened with responsibility while statutory partners underperform.
- Despite challenges, there is strong community will to engage and contribute solutions.

Recommendations for the Commission

- Police to embed regular presence in community spaces, with culturally sensitive engagement.
- Simplify and destigmatise reporting mechanisms for domestic abuse and sexual
- Invest in holistic, non-medicalised support for young people and families.
- Expand efforts to recruit and retain officers from minority backgrounds to improve representation and trust within the police force.
- Ensure councils, employers, MPs, and statutory partners share responsibility for women's safety and wellbeing.
- Involve grassroots organisations in designing interventions, recognising their role in bridging trust gaps.

9. Meeting Closed