

## Lily Allen, stalking, and flaws in the laws

Stalkers and stalkees are being failed by the system; psychological support must be made available to defendants and victims alike

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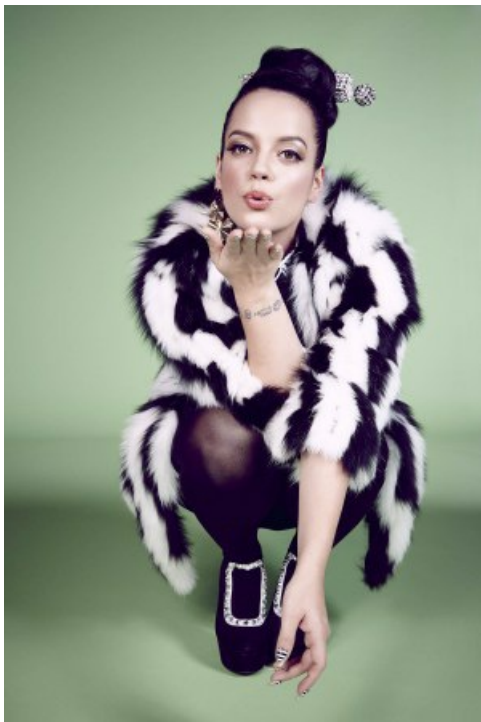


Image: Lily Allen

Last week, singer Lily Allen revealed the seven year ordeal that she suffered when she was stalked. The man, who broke into her home with a knife, stole her handbag then burned it, and continuously sent her threats, was found guilty of harassment by a judge on Wednesday.

Stalking and harassment, as pointed out by Allen, are “isolating”; it makes one question not only the safety of one’s home and wellbeing, but also one’s relationships with others, as mistrust and paranoia take over. Stalking is a subtle and powerful control mechanism; due to this, there’s no doubt that it’s a crime and should be treated as such. But strengthening the laws and legislation around these crimes is problematic, because they are difficult to define, and even more difficult to successfully prosecute. The terms ‘stalking’, and especially ‘harassment’, are often thrown around on social media to complain about disputes and debates without a sincere understanding of what they actually mean. However, in the Allen case, a repeated Twitter threat to “plunge a knife” into her face sounds like pretty concrete evidence of ‘harassment’ to me, displaying that it’s not an accusation to be used pettily.

It is estimated by the National Stalking Helpline that the number of stalking cases recorded by the police represent fewer than 1 per cent of actual cases that take place. Incidents of stalking are often treated as isolated incidents by police and victims, who fail to link them together to identify threatening patterns of

behaviour. These statistics point out that the police are continuously failing to guarantee the safety of victims, and so there is no doubt that guidelines need to be strengthened in order to identify what does and does not count as stalking. This, in addition to swifter police action when evidence of threatening behaviour emerges, would hopefully mean that victims are taken seriously and that the destructive nature of stalking is stopped.

Many anti-harassment campaigners, such as Action Against Stalking, have called for the lengthening of the maximum harassment sentence which currently stands at five years. But, the link between poor mental health and stalking cannot be ignored if the impact of this crime is to be curbed. Alex Gray, (Allen's stalker) had a history of mental illness and according to his mother, authorities and health services had continuously failed to offer him the correct support. This indicates that lengthening custodial sentences may not be the best way of deterring possible offenders whose mental health issues have surfaced through their obsessions with victims. In fact, as with most criminal activity, the best way to combat stalking is to improve support networks and mental health services.

Stalking and harassment should therefore be seen as symptoms of underlying mental health conditions. Both victims and perpetrators of this crime deserve wider access channels to psychological support from a system that is currently failing them all, both judicially and through the health system.



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