



Consortium for the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas

Response to: Call for Views – Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy and Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy

Issued by: Department of Justice, Department of Health and The Executive Office

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Foyle Women's
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Women's Regional Consortium: Working to Support Women in Rural Communities and Disadvantaged Urban Areas

1. Introduction

1.1 This response has been undertaken collaboratively by the members of the Consortium for the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas (hereafter, either the Women's Regional Consortium or simply the Consortium), which is funded by the Department for Communities and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

1.2 The Women's Regional Consortium consists of seven established women's sector organisations that are committed to working in partnership with each other, government, statutory organisations and women's organisations, centres and groups in disadvantaged and rural areas, to ensure that organisations working for women are given the best possible support in the work they do in tackling disadvantage and social exclusion.¹ The seven groups are as follows:

- ♀ Training for Women Network (TWN) – Project lead
- ♀ Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA)
- ♀ Women's Support Network (WSN)
- ♀ Northern Ireland's Rural Women's Network (NIRWN)
- ♀ Women's TEC
- ♀ Women's Centre Derry
- ♀ Foyle Women's Information Network (FWIN)

1.3 The Consortium is the established link and strategic partner between government and statutory agencies and women in disadvantaged and rural areas, including all groups, centres and organisations delivering essential frontline services, advice and

¹ Sections 1.2-1.3 represent the official description of the Consortium's work, as agreed and authored by its seven partner organisation

support. The Consortium ensures that there is a continuous two-way flow of information between government and the sector. It also ensures that organisations/centres and groups are made aware of consultations, government planning and policy implementation. In turn, the Consortium ascertains the views, needs and aspirations of women in disadvantaged and rural areas and takes these views forward to influence policy development and future government planning, which ultimately results in the empowerment of local women in disadvantaged and rurally isolated communities.

1.4 The Women's Regional Consortium appreciates the opportunity to respond to the Call for Views on the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy and the Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy. While abuse and violence can be perpetrated by women against men these are highly gendered issues with women being much more likely to be victims and men more likely to be offenders.

1.5 Throughout this response the Consortium has sought to ensure the voices of women are represented. We believe that it is essential for policy makers and Government to listen to the voices of the women who live here. We have carried out a number of focus group sessions with local women and we have included throughout this response some of what they have said in relation to their experiences of domestic and sexual abuse and violence against women and girls. We hope that their views, experiences and suggestions will be reflected in the final Strategies.

1.6 We wish to endorse the response made by the Women's Policy Group of which we are a member. We fully endorse their response and support their valuable and informative survey evidence and their recommendations in relation to the development of the final Strategies.

2.0 General comments

Domestic abuse incidents and crimes have been on the increase in Northern Ireland since records began and crimes with a domestic abuse motivation represented 20.2% of all crimes recorded by the PSNI in 2020/21.²

The latest available statistics³ for Northern Ireland show that in the 12 months from 1st January 2021 to 31st December 2021:

- there were 32,219 domestic abuse incidents an increase of 381 (1.2%) on the previous 12 months.
- the number of domestic abuse crimes reached 20,827, an increase of 1,717 (9%) on the previous 12 months and the highest 12-month period recorded since 2004/05.

While the numbers of domestic abuse incidents continue to rise the outcome rate for domestic abuse crimes has been falling over the last number of years from 46.6% in 2010/11 to 26.3% in 2019/20⁴. The outcome rate in 2020/21 was 28.4%.

According to the Femicide Census⁵ on average, every three days a woman is killed by a man in the UK. Karen Ingala Smith's work on Counting Dead Women has already shown that the number of women killed by a male suspect in 2021 is 140, higher than the number of women killed in 2019 and 2020.⁶ In addition, the full extent of domestic abuse related suicide is unknown. The #notjustanother campaign is asking that, in addition to a national count of women killed by men in

² Trends in Domestic Abuse Incidents and Crimes Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland 2004/05 to 2020/21, PSNI & NISRA, November 2021

<https://www.psni.police.uk/globalassets/inside-the-psni/our-statistics/domestic-abuse-statistics/2020-21/domestic-abuse-incidents-and-crimes-in-northern-ireland-2004-05-to-2020-21.pdf>

³ Domestic Abuse Incidents and Crimes Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland, Update to 31st December 2021, PSNI & NISRA, February 2022

https://www.psni.police.uk/globalassets/inside-the-psni/our-statistics/domestic-abuse-statistics/2021-22/q3/domestic-abuse_-bulletin-dec-21.pdf

⁴ Trends in Domestic Abuse Incidents and Crimes Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland 2004/05 to 2020/21, PSNI & NISRA, November 2021

<https://www.psni.police.uk/globalassets/inside-the-psni/our-statistics/domestic-abuse-statistics/2020-21/domestic-abuse-incidents-and-crimes-in-northern-ireland-2004-05-to-2020-21.pdf>

⁵ [Men still killing one woman every three days in UK – It is time for “Deeds not Words” – Femicide Census](#)

⁶ Ibid

domestic femicides, the numbers of women who have died in unexplained circumstances and domestic abuse related suicides are also collated. Research by the Home Office and Police⁷ on the Domestic Homicides Project found that there were 38 suspected suicides of victims of domestic abuse reported to the project in the 12 months from April 2020 to March 2021 and 90% were female. This is likely to be an underestimate as only those with a reported history of abuse to police were included.

2.1 Gendered Nature of Domestic Abuse

Domestic Abuse is an issue mostly faced by women with the majority of perpetrators being men. During 2020/21 women were 69% of all reported victims of domestic abuse crimes and 31% were male. In terms of perpetrators, of all offenders dealt with by the PSNI during 2020/21 in connection with domestic abuse crimes that resulted in a sanction outcome 86% were male and 13% were female.⁸

2.2 The Impact of Covid19

The Covid19 pandemic and resulting lockdowns have increased the levels of domestic violence and abuse. Research by Women's Aid⁹ has shown that domestic abuse has got worse during the pandemic with access to escape and support networks being restricted. It also reported that the availability of refuge spaces has been reduced during the pandemic with support services facing funding challenges.

Refuge recorded an average of 13,162 calls and messages to its National Domestic Abuse helpline every month between April 2020 and February 2021 up more than 60% on the average number of monthly contacts at the start of 2020. Refuge said

⁷ Domestic Homicides and Suspected Victim Suicides During the Covid-19 Pandemic 2020-2021, Home Office, NPCC, College of Policing, Vulnerability Knowledge & Practice Programme [02d412c416154010b5ceba8f8965030.pdf \(prgloo.com\)](https://www.prgloo.com/02d412c416154010b5ceba8f8965030.pdf)

⁸ Trends in Domestic Abuse Incidents and Crimes Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland 2004/05 to 2020/21, PSNI & NISRA, November 2021 <https://www.psni.police.uk/globalassets/inside-the-psni/our-statistics/domestic-abuse-statistics/2020-21/domestic-abuse-incidents-and-crimes-in-northern-ireland-2004-05-to-2020-21.pdf>

⁹ A Perfect Storm: The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on domestic abuse survivors and the services supporting them, Women's Aid, August 2020 <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/A-Perfect-Storm-August-2020-1.pdf>

72% of these were from women who said they were experiencing violence and abuse, and nearly a fifth said their abuser had threatened to kill them.¹⁰

2.3 The Justice System and Domestic Abuse

We welcome the introduction of the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021 which makes coercive control a specific offence and includes psychological and financial abuse and non-violent intimidation. However, while this is important legislation and brings Northern Ireland into line with other jurisdictions and with human rights standards there is much more work to be done in this area.

A follow-up report by Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI)¹¹ on the handling of domestic abuse cases by the criminal justice system found that only one of its seven recommendations had been achieved, four had been partially achieved and two not achieved. The Chief Inspector of Criminal Justice in Northern Ireland Jacqui Durkin said she was disappointed at the pace of progress to improve how the criminal justice system handles cases of domestic violence and abuse and *“that key recommendations to implement an advocacy service to support victims of domestic violence and abuse and establish a regional domestic violence and abuse courts remained outstanding.”*¹²

2.4 International Obligations

CEDAW’s General Recommendation 35¹³ on gender-based violence against women outlines how gender-based violence against women *“occurs in all spaces and spheres of human interaction, whether public or private, including in the contexts of*

¹⁰ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-56491643>

¹¹ No Excuse: A Thematic Inspection of the Handling of Domestic Violence and Abuse Cases by the Criminal Justice System in Northern Ireland, A Follow-Up Review of the Inspection Recommendations, April 2021

[No Excuse: A Follow-up Review of a thematic inspection of the handling of domestic violence and abuse cases by the Criminal Justice System in Northern Ireland. \(cjini.org\)](https://www.cjini.org/No-Excuse-A-Follow-up-Review-of-a-thematic-inspection-of-the-handling-of-domestic-violence-and-abuse-cases-by-the-Criminal-Justice-System-in-Northern-Ireland)

¹² [Police Professional | Inspectorate ‘disappointed’ at speed of progress to improve handling of domestic abuse cases](https://www.policenews.org.uk/news/Police-Professional-Inspectorate-disappointed-at-speed-of-progress-to-improve-handling-of-domestic-abuse-cases)

¹³ General recommendation No.35 on gender-based violence against women, updating general recommendation No.19, CEDAW/C/GC/35, July 2017

https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW/C/GC/35&Lang=en

*the family, the community, public spaces, the workplace, leisure, politics, sport, health services and educational settings, and the redefinition of public and private through technology-mediated environments.*¹⁴ The Recommendation spells out carefully the general *obligations of states parties* under CEDAW in relation to gender-based violence against women.¹⁵ The overarching obligation of States parties is to pursue by all appropriate means and without delay a policy of eliminating discrimination against women, including gender-based violence against women.

In its most recent Concluding Observations for the UK Government the CEDAW Committee welcomed the adoption of measures to combat violence against women and girls in England, Wales and Scotland but were “*concerned about the lack of uniform protection of women and girls from all forms of gender-based violence across the jurisdiction of the State party, noting with particular concern the inadequacy of laws and policies to protect women in Northern Ireland.*”¹⁶ CEDAW recommended that the UK “*Adopt legislative and comprehensive policy measures to protect women from all forms of gender-based violence throughout the State party’s jurisdiction including Northern Ireland.*”¹⁷ While there has been some progress in Northern Ireland through the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act there is more work to be done to ensure effective support and protection for victims/survivors.

The Istanbul Convention¹⁸ aims to prevent all forms of violence against women, protect those who experience it and prosecute perpetrators. To date the UK Government has signed, but not ratified, the Istanbul Convention. Ratifying it would commit the UK government to following a strong set of minimum standards in combatting violence against women and girls.

¹⁴ Ibid, para 20

¹⁵ Ibid, para 21

¹⁶ Concluding observations on the eighth periodic report of United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, Para 29 https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW%2fC%2f%20GBR%2fCO%2f8&Lang=en

¹⁷ Ibid, para 30(b)

¹⁸ Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/rms/090000168008482e>

Key among these are requirements to implement effective legislation to protect women and girls from violence, ensure adequate resourcing for action, and implement gender sensitive policies. The Convention also emphasises data collection as the basis of action, and stresses the role of meaningful data in prevention. It also mandates work with men and boys to change cultures, attitudes and behaviours and provides detailed guidance on the development of judicial systems and responses.¹⁹ The Council of Europe has also recently published guidance on education for prevention under the Istanbul Convention, which emphasises gender equality and non-violent approaches and provides examples of good practice from a number of countries as well as a checklist for developing national good practice.²⁰

The UK Government has said that it is committed to ratification but that amendments to domestic law were necessary before this could be done including the introduction of the Domestic Abuse Bill. The Government states that the Bill, together with the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill in Northern Ireland, includes the necessary legislative measures to ensure all parts of the UK are compliant with the Convention.²¹

The head of UN Women, Sima Sami Bahous, said that *“violence silences women, renders them invisible, pushes them from public space.”*²² This in turn directly hinders progress on the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, which aims to lift people out of poverty and create a more equal, sustainable world free from gender inequality.

¹⁹ Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence

[Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence](#)

²⁰ Preventing Violence Against Women through Formal and Informal Education: Article 14 of the Istanbul Convention, Council of Europe, March 2022
[1680a5c70d \(coe.int\)](#)

²¹ <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2020-10-22/debates/20102247000009/IstanbulConventionRatification2020ReportOnProgress>

²² <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/03/1113992>

2.5 Women's Economic Disadvantage and Domestic Violence

Gendered social norms restrict and limit women's roles in the economy, thereby contributing to women's economic disadvantage relative to men.²³ Women are more likely to be in receipt of social security benefits, more likely to be in low-paid, part-time and insecure work and also more likely to be providing care either for children or other family members which limits their ability to carry out paid work. This contributes to keeping women's incomes generally lower over their lifetimes and therefore means they are more likely to be dependent on men or the State through social security benefits. This lack of economic independence can make women more vulnerable to abusive relationships.

Added to this the impact of a decade of austerity and welfare reform policies that have disproportionately impacted on women. Research by the House of Commons Library shows that 86% of the savings to the Treasury through tax and benefit changes since 2010 will have come from women. It shows that, by 2020, men will have borne just 14% of the total burden of welfare cuts, compared with 86% for women.²⁴ Research by the Women's Regional Consortium on the impact of austerity²⁵ and on the impact of Universal Credit²⁶ on women shows the extent to which changes to the social security system have worsened their ability to provide for their children and families and made them more vulnerable to financial hardship and poverty. Poverty is one of the main risk factors for violence against women and girls.

With the social security system increasingly not providing a reliable safety net, women's vulnerability to violence is heightened. Abusers exploit women's existing economic inequality or create economic instability to reduce their partner's ability to

²³ Violence against Women and Girls and women's economic inequality, Eva Neitzert, March 2020 <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Violence-and-womens-economic-equality.pdf>

²⁴ Estimating the gender impact of tax and benefit changes, Richard Cracknell, Richard Keen, Commons Briefing Papers SN06758, December 2017 <http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06758/SN06758.pdf>

²⁵ Impact of Ongoing Austerity: Women's Perspectives, Women's Regional Consortium, March 2019 <http://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/sites/default/files/Impact%20of%20Ongoing%20Austerity%20Women%27s%20Perspectives.pdf>

²⁶ The Impact of Universal Credit on Women, Women's Regional Consortium, September 2020 <http://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/sites/default/files/The%20Impact%20of%20Universal%20Credit%20on%20WomenRevised.pdf>

resist control. Women who can't find £100 at short notice are **3.5 times more likely to experience economic abuse**. Without access to the economic resources required to leave and live independently, victims stay with abusers for longer and experience more harm as a result.²⁷ The links between economic stability and safety are therefore very clear.

Concerns about austerity measures and about the way Universal Credit is paid have been raised internationally by the CEDAW Committee. Following its recent examination of the UK, the CEDAW Committee recommended that the UK government “*undertake a comprehensive assessment on the impact of austerity measures on the rights of women and adopt measures to mitigate and remedy the negative consequences without delay.*”²⁸ The Committee also highlighted its concerns about the single payment of Universal Credit stating “*the payment of the universal credit.....into a single bank account.....risks depriving women in abusive relationships of the ability to gain access to necessary funds and trapping them in situations of poverty and violence.*”²⁹

Addressing women's disadvantage in the economy requires action to ensure that women are able to be economically independent not only through paid work but also through a properly supportive social security system which provides a safety net when women are not able to work. This should include ensuring that benefits are set at a level that enables women and families to afford to live free from poverty including the removal of gendered welfare reform policies such as the Benefit Cap and the two-child limit. It should also include work to reduce women's economic dependence on their partners including by allowing Universal Credit payments to be automatically split between partners.

²⁷ [What we do - Surviving Economic Abuse](#)

²⁸ Concluding Observations on the eighth periodic report of United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, CEDAW/C/GBR/CO/8, March 2019 (para 17) https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW/C/GBR/CO/8%20&Lang=En

²⁹ Ibid, para 52

2.6 Costs of Domestic Abuse

Aside from the huge personal costs to victims and survivors and their families the cost of violence against women and girls to the economy is considerable. A report by the UK Home Office estimated that the economic and social costs of domestic abuse – including the cost of providing public services to victims/survivors of domestic violence and the lost economic output of women affected – was £66 billion annually in England and Wales alone.³⁰

2.7 Domestic Violence and the Workplace

Domestic violence can have significant implications in the workplace in terms of lost working days through sick leave, low morale and low productivity. The Irish Congress of Trade Unions carried out a survey on Domestic Violence and the Workplace.³¹ This research highlighted that it *“is estimated that domestic violence costs UK businesses in excess of £2.7bn each year due to decreased productivity, poor performance, absenteeism and employee turnover.”* It found that a third of respondents had experienced domestic violence with over 40% of those reporting that it affected their ability to get into work for reasons including threats, physical injury and restraint. Furthermore, 87% of respondents who had experienced domestic violence reported that the violence had affected their work performance due to being distracted, tired or unwell.

Lockdown and social distancing measures as a result of the Covid19 pandemic have seen rises in domestic abuse figures. Increasing numbers of people working from home has meant that more and more people face the prospect of spending increasing amounts of time with their abuser. Research from the charity Surviving Economic Abuse³² found that 45% of victim-survivors reported that perpetrators were

³⁰ Violence against Women and Girls and women’s economic inequality, Eva Neitzert, Women’s Budget Group, March 2020

<https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Violence-and-womens-economic-equality.pdf>

³¹ Domestic Violence and the Workplace, Findings from a Survey, Irish Congress of Trade Unions, December 2016

<https://www.ictuni.org/publications/ictu-domestic-violence-survey-results>

³² The Cost of Covid-19: Economic abuse throughout the pandemic, Briefing one – Employment and education, Surviving Economic Abuse, November 2020

<https://survivingeconomicabuse.org/the-cost-of-covid-19-economic-abuse-throughout-the-pandemic-on-employment-and-education-2/>

deliberately sabotaging a woman's ability to work and study now that they are spending more time at home due to lockdown orders, furloughing or job loss. Examples included deliberate damage/hiding of essential work equipment such as phones, laptops and Wi-Fi routers, constant interruptions and demands on their time, as well as extreme levels of stress and anxiety that made working very difficult. A particularly common response was how perpetrators used childcare arrangements to negatively impact a victim's ability to work or study. Respondents reported that perpetrators would refuse any responsibility forcing some women to miss meetings, turn down job opportunities or reduce hours and therefore pay.

2.8 Investment in Specialist Services

Figures from Women's Aid in Northern Ireland show that in 2020/21, 530 women and 319 children stayed in Women's Aid refuges across Northern Ireland.³³ These specialised and secure refuges are key to ensuring that victims, particularly women, have somewhere to turn when trying to escape abuse. They provide safe spaces which consider the needs of women and their families as a priority.

Increases in domestic abuse incidents and crimes over the last number of years points to the urgent need for increased funding for these specialist services to meet growing demand. It is essential that these services receive secure funding which keeps pace with increases in the cost of living so that they can properly support women through the provision of refuge accommodation.

Access to housing, secure tenancies and the appropriate funding of refuges must be compliant with the Istanbul Convention. Article 20 of the Convention³⁴ states:

"Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to ensure that victims have access to services facilitating their recovery from violence. These measures should include, when necessary, services such as legal and psychological

³³ Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland 2020-2021 Annual Report, Women's Aid Federation NI, December 2021

<https://www.womensaidni.org/assets/uploads/2021/12/WAFNI-Annual-Report-20-21.pdf>

³⁴ Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, April 2011

[Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence \(coe.int\)](https://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/Html/108)

counselling, financial assistance, housing, education, training and assistance in finding employment.” In addition, an explanatory report to the Convention recommends: *“safe accommodation in specialised women’s shelters, available in every region, with one family place per 10 000 head of population.”*³⁵

2.9 Domestic Violence and Housing

Domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women are a key cause of homelessness for women and children. Research by Crisis³⁶ estimated that 61% of homeless women in Great Britain were homeless because of domestic abuse. Domestic abuse is the leading cause of homelessness for women and in some homeless shelters as many as 50% of women clients have experienced domestic abuse.³⁷ The Femicide Census 2018³⁸ showed that 41% of women killed by their partner had separated or taken steps to separate from him and this is often the most dangerous time for women experiencing abuse.

This highlights the importance of having safe and secure places for women to live when they have made the decision to leave an abusive partner. The lack of available refuge services and suitable, affordable housing means that many women suffering from domestic abuse are forced into the impossible choice of staying with their abuser or making them and their children homeless.

Despite the importance of housing in domestic abuse situations the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act in Northern Ireland does not contain any provisions on housing. In its submission to the Committee for Justice on the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill the Women’s Aid Federation highlighted the importance of

³⁵ Explanatory Report to the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence
[CETS 210 - Explanatory Report to the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence \(coe.int\)](#)

³⁶ Nations apart? Experiences of single homeless people across Great Britain, Crisis, December 2014
https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/20608/crisis_nations_apart_2014.pdf

³⁷ Safe at Home, The case for a response to domestic abuse by housing providers, SafeLives, March 2018
[2018-03-28-web-ready-safe-at-home-report.pdf \(gentoogroup.com\)](#)

³⁸ Annual Report on UK Femicides 2018, Femicide Census
[Femicide-Census-Report-on-2018-Femicides-.pdf \(femicidecensus.org\)](#)

housing for women who are thinking of leaving or who have left abusive relationships. They believe that the absence of any reference to housing in the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill is a significant oversight and embeds a ‘silo’ approach to legislation that may ultimately undermine its effectiveness.³⁹

The Women’s Policy Group (WPG) also raised concerns about a lack of reference to housing in their submission on the Bill.⁴⁰ The WPG called for similar protections to those provided for in the Domestic Abuse Bill also being provided to victims and survivors in Northern Ireland. The WPG stressed the need for the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill to be appropriately resourced given that no refuges in Northern Ireland have had an uplift to their budgets for over a decade effectively meaning they have seen a cut and have had to find additional funding to cover their costs.

In its response to the housing issues raised the Justice Committee stated that it: *“appreciates the importance of the availability of safe and secure housing for victims of domestic violence and abuse, the absence of which often prevents them from leaving an abusive relationship and wants to see the issues outlined in the evidence addressed. While the Committee explored the potential for an amendment to place a duty on the Housing Executive and/or the Department for Communities in relation to this matter it is aware that housing matters are beyond the reasonable limits of the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill’s collective purposes. The Committee therefore welcomes the commitment from the Minister for Communities to review the position in relation to secure tenancies and if necessary, take forward any legislative changes within this mandate.”*⁴¹

³⁹ Report on the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill, Committee for Justice, Northern Ireland Assembly, October 2020

[Committee for Justice - Report on the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill \(niassembly.gov.uk\)](https://niassembly.gov.uk/committees/justice-committee/reports/committees-report-on-the-domestic-abuse-and-family-proceedings-bill/)

⁴⁰ Women’s Policy Group NI Evidence Submission to Justice Committee Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill 2020, Women’s Policy Group, June 2020

[WPG-NI-Evidence-Submission-to-Justice-Committee-05.06.20.pdf \(wrda.net\)](https://www.wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/WPG-NI-Evidence-Submission-to-Justice-Committee-05.06.20.pdf)

⁴¹ Report on the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill, Committee for Justice, Northern Ireland Assembly, October 2020

[Committee for Justice - Report on the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill \(niassembly.gov.uk\)](https://niassembly.gov.uk/committees/justice-committee/reports/committees-report-on-the-domestic-abuse-and-family-proceedings-bill/)

2.10 Domestic Violence and Mental Health

The Women's Policy Group (WPG) Feminist Recovery Plan for Northern Ireland⁴² has highlighted that domestic violence often involves a pattern of coercive control and manipulation that can lead to extensive mental health trauma including a loss of self-esteem, depression and isolation.

Victims of domestic violence require specific and appropriate mental health services, including safety planning, therapy, and/or counselling. These services should be provided by people trained in the dynamics of domestic violence. Victims of sexual violence should be able to access services from therapists trained in trauma informed care and victim responses to sexual violence. All of these services should be provided within a timely manner and prioritised as a matter of urgency.

There needs to be greater recognition of intimate partner sexual abuse and both the short and long term traumatic impacts on individuals which is not addressed adequately within the Gillen Review.

While some of these services are currently being provided by organisations such as Women's Aid there is a need to expand and fund these as a matter of urgency. The Feminist Recovery Plan recommends that specific funding is allocated for appropriate, safe and rapid therapeutic services to victims of domestic violence and sexual violence.

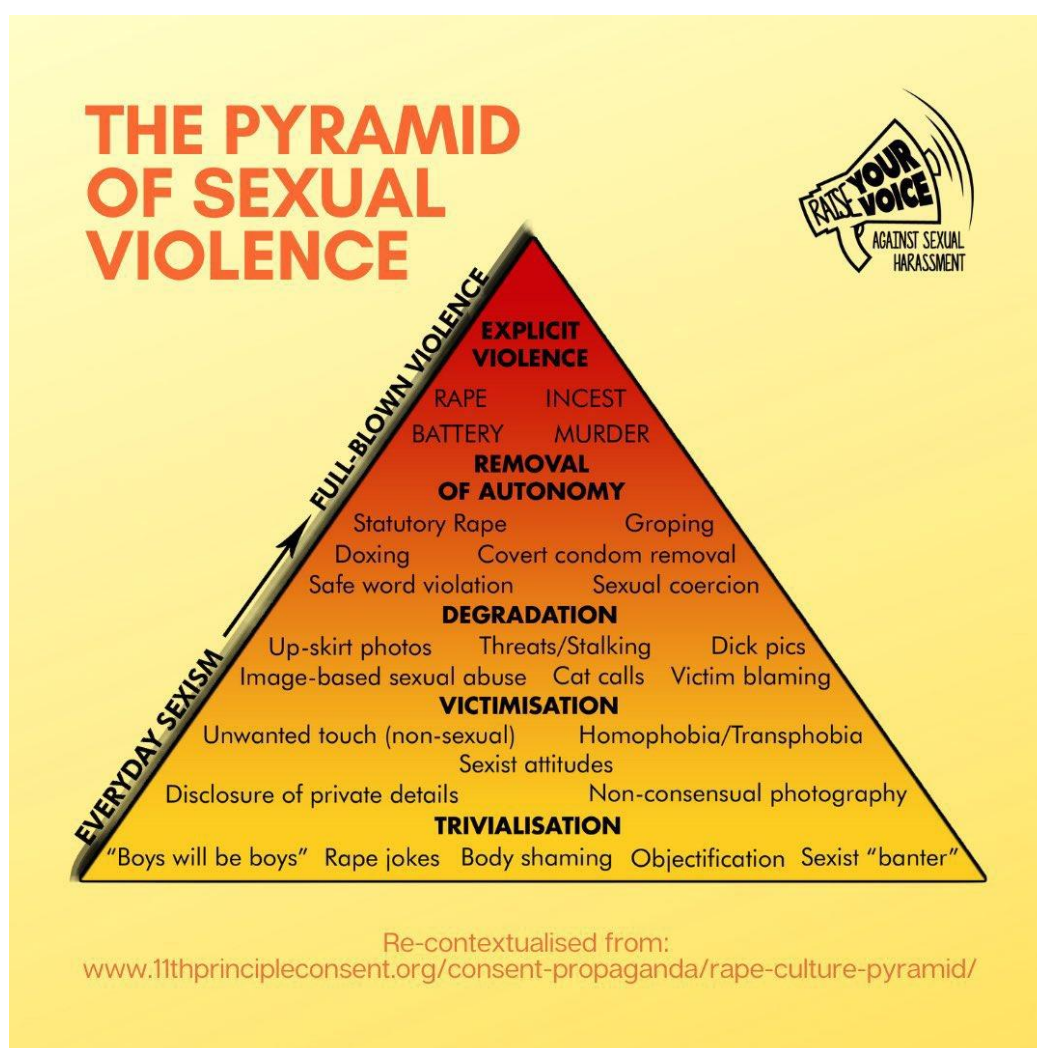
2.11 Violence Against Women and Girls

Violence against women and girls is a public health problem and a violation of women's human rights. This violence can have hugely negative impacts for women impacting on their overall wellbeing, sense of safety and freedom and on their physical, mental and sexual health.

⁴² NI Covid-19 Feminist Recovery Plan: Relaunch – One Year On, July 2021
<https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/WPG-COVID-19-Feminist-Recovery-Plan-Relaunch-One-Year-On.pdf>

Violence Against Women and Girls has a gendered motivation, gendered power dynamics and gendered vulnerabilities. This does not exclude female perpetrators especially in cases of state violence against women and girls and instances where women act as gatekeepers and enablers of abuse.

Women's experience of violence and harassment exists on a continuum which includes everyday sexism and street harassment through to assault and sexual offences. These behaviours are illustrated on the 'Pyramid of Sexual Violence' which shows how everyday behaviours like 'banter' and sexist jokes bolster up the culture of misogyny. It shows how common attitudes and beliefs uphold and form the basis for more extreme acts of sexual violence. It is clear therefore, that action must be taken to end these misogynistic behaviours which enable and encourage sexual harassment and sexual violence.



Office for National Statistics (ONS) data⁴³ found that both women and men feel less safe after dark, but the extent to which women feel unsafe is significantly greater.

The research found that:

- One in two women and one in seven men felt unsafe walking alone after dark in a quiet street near their home.
- One in two women and one in five men felt unsafe walking alone after dark in a busy public place.
- Four out of five women and two out of five men felt unsafe walking alone after dark in a park or other open space.
- Two out of three women aged 16 to 34 years experienced one form of harassment in the previous 12 months; with 44% of women aged 16 to 34 years having experienced catcalls, whistles, unwanted sexual comments or jokes, and 29% having felt like they were being followed.
- Some 6 out of 10 people who reported feeling unsafe during the day, and 4 out of 10 who reported feeling unsafe after dark, had altered their behaviour, as a result, in the previous month.

Plan International Research⁴⁴ has shown that street harassment is an almost universal experience for girls around the UK, to the point that some even consider this to be a normal part of growing up. These experiences are widely trivialised, creating a culture of acceptance and normalisation of this behaviour. Girls can start to experience these behaviours as early as primary school and they become increasingly frequent as girls enter their teenage years. Their research found:

- 66% of girls in the UK have experienced sexual attention or sexual or physical contact in a public place.
- 38% of girls experience harassment like catcalling, wolf-whistling and sexual comments at least once a month.

⁴³ Perceptions of personal safety and experiences of harassment, Great Britain: 2 to 27 June 2021, ONS, August 2021
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/perceptionsofpersonalsafetyandexperiencesofharassmentgreatbritain/2to27june2021>

⁴⁴ Street Harassment It's Not OK, Plan International, 2018
<https://plan-uk.org/file/plan-uk-street-harassment-reportpdf/download?token=CyKwYGSJ>

- 63% of young adult women (aged 18 to 24) had experienced inappropriate sexual behaviour in night-time venues.
- 35% of girls wearing school uniform have been sexually harassed in public.
- More than 1 in 3 girls in the UK have received unwanted sexual attention such as being groped, stared at, catcalled and wolf-whistled while wearing their school uniform in public.
- 1 in 7 girls have been followed while in uniform.
- 1 in 8 girls said their first experience of unwanted sexual attention or contact in a public place was when they were 12 years old or younger.
- 42% of 14 to 21-year-old BAME women reported unwanted sexual attention at least once a month.
- 49% of LGBTIQ+ young women and people experienced unwanted sexual attention at least once a month.
- 22% of women in the UK reported some experience of sexual touching, groping, flashing, sexual assault or rape while they were in or around school.
- 66% of victims of reported sex offences on school premises are girls or women, with 94% of alleged perpetrators men or boys.

More recent research by Girlguiding⁴⁵ which took place after the murder of Sarah Everard reveals the huge scale of harassment girls and young women face. From unwanted attention and comments, to physical harassment and abuse, it shows how widespread harassment is in all parts of the country, in all areas of girls' lives, from a young age. Fear of harassment negatively affects girls' and young women's freedom – from where they go to the activities they take part in and also has a detrimental effect on their mental health. Their survey research looked at sexual harassment at school and sexual harassment in public.

⁴⁵ Research briefing: It happens all the time Girls' and young women's experiences of sexual harassment, Girlguiding, June 2021
https://www.girlguiding.org.uk/globalassets/docs-and-resources/research-and-campaigns/girlguiding-research-briefing_girls-experiences-of-sexual-harassment_june2021.pdf

Survey research by Girlguiding⁴⁶ found that in terms of sexual harassment at school:

- Two thirds (67%) of girls and young women have experienced sexual harassment from other students at school.
- Two in five (41%) girls aged 13 to 16 said they had experienced taunts or 'jokes' of a sexual nature. This increased to 63% for those aged 17 to 18. Girls that identify as LGBTQ were more likely to have experienced this type of harassment. 62% said they had, compared to 45% of girls that identify as heterosexual.
- Two in five (41%) girls across all age groups have experienced sexist or derogatory comments on social media from someone at school or college. This increased for LGBTQ girls – 62% had suffered this, compared to 37% of straight girls.
- Just over a quarter (27%) of all girls and young women have experienced unwanted attention or stalking. This goes up from 16% for girls aged 13 to 16, to almost half of those aged 17 to 18 (47%). Girls of colour were more likely to say they'd experienced unwanted attention or stalking (39% compared to 24% of their white peers). LGBTQ girls were also more likely to have experienced this (36% compared to 24% of straight girls).
- Just under a fifth of girls aged 13 to 18 (18%) have experienced unwanted touching such as being pinned down or having their bra strap or skirt pulled. Again, this increases for girls as they get older, from 9% aged 13 to 16, to 36% aged 17 and 18. This was also slightly higher for girls of colour compared to white girls (22% compared to 17%) and for LGBTQ girls compared to heterosexual girls (32% compared to 15%).
- A third of girls aged 13 to 18 (33%) have seen rude graffiti about girls or women at school. A quarter (26%) have been exposed to pictures or videos of girls or women that made them feel uncomfortable at school. This increases from a fifth (19%) of girls aged 13 to 16 to 39% aged 17 and 18.
- A similar number (24%) have seen sexually explicit pictures or videos, increasing from 12% aged 13 to 16, to almost half (48%) aged 17 and 18. Just under a quarter (23%) have been asked to share an intimate picture of

⁴⁶ Ibid

themselves (14% aged 13 to 16; 42% aged 17 and 18). 42% of LGBTQ girls had been asked to share an intimate picture, compared to 20% of heterosexual girls and young women.

- Just over half (53%) of all girls and young women don't feel boys their age understand what behaviour is appropriate towards girls and what isn't. This rises to 63% for those aged 17 to 18.

Survey research by Girlguiding⁴⁷ found that in terms of sexual harassment in public:

- Eight in ten (80%) of all girls and young women feel unsafe when they're out on their own, increasing to nearly all young women aged 17 and 18 (96%). A third (32%) of all girls and young women feel this way often or most of the time. Girls of colour were more likely to experience this most of the time (24% compared to 13% of white girls), as are LGBTQ girls – 92% compared to 76% of straight girls.
- Three in five girls (60%) across all age groups have experienced unwanted attention, such as being whistled at in the street. This increases from 37% aged 13 and 14 to 57% aged 15 and 16, and 83% aged 17 and 18. A fifth (19%) of all girls who have experienced this say it happens often or most of the time, increasing to 39% for the older age group. Girls of colour were more likely to experience street harassment (67% compared to 57% of white girls) and to suffer it more often. LGBTQ girls were also more likely to have experienced street harassment and more often (72% compared to 57% of straight girls).
- Half (51%) of all girls and young women have experienced unwanted sexual comments directed at them. This increases from 33% aged 13 and 14 to 50% aged 15 and 16, and 69% aged 17 and 18. A quarter (27%) in this older age group say it happens often or most of the time.
- Six in ten (60%) of all girls and young women have been intimidated by a group of boys. This rises from 46% aged 13 and 14 to 55% aged 15 and 16, and 78% aged 17 and 18 (50% of whom say this happens often or most of the time). Girls of colour were more likely to experience this most of the time (18%

⁴⁷ Ibid

compared to 8% of white girls) and LGBTQ girls were more likely to have experienced this at all (78% compared to 57% of straight girls).

- Just over half (54%) of girls and young women say they've felt uncomfortable or intimidated when they're out, for example at the gym. This increases from 33% aged 13 and 14 to 49% aged 15 and 16, and 82% for 17- and 18-year-olds. LGBTQ girls were more likely to feel this way (77% compared to 51% of straight girls).
- 16% of girls aged 13 to 16 have experienced unwanted touching on public transport, rising to 30% of those aged 17 and 18.

2.12 Raise Your Voice

WSN is proud to be a partner in the 'Raise Your Voice' project⁴⁸ alongside our colleagues in the Women's Resource & Development Agency (WRDA), Reclaim the Agenda and the Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN). Raise Your Voice is a project to tackle sexual harassment and sexual violence across Northern Ireland. This endemic problem will be approached in a variety of ways through working directly with the community, increasing public awareness, educating organisations on best practice and lobbying for legislative advances in this area.

Raise Your Voice was funded by the Rosa Fund for Women & Girls and Time's Up UK. It was launched in August 2019 and provides workshops on sexual harassment and violence and consent. It will shortly develop new courses on bystander intervention and online abuse to add to the existing workshops. The goal of the project is to create true cultural change in order to tackle the root causes of these behaviours and empower people to act to change this in their own lives and communities.

This project is doing vital work in local communities to raise awareness and to educate people on how to identify, challenge and prevent this type of behaviour. We believe that this type of work is invaluable in addressing the issues of sexual harassment and sexual violence in society.

⁴⁸ <https://www.raiseyourvoice.community/>

There is a clear need for the continuation of this project given the levels of sexual harassment and sexual violence that exist in Northern Ireland. The success of this project and the interest and demand for workshops serves to highlight the need for work in this area and that there is a strong case for developing and extending this work.

We would like to see this type of community-based work developed and adequately resourced so that it can support and complement the Domestic and Sexual Abuse and Violence Against Women and Girls Strategies. As previously outlined any new legislation and Strategies are only as good as the knowledge, training and education around them and we believe that projects such as Raise Your Voice are crucial in helping to achieve this.

The following feedback from the evaluations of the Raise Your Voice project highlights the need that exists for this project, the value of the project in terms of personal education/knowledge, wider education and awareness raising and the real need which exists for the dissemination and mainstreaming of this information.

“I recognised some of my own actions in the past in the examples that were used, something I’m very ashamed of and made me uncomfortable. However, this is not a negative aspect of the workshop, it is vitally important that myself and men like me are able to recognise these instances and aspects of our behaviours so we can change them.”

(Raise Your Voice Workshop participant)

“The trainer’s knowledge and expertise is obvious and I have been challenged by what’s been talked about. I’ll be sitting down with my son (who is 16) and watching the videos with him.”

(Raise Your Voice Workshop participant)

“Educate, educate, educate! It is clear that societal norms are changing and we all need to understand what’s acceptable and what’s not. Such a workshop - short, focused, factual is a very good form of education. Thank you for running it. Perhaps it should be made mandatory in workplaces and schools.”

(Raise Your Voice Workshop participant)

“Strongly recommend for youth groups, schools, colleges, councils, places of work etc. Everyone should participate in such workshops. Fantastic thanks so much!”

(Raise Your Voice Workshop participant)

“This information needs to be mainstreamed. As a parent I think this type of awareness raising is vital as older attitudes are very prevalent here. I feel that girls and women cannot be left to do this work on their own. It needs to be available to everyone and on an inter-generational basis.”

(Raise Your Voice Workshop participant)

“I would love to see this workshop as part of the school curriculum, it would open the topic out and plant a good seed for thought in young people’s minds.”

(Raise Your Voice Workshop participant)

2.13 The Consultation Process

While we welcome having the opportunity to respond to this important call for evidence we wish to raise a number of issues about the consultation process. The original deadline for responses gave only 8 weeks to respond and was later extended to 10 weeks. We are very grateful for this extension which allowed us to talk to more local women about these issues. However, we suggest that the minimum consultation period should be at least 12 weeks to allow for genuine and meaningful consultation with those who may have valuable inputs into this process.

This is an issue of huge importance to women and the wider women's sector and time is needed to consider the issues, reach out to groups of women and discuss the issues in a format that they are comfortable with and then to formulate their views into a response. This is time intensive work and in order for it to be meaningful engagement we need to be given the time and space to do this work. Rushing this work means less opportunities for engagement and risks missing out groups of women who may be harder to reach and more marginalised.

We appreciate that a facility for victims and survivors to take part in the call for evidence was provided through online surveys. We suggest that while this format

may work for some victims/survivors it is not ideal for others and carries with it a risk of re-traumatisation. We believe that effective consultation around issues such as these which are so personal, emotional and carry a high risk of re-traumatisation must also be facilitated in person. This allows victims/survivors who wish to share their views and experiences to do so in a supportive environment where they can be signposted to additional help and advice. Once again, this necessitates adequate time to organise these events and to allow for collating this information.

In addition, the Covid19 pandemic has had a huge impact on all our lives and on our ability to work and communicate with each other. For the community and voluntary sector it has meant that the ability to carry out normal ways of working have been subject to some limits. This has been particularly challenging for carrying out research work and in trying to effectively gather the views of people in relation to consultation exercises.

The consultation also came at a time when the women's sector and indeed the wider voluntary and community sector has come under significant pressure with the sheer volume of consultations ongoing. Many of these consultations are also significant in terms of their importance and have particular implications for the women's sector so have required an investment of time and resources to produce detailed responses.

We would suggest that given the nature and importance of this Consultation and a range of external factors such as Covid19 and an already busy consultation environment that the period should have been longer to enable for more genuine and meaningful consultation. Despite the fact that there is a challenging work environment no allowances were made for this therefore putting significant pressure on an already over-worked and under-resourced voluntary and community sector.

We would refer the all Government departments to the guidance on consulting with women produced by Women's Regional Consortium members WRDA.⁴⁹ This

⁴⁹ Women at the Heart of Public Consultation, A guide for Public Authorities and Women's Organisations, WRDA, November 2017
https://wrda.net/wpcontent/uploads/2018/10/WRDA_WomenAtTheHeartOfPublicConsultation.pdf

guidance contains five top tips based on the many years of experience that women's groups have in promoting women's participation in public policy making. These include the need to work together with the women's community and voluntary sector, making time for accessible face to face engagement, keeping language accessible and relevant, listening to the stories from women and making women visible in the product as well as the process.

We also wish to acknowledge that a number of online public engagement events and stakeholder focus groups were held. We very much welcome this outreach and the ability to ask questions and make representations to the Departments involved. However, it must be remembered that online only events do not and cannot reach everyone who may wish to share their views and for some groups face to face engagement is the only way to effectively gather their views.

Specific Questions

SECTION 1: ABOUT YOU

Question (a): I am responding as... *(Please tick one option only)*

- ☐ **A member of the public (Do not provide your name or email address)**
- ☒ **On behalf of an organization – Please specify below and include your organisation's email address:**

Women's Regional Consortium

policy@wsn.org.uk

SECTION 2: RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS ON A DOMESTIC AND SEXUAL ABUSE STRATEGY

Question 1: What information can you provide on the scope, scale and prevalence of domestic and sexual abuse in Northern Ireland, supported by relevant data and statistics where available, to help underpin workstreams under the new Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy?

We refer the Department to the recent comprehensive statistics collected by the Women's Policy Group in their response.

Anecdotal research with local women by the Women's Regional Consortium across a range of issues highlights that domestic and sexual abuse is prevalent across Northern Ireland and is an issue of concern to many local women. However, because of stigma, patriarchal attitudes and lack of resources much of it can be hidden.

There is also a lack of recognition of certain behaviours as domestic violence among victims. This is particularly in the area of coercive control and financial control.

Many victims talk about these issues among their peers as if it is normal behaviour as it has become so normalised for them. They do not see these behaviours as a form of domestic violence. This makes it even more difficult to understand and recognise the scope, scale and prevalence of this issue.

The scale and prevalence of domestic and sexual abuse have seen an upsurge due to the impact of the Covid19 pandemic. It has been described as a ‘Shadow Pandemic’ by the UN⁵⁰ with many countries across the world seeing an increase in domestic and sexual violence. This rise in violence is associated with compulsory working from home leaving victims confined at home with their abuser putting them at greater risk of abuse.

“Domestic Violence is a huge issue but a lot of it is hidden.”

“Domestic violence is a massive problem and it’s a lot bigger than people realise or the official statistics on it. Many of the women I work with are reporting issues at home including coercive control. It’s happening with all ages from the very young to women in their 60s. I have to explain to many of them what gas lighting is as that is happening a lot and they don’t know what it is.”

“Domestic Violence is a massive issue, there’s so much of it going on but it’s hidden so people don’t know how much of a problem it is.”

Question 2: Are there specific areas where service provision and support could be further improved, and strengthened, in order to most effectively respond to domestic and sexual abuse?

Yes, the Women’s Regional Consortium believes there are a number of specific areas where service provision and support must be improved and strengthened in order to respond to domestic and sexual abuse.

⁵⁰ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response/violence-against-women-during-covid-19>

Specialist Services

There is a need to adequately fund emergency refuge accommodation and other specialist services that help victims/survivors. Refuges provide a lifeline for many women fleeing domestic violence but places are scarce. During the pandemic many refuges came under increasing pressure with more calls from women needing support. Statistics from Women's Aid NI⁵¹ illustrate the level of need that exists in Northern Ireland:

- 530 women stayed in refuges throughout Northern Ireland.
- 319 children stayed in a refuge with their mum.
- 6,005 women and 6,450 children received floating support in their homes.
- 236 BME women stayed in refuges in the year 2020/2021.
- 2,411 women with complex needs received floating support.
- 34 women and 38 children with no recourse to public funds were supported in refuge.

Refuges need increased and sustainable funding so there is always space to go if women and their families need to leave. Women should never feel that it is safer to stay in an abusive relationship than to leave. As recommended in the Women's Policy Group Feminist Recovery Plan for Northern Ireland⁵² there is a need to secure funding for these specialised services and a review of tendering and procurement in relation to domestic violence and abuse services. See further information in Section 2.8.

“My partner hit me one night and I left straight away with my 3 kids. I was lucky that when I went to Women's Aid someone had just left and I was able to get a room in the refuge. If I'd gone there and there had been no space I don't know what I would have done. I left because I knew it would happen again. I have 3 daughters what kind of message would that have given them if I had stayed?”

⁵¹ Covid 19: A Year in Unprecedented Times, 2020 – 2021 Women's Aid NI Annual Report [Annual Report 20-21 - FINAL - 07.12 \(womensaidni.org\)](https://www.womensaidni.org/annual-report-20-21-final-07.12)

⁵² NI Covid-19 Feminist Recovery Plan: Relaunch – One Year On, Women's Policy Group, July 2021 <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/WPG-COVID-19-Feminist-Recovery-Plan-Relaunch-One-Year-On.pdf>

“My sister’s husband beat her and isolated her. She had 9 children to him. The rest of our family were frightened of him. Her GP came out to see her and threatened to report him but it didn’t stop. Where do you go if you are running for your life with 9 children?”

“People need to get the help they need right when they need it, when it happens. Often this type of abuse takes place late at night.”

“There should be some system like phoning an ambulance in domestic violence cases so that there is a proper response as it can be a life threatening situation. It needs to be taken a lot more seriously.”

“There needs to be funding for services so that people know where to get help in these situations and this help needs to be available when they ask for it.”

The Rape Crisis Service is another area where funding and resourcing is needed as a matter of urgency. The Rape Crisis Service for Northern Ireland provides trauma informed emotional support for those impacted by rape and sexual violence in adulthood. This is an essential non-time limited service for all whether reporting or not, waiting on counselling, waiting on outcomes of court cases and in particular provides support for those whose cases are not being taken forward based on decisions made by PSNI or PPS not to proceed. The Rape Crisis Freephone line is open four evenings a week to take self-referrals for one-to-one support and to provide information and sign-posting for victims/survivors, families members and others in need.

Referrals for support are also made through other stakeholders such as the Rowan centre and ASSIST NI. Additional funding support should be made available to ‘roadmap’ the range of services currently available, how they interlink, how and when they can be accessed/availed of depending on whether a case is being legally pursued or not, linking Rape Crisis, ASSIST NI, SOLAs and counselling through Nexus.

Volunteer Support workers for Rape Crisis are encouraged from across Northern Ireland to ensure that services are not Belfast/Antrim centred and welcome the breadth of the new ASSIST NI services. However, additional funding for neutral,

safe venues to provide one-to-one support in every county should be made available. Rape Crisis works through local women's centres and community organisations to provide this where possible but there is an urgent need for additional spaces with flexible opening hours.

Funding discrepancies for service providers such as Rape Crisis NI have particular impacts for marginalised women using this service, such as minority ethnic women, who may require specialist support and translators. Without adequate funding, this specialist support cannot be given which creates barriers for marginalised women. Additional funding for partnership working/training will remove these barriers.

All Rape Crisis NI Support Workers are asked about any additional languages they may have to reduce language barriers where possible but additional training with for example the Migrant Centre NI would ensure wider linguistic and cultural support for migrant women. Due to the nature of the service, translation services are not ideal, which is why it is essential to have trained support workers across all communities such as migrant, Traveller and LGBTQI+.

Information, Advice and Support

It is not easy enough for victims/survivors to get information and advice on what to do if they are in an abusive relationship. In terms of leaving an abusive partner it can be a massive step for a victim to take affecting many aspects of their life including housing, money, children, schooling, health, work, etc. It is important that victims can get access to holistic information, advice and support across all the range of issues they may have when they need it and in the format they need it. There must be clear pathways to help and support for victims. It is vitally important that this is provided in the right way and at the right time so that victims are not put off taking action about their situation.

In addition to information and support in relation to taking action around leaving an abusive situation there is a need for continued support even after a victim has left or a case has finished. For many victims the trauma does not stop when the

relationship ends or the court case is over. Many victims feel a 'cliff edge' afterwards with no access to further support and services even though it is needed.

Domestic abuse doesn't only impact on the victim but has much wider effects on children and wider family members. Victim's parents and wider family circle are often involved in childcare and providing support to the victim. There may also be information and support needs from the perpetrators family. Domestic violence and abuse has a ripple effect on all these people and many could benefit from additional information, advice and support.

There is also a need to provide clear advice and information for people who witness domestic abuse and sexual violence so they know and understand what to do in these cases. They need to be aware of what action they can take to help and support victims and also how to report it. Very often people who witness this type of behaviour are reluctant to take action for fear of making things worse for the victim. They need to have the necessary information and advice so they know what action to take in these circumstances.

“Part of the Strategy needs to address how to help victims after they get out of their abusive situation – they need help after too.”

“When it comes to domestic abuse everyone suffers – the impact it has on the victim and the entire family – the hardness it creates in you. It makes you have to think about running away, having an escape plan – things you shouldn't have to think about.”

“The experience that people get when they reach out for help is so important – they have to be able to get the information, advice and help they need there and then.”

“There needs to be more education around financial help if you escape an abusive situation. You have to know that it can be better. I was lucky I got help through Women's Aid and there was a space when I needed it but if you don't know about the help out there it can mean you are forced to stay.”

“The experience that people get when they reach out for help is so important – they have to be able to get the information, advice and help they need there and then.”

“I work in a pharmacy and we became a safe haven during lockdown for people to report domestic violence. One of my colleagues saw a woman being hit in the car outside the pharmacy but she didn’t say anything. This woman came into the pharmacy during lockdown and reported domestic violence. When she did this my colleague told me what she seen and I asked her why she didn’t do anything. She said she was worried about it making it worse for the woman if she did. It is hard to intervene as people worry if it just makes things worse for the victim.”

“Sometimes women don’t want to leave as they don’t want to be the one who takes the children away from their dad, home, community, etc. They need information and support to know what their options are.”

“For many it takes time to process and deal with these issues. Many are not ready to deal with it straight away. It gets blocked out until they get some breathing space then it all comes out. There is a need for support down the line too – people often need support later on.”

“If you’re living in a domestic abuse situation often the information doesn’t go in because you are living it.”

Pressure for Sex and Marital Rape

In some relationships there is considerable pressure for women and girls to have sex and not to deny their partners sex when they ask for it. This reinforces the need for information and education around consent and what constitutes a healthy relationship for both men and boys and women and girls.

“My daughter’s friend who is 15 and has mental health issues didn’t want to see her boyfriend on Valentine’s Day. She didn’t want to see him because she knew he would expect sex and she didn’t want to have sex with him or have an argument about it. As much as men say that women can say ‘no’ when they do the man’s behaviour afterwards just ends up putting the pressure on.”

“I was asked by my ex never to deny him sex. He asked me never to refuse him at the start of our relationship. It wasn’t done in a nasty way it was more like a pathetic way that it would hurt his pride and emotions if I refused him.”

Marital rape is a form of domestic violence but one that is less well known despite its seriousness. A YouGov survey for End Violence Against Women⁵³ showed that almost a quarter (24%) think that sex without consent in long-term relationships is usually not rape. There is a need for greater understanding of this issue and increased information and support to raise awareness and to help women in these circumstances get the help they need.

“There are lots of cases of rape in marriage – many women have lots of children because they wouldn’t have dared to say ‘no’ to their husbands.”

“In the family court I never saw justice for the abuse I suffered at his hands. It came down to them believing his word against mine. They asked me if it was so bad to live with him why did I have a baby with him. I had to explain that it was not consensual. I had to produce evidence to prove that it was marital rape but there is not enough evidence that this is a crime.”

Housing

The services provided by women’s refuges provide short term stability for women and their families. The next stage of the process involves them moving out of refuge and living independently and safely in the community. However, this is complicated by a lack of suitable, affordable accommodation for them to move into. The ability of survivors of domestic abuse to rebuild their lives can be severely limited by a lack of suitable housing which is appropriate for their particular needs including the needs of disabled women and children. See further information in Section 2.9.

Insufficient social housing stock can have serious implications in domestic violence situations leaving victims trapped in coercive and abusive situations as they have nowhere to go. The situation is even worse in rural areas where there is even less social housing available in the locality and victims are reluctant to move their children from local social networks and schools. The social housing sector already understands how domestic abuse presents and the impact it has on victims the majority of whom are women. This model of housing provision is therefore important

⁵³ <https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/major-new-survey-many-still-unclear-what-rape-is/>

and any move away from this model of provision will be detrimental for victims and survivors of domestic abuse.

Worryingly the number of households in priority need of social housing in Northern Ireland is at the highest level on record. In March 2021 there were 43,971 applicants on the social housing waiting list and of these 30,288 were in 'housing stress'.⁵⁴ This can have particularly negative impacts for women, LGBTQI+, BAME and disabled people leaving them unable to access suitable housing. In terms of gender, statistics show that more women are social housing tenants (23%) than men (12%).⁵⁵ Changes to social housing therefore have a disproportionate impact on women who are overrepresented among those in housing need and among social renters.⁵⁶

The Women's Regional Consortium has concerns about victims/survivors having to move out into the private rented sector without adequate protections. *"The experience of Housing Rights' clients, many of whom are on low incomes, is that within the private rented sector a sub sector exists which is characterised by poor standards, insecurity of tenure and problems with affordability."*⁵⁷

We would also like to echo the concerns of our colleagues in the Women's Policy Group (WPG) who raised concerns about potential changes to social housing allocation with the introduction of a policy that would allow NIHE to offer private rentals on par with social housing and that this would be considered a reasonable offer. The WPG argue that social housing is beneficial for women who have experienced domestic abuse as it provides longer tenancy agreements than the annual tenancies associated with private rental affording women and their children greater stability.

⁵⁴ Northern Ireland Housing Statistics 2020-21, NISRA & DfC, December 2021
[Northern Ireland Housing Statistics 2020-21 \(communities-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/northern-ireland-housing-statistics-2020-21)

⁵⁵ NIHE House Condition Survey 2016
<https://www.nihe.gov.uk/Working-With-Us/Research/House-Condition-Survey>

⁵⁶ Housing and gender, Briefing from the UK Women's Budget Group on the impact of changes in housing policy since 2010 on women, November 2017
[Microsoft Word - housing pre-budget nov 2017 final.docx \(wbg.org.uk\)](https://www.wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Microsoft-Word-housing-pre-budget-nov-2017-final.docx)

⁵⁷ Private Tenancies Bill, 2021, Housing Rights Written Evidence, January 2022
<https://www.housingrights.org.uk/sites/default/files/policydocs/Housing%20Rights%20Written%20Evidence%20Private%20Tenancies%20Bill%202021.pdf>

The Feminist Recovery Plan⁵⁸ recommends the granting of secure tenancies in cases of domestic violence and abuse with recognition of the differing needs of disabled women, Traveller women, trans communities, rural women, migrant women, etc.

Poverty and Financial Hardship

Issues of financial hardship, debt and poverty have implications for a victim's ability to leave an abuser. Poverty is one of the main risk factors for violence against women and girls. Gendered social norms often mean that women are more dependent on men and state benefits for their income making them more vulnerable to abuse.

The current cost of living crisis added to a decade of welfare reform and austerity changes that have disproportionately impacted on women has left them even more vulnerable to financial hardship and poverty. This will undoubtedly impact on their ability to leave abusive relationships. The ability to make ends meet and to provide for their children and families often takes over and makes it even harder to empower women to seek help and leave abusive relationships if their basic needs are not being met. See further information in Section 2.5.

In addition, there is often a lack of trauma-informed assessments for social security for those who have suffered abuse. While the social security system regularly interacts with people with complex needs it has adopted increasingly punitive approaches to those claiming benefits particularly as a result of welfare reform and austerity changes. There is a need for trauma-informed approaches to improve the quality of support within the social security system and avoid re-traumatising those who have experienced abuse.

"My partner has a really good job but I don't see any of it."

⁵⁸ NI Covid-19 Feminist Recovery Plan: Relaunch – One Year On, Women's Policy Group, July 2021 <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/WPG-COVID-19-Feminist-Recovery-Plan-Relaunch-One-Year-On.pdf>

Mental Health

Northern Ireland's Mental Health Champion Siobhán O'Neill has put forward a number of key recommendations for Northern Ireland's mental health recovery plan following the Covid19 pandemic.⁵⁹ It includes the need to plan appropriate services for those who need them and include public health responses that tackle domestic violence.

Victims of domestic violence and sexual violence require specific and appropriate mental health services provided by people/organisations trained in these areas. The Feminist Recovery Plan⁶⁰ recommends that specific funding is allocated for appropriate, safe and rapid therapeutic services to victims of domestic violence and sexual violence. Funding needs to be allocated to specialised services based on skills. See further information in Section 2.10.

Work

The impact of issues that happen in the home cannot always be separated from work. Domestic and sexual violence can impact greatly on the working life of someone who is a victim. They can continue to experience the violence and abuse in the workplace through phone calls, messages and emails. All this can impact on their performance, attendance at work, timekeeping, career prospects and job security. It can also have an impact on their colleagues who can also be affected by threatening or intimidating behaviour from the perpetrator. See further information in Section 2.7.

We welcome the progress of the Domestic Abuse (Safe Leave) Bill through the Assembly which will introduce a right to statutory paid domestic abuse leave. This will help many victims to deal with emergency situations and provide them with a pathway to safety. However, we believe that this should only be one of a number of rights around domestic abuse which should be provided for in the workplace.

⁵⁹ <https://www.belfastlive.co.uk/news/health/professor-siobhan-oneill-unveils-20-20268639>

⁶⁰ NI Covid-19 Feminist Recovery Plan: Relaunch – One Year On, Women's Policy Group, July 2021 <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/WPG-COVID-19-Feminist-Recovery-Plan-Relaunch-One-Year-On.pdf>

Other rights that should also be provided should include rights to request short-term flexible working arrangements and the right to time off to care for dependents who have been the victims of domestic abuse. We also believe that there should be requirements on employers to put in place workplace policies on domestic abuse, provide training to all staff on domestic abuse awareness including more in-depth training for line managers and HR staff. This training should be developed in conjunction with specialist VAWG services and Trade Union representatives.

“I’m worried about my work, the stuff my ex is saying about me. What impact will it have on my work. It could have implications for my income and my purpose – my work is what keeps me going. He will use everything at his disposal to bring me down.”

Women’s Centres Work

The services delivered by Women’s Centres and groups across Northern Ireland provide a lifeline to local people in disadvantaged and rural areas. They provide wrap-a-round services that support not only the woman but the whole family. Services include personal development and confidence building, trauma counselling, adult training & education, signposting, programmes and initiatives that support women and families in domestic violence situations in addition to providing a full range of childcare.

In addition to the range of services provided in Women’s Centres, these are trusted local organisations that women and families are more likely to turn to or accept being referred to for support and advice at times of stress and difficulty. Frontline services delivered through these organisations complement statutory and other voluntary sector provision ensuring that women and their families have access to the information, advice and support they need in these situations.

In order to be able to deliver community-based frontline services in disadvantaged and rural areas women’s centres and groups must secure a cocktail of funding, often from different departments either directly or through their agencies and through charitable sources. However, since 2012 these funds have been subject to austerity

cuts which has resulted in little or no funding for overheads and in some cases a reduction in funded staff hours.

Just like families Women's Centres are finding it tougher and tougher. Their running costs have doubled in the last year but there has been no increase in their budgets for running costs to meet these increases. Many of the Centres have seen increasing demand for their services as women and families struggle as a result of the pandemic and with rises in the cost of living. Additional support is needed to help community organisations, such as Women's Centres, who are providing vital support in disadvantaged communities to continue to meet these rising costs.

These vital services delivered locally by community organisations such as Women's Centres and supported by the work of the Women's Regional Consortium are vital to tackling disadvantage and promoting gender equality. These local services which support statutory provision are the most cost effective way of ensuring that local needs are met and ensures the best outcomes for the communities they serve. Much greater value must be placed on these unique and trusted services which provide holistic services for women and their families including in domestic violence situations. In order to continue these vital services, they need to have long-term sustainable funding for this work.

"I've had counselling through the Women's Centre for the domestic abuse I suffered. A lot of people here need counselling as a result of the Troubles – they need to talk about the traumas that went on in families. The Troubles were not normal – they bring with it a certain acceptance of violence."

"People don't report and years later they realise what they were going through was wrong. A lot of people don't know this stuff if they are not coming to places like Women's Centres and they don't know the law."

"The Women's Centre has given me purpose. Some ways I think I would have seen what was happening to me sooner if I had been at the Women's Centre earlier. Through working here and attending courses it has empowered me."

“The Women’s Centre is brilliant. It not only focuses on physical health but mental health. Self-development courses, facilitators and centre users are all invested in creating an atmosphere where people feel welcome and safe. It’s a very caring environment.”

“You isolate yourself in a domestic abuse situation. When you come out into the Women’s Centre and hear other people’s experiences you know you are not on your own and the support is there. It helps you to identify these things that are wrong.”

Question 3: What activity should be undertaken to aid prevention, and provide for early intervention, in order to help reduce the number of people that become victims in the first place? Linked to prevention, and equally important in preventing crimes, is any evidence that can be provided on abusers, particularly repeat offenders, so that we can gather as much evidence as possible on both who commits these crimes and what works to help them stop.

Education

The Women’s Regional Consortium believes that education is key to prevention. We believe that comprehensive Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) standardised across all schools which takes into account the full range of relationships is vital to aid prevention of violence and abuse. Young people need to be educated on what constitutes a healthy relationship and they need to be taught about consent with the aim of addressing behaviours that can lead to violence and abuse. They need to be given the information and skills to recognise what is right and wrong in relationships and take this into their adult lives and relationships.

Education is an important way to address learned behaviour. Many perpetrators carry out abusive and violent behaviour because of what they have been exposed to in wider society or have seen in relationships around them including their parents. Northern Ireland’s violent history has also meant greater levels of acceptance of violence and abuse. It is also important that education informs victims about abusive and violent behaviours and the full range of manifestations that they can take. This is important in terms of both recognising and challenging these behaviours.

There are concerns about pornography which is readily available for young people and how this impacts on attitudes towards women and girls and how people think that intimate relationships should work. There is an increasing need to address the harms caused by attitudes arising from pornography and to provide education around healthy sexual relationships.

“Education is important for boys in terms of them having respect for women and girls and how they should be treated. But education is also important for girls. They need to be able to recognise when relationships are bad and abusive. One of the girls I work with is in an awful relationship but she doesn’t see that. It is more important that people see her as a good mum with a partner. Growing up she didn’t have a daddy around or a proper family and she doesn’t want people to think that about her child. It’s about trying to show her that she doesn’t have to live this way and that she has more worth than that.”

“There needs to be education around the way women are spoken about. We had a team come into work to talk about issues around how women are spoken about, respect and the issue of pornography which is so readily available. It is so easy to get hold of on mobile phones now – that makes men think it’s OK to treat women in this way.”

“Young men often copy how their fathers behaved – quite often violence is accepted behaviour or learned behaviour.”

“Many are conditioned to behave certain ways towards women and girls because that is what they have seen from their parents and that is all they know.”

“I’ve always felt not good enough, it’s the way I’ve been spoken to. My husband’s mother and sisters adored him and I always felt like I wasn’t good enough for him so I had to put up with his behaviour.”

“They need to educate men and women as well – women end up thinking that everyone has troubles and you just have to put up with it.”

“Women also need to be educated on what is acceptable behaviour in relationships otherwise they end up putting up with it.”

“There is a lack of awareness of what a healthy sexual relationship is. A close friend of mine had to tell me that I was in a dangerous situation and I didn’t realise it. My partner would hold me by the neck when we were being intimate and I didn’t realise how dangerous this was. If they behave this way there is a greater chance of actual violence. I always thought I was quite aware of the ways of the world and modern life but I wasn’t aware of this. I had just excused it as something he liked to do.”

“There is a need for education from a very young age including young boys and pre-teens about all these issues.”

“If you don’t know about abuse how can you seek help and support to do something about it.”

The Women’s Support Network signed a Raise Your Voice open letter to the Minister for Education on the need for comprehensive, statutory and standardised RSE in schools which highlighted the following:

*“Research by Belfast Youth Forum with QUB’s Centre for Children’s Rights and Common Youth shows that young people believe that the sex education they received was not good enough, with 60% saying that they found the information they received “not very useful” or “not useful at all”. The vast majority of students knew they had a right to RSE in school, but felt that this right was not being met. The top priority that students identified was learning about how to navigate personal relationships (66%) with many stating that they want to learn about a range of issues as diverse as menstruation, domestic abuse and consent in a way that is inclusive of everyone.....Further, Judge John Gillen also recommended comprehensive RSE as part of the Gillen Review into the law and procedures in serious sexual offences, recognising the role that this plays in prevention of such crimes as well as in achieving justice in any trials that take place.”*⁶¹

Currently RSE provision in schools is up to each school to develop its own RSE policy which is a mandatory part of the curriculum. However, the content of what is taught to pupils is up to each individual school to decide based on the school ethos.

⁶¹ <https://www.raiseyourvoice.community/news-resources/open-letter-call-for-comprehensive-sre>

In many cases this means that RSE provision is inadequate with a focus on heterosexual relationships only. The expert panel for the Gender Equality Strategy has also said that RSE in schools in Northern Ireland is “inconsistent and insufficient.”⁶² The expert panel called for RSE which is fit for purpose and inclusive of the experiences of all young people⁶³ and that it should take account of the CEDAW Recommendation⁶⁴ to: *“take measures to introduce mandatory age-appropriate education on sexual and reproductive rights in school curricula, including issues such as gender relations and responsible sexual behaviour, throughout the State party.”*

“There is a need to go into schools and for this to be part of the school curriculum so that it has to be done. It must be age appropriate right through school from an early age.”

Public Awareness

There is a need for greater levels of public awareness on the full range of behaviours that constitute domestic abuse. As previously mentioned in our answer to Question 1 there are some victims who do not realise that they are victims of abusive behaviour. This is particularly the case for the less obvious scenarios of domestic abuse including coercive control and financial abuse which means victims are less likely to recognise the signs and potential dangers of this type of abuse.

We welcome the recent public awareness campaign by the Department of Justice on the new offence of coercive control but ongoing work is needed to raise awareness around the full range of coercive control situations that may arise and which are representative of many different types of relationships. Public awareness campaigns must also focus on lower level forms of abuse as well as the very serious forms of

⁶² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-56378106>

⁶³ Gender Equality Strategy Expert Advisory Panel Report, December 2020
<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/system/files/publications/communities/dfc-social-inclusion-strategy-gender-expert-advisory-panel-report.pdf>

⁶⁴ Concluding observations on the eighth periodic report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, March 2019, Para 42 (c)
https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW/C/GBR/CO/8&Lang=En

abuse. This will help victims and others to recognise the full range abusive behaviours and to recognise and take action against these behaviours early. It will also help to inform perpetrators of the potential repercussions of this behaviour. These must be backed up with specialist support and access to information and advice so that victims are empowered to take action about their situation.

“Sometimes campaigns make people think that abuse has to be very serious to be abuse. That means that some victims don’t fully grasp that what they are experiencing is abuse as it is not at that level. Sometimes they don’t recognise themselves in these campaigns. If they don’t see themselves in them, they don’t see it as abuse and they don’t seek the help that is available. Sometimes they can think it’s bad but it’s not that bad that they can take action about it.”

“We went to mediation to try and resolve things. The mediator told me that it was serious verbal abuse I was dealing with but I hadn’t seen it like that. It was the first time that I understood what was happening to me.”

“There needs to be more media/TV to show where victims can go to get help.”

“The women I work with do recognise coercive control but they often need someone to validate it for them. In discussions with them I recognise coercive controlling behaviours from their partners and I tell them what they are describing is coercive control. They understand what it is as they’ve seen the adverts. But they need validation to enable them to do something about it.”

Any such campaigns must signpost victims and their friends and family to appropriate services and sources of support. Once again it is important that funding is provided for specialised services so that when people do reach out for the help they need that it is available when they need it.

Stigma

There is still considerable stigma attached to domestic and sexual violence. Levels of shame and fear of disclosing abuse means that many victims are trapped in abusive situations and find it difficult or impossible to seek help. This is often

compounded by the attitudes of others including family members particularly from older generations.

Added to this is the fear of social services involvement. Those who work with victims/survivors report that the fear of social services is palpable. Many victims are terrified to come forward in case social services find out and they fear that their children could be taken away from them. This perception is also often backed up by other family members who discourage reporting abuse.

There is a real need for work to address the stigma, attitudes and perceptions to domestic violence across society so that victims are encouraged to be open about their situation and feel supported to take action.

“You’re often told by family to hide domestic violence, this adds to the shame for the victim.”

“Both women’s and men’s attitudes to domestic violence can be a problem. Sometimes people say “why can’t she just leave him?” and they say things like “sure you know what men are like.””

“The fear of social services is rife. Everything seems to come back to this. Some of the women won’t even speak to their GP about their mental health issues around abuse in case social services get involved. They keep saying “they will think I can’t look after the kids” and in some cases family members will tell them to keep quiet about abuse or “you’ll have the social worker coming out to you.””

“I was in a domestic violence situation and I never told anyone. He was physically abusive and eventually I couldn’t take it anymore so I went to my mum. She closed the door on me she basically said you made your bed. She wouldn’t take me in, she was of that era where you just had to pull your socks up and get on with it. I got help from my sister and a friend in work.”

“When you’re a victim of domestic abuse you can be surprised about other people’s attitudes, even women – you get the feeling they think you’ve done something wrong and you deserved it somehow.”

“When I left people thought it was just a wee row and I would go back. People are very naïve about domestic violence. My mother-in-law said to be ‘sure it was just a wee slap.’”

*“You shouldn’t be ashamed to tell people that Mr Nice Guy isn’t so nice.”
“I think it’s hidden because there is still quite a stigma around it. For older generations it’s really scary. They’ve spent so much of their life living with it.”*

“I wouldn’t go to a refuge, I’ve never had any involvement with social services and I wouldn’t want that. You’d be afraid of getting your kids taken away from you.”

Funding for Organisations that work with Victims/Survivors

We again wish to highlight the importance of organisations that work with victims and survivors including organisations such as local Women’s Centres. These organisations provide information and education on the signs of abuse and help victims to identify these types of behaviours. They provided trusted, local spaces where victims can disclose abuse and seek help. Women’s Centres are able to provide trauma sensitive advice and signposting to victims in relation to taking action to leave abusive relationships and to pursue legal remedies. Additionally, Women’s Centres provide education and courses in areas such as personal development and confidence building and trauma counselling which can help victims make the necessary changes in their lives.

It is vitally important that these organisations have long-term sustainable funding to continue to provide these important information, education and prevention services and to develop and enhance their services for victims/survivors into the future.

“Mental abuse is really hard. I moved to Northern Ireland with my ex-partner and we had two kids. He used the car and I was never in it. I just had to stay at home with the kids. He took me across here and tried to isolate me from my family and friends. The Women’s Centre helped me. I did a building confidence course and it literally built me up and helped me to leave him. Because of what I had been put through by my ex I had therapy and it has given me a toolbox for dealing with him so now I know how to handle his behaviour. He was gas lighting me and controlling me which was making my life difficult and isolating me.”

“People are treated well here. It builds up a sense of community with lots of support and care. There are a lot of people who use the Centre from abusive relationships. Sometimes you can’t confront the issue head on if they are not able to deal with it. Sometimes you have to come around the issue and the person and let them feel safe and be accepted and when they are ready the Centre is there to support them.”

“The first time I came to the Women’s Centre I was very low after coming out of a bad relationship. In the first class I attended I didn’t want to talk. But now I see such a difference in myself for the better. I had low confidence and self-esteem but coming to the Centre has built me up. I knew after coming here that I was in an abusive relationship where he threatened to kill me. I never reported it. When I leave the Centre at the end of the day I feel part of a caring, supportive, motivated environment.”

Repeat Offenders

We believe there needs to be a better way of identifying those who are likely to be repeat offenders. While Northern Ireland has a Domestic Violence and Abuse Disclosure Scheme (DVADS) there are problems with the operation of it. Research by the Women’s Policy Group for the Protection from Stalking Bill⁶⁵ showed a lack of awareness about the scheme. For those who were aware of the Scheme none of them found it useful to them or their case. Problems included lengthy waits for information, incomplete information about perpetrators from the PSNI and incorrect information from the PSNI with regards to eligibility for the Scheme. The Women’s Policy Group has recommended a review of the Scheme which could be a powerful tool in identifying repeat offenders and protecting future victims.

“In terms of the police/courts is there any way to check records if people have been arrested for domestic violence? There should be a register for people with previous offences so that women and children can be protected from repeat offenders. It needs to be much easier to identify these people.”

“There should be a register to check who has been given non-molestation orders, warnings, convictions, etc.”

⁶⁵ <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/committees/2017-2022/justice/primary-legislation/stalking-bill/written-submissions/34.-20210416-womens-policy-group-ni-with-slides.pdf>

Question 4: How best can we take account of the needs of specific groups of victims, including, for example: women; men; LGBTQIA+ individuals; minority ethnic communities; children and young people; older people; and those with a disability? This should include consideration of how the experience of these groups of victims could be improved, including how to overcome any barriers to accessing services and reaching support.

Needs of Specific Groups

A report by the Expert Advisory Panel on a Gender Equality Strategy⁶⁶ highlighted the challenge faced by a lack of robust, disaggregated data. This report referred to data gaps across a range of areas for many of the Section 75 groups including gender. The expert panel stressed that *“this is an issue of critical concern and one which requires urgent action.”* This is an important consideration for this Strategy as having access to relevant, up to date data broken down across the Section 75 groups allows for a greater understanding of the scale and nature of the problem for these groups as well as the targeting of policies and decision making to where it is needed most.

We suggest the best way of taking account of the needs of specific groups is to actively seek the experiences and views of victims/survivors within these groups. The voices of those with lived experience are a crucial element in taking account of the needs of specific groups. However, this must be genuine engagement and valued for the expertise and knowledge it brings. Resourcing should be provided to do this work properly and it should be carried out in ways and places that work for victims and which are sensitive to their needs and experiences. Too often engagement work is carried out as a tick-box exercise, more suited to policy makers carrying out the engagement, and without giving sufficient importance to its value. It is vitally important to understand the needs of all victims and in order for this to happen policy makers need to hear the full diversity of victims voices.

⁶⁶ Gender Equality Strategy, Expert Advisory Panel Report, December 2020
<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/system/files/publications/communities/dfc-social-inclusion-strategy-gender-expert-advisory-panel-report.pdf>

There needs to be greater recognition of the full range of situations where abuse can take place and the specific needs of all these victims. The Strategy must also address the needs of parents who suffer from violence and abuse from their children, those who provide or need care who suffer violence and abuse as well as violence and abuse by other family members, for example, siblings and children.

“The police wouldn’t do anything about the abuse we suffered by my brother. He was seen to be successful and it was as if they didn’t want to believe that he was capable of being violent.”

“I used to go and sit in the Royal Victoria Hospital at night, I had nowhere else to go. My brother was an alcoholic and he used to regularly threaten us with a knife.”

“My daughter who is 15 will do anything to get what she wants including destroying property and threatening to kill me. Social work resources have been put in place to help and we are on intensive support but that just means I get a visit once a fortnight. I have lost all faith in the support services. My way to contain it is just to take a beating. I’ve learned to live my life flinching because of violence from my daughter. She has made death threats against me and really wants to hurt me. I have had to phone the police. It feels worse in an emotional sense when your child attacks you.”

Overcoming Barriers to Accessing Services and Support

The Feminist Recovery Plan⁶⁷ contains a number of recommendations for overcoming the barriers to accessing services and support for specific groups:

- It recommends the need for specific, culturally competent and community-led domestic violence and sexual violence refuges, in particular for BME communities and LGBTQI+ communities who are often unable to access mainstream refuges or support services.
- It calls on the NI Executive to adequately resource organisations which support those with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF), including women’s organisations and refuges who assist victims of domestic abuse with NRPF, as well as sufficiently resourcing immigration advice provision for women

⁶⁷ Ibid

applying to the Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme and the EU Settlement Scheme.

- It recommends the need to provide guidance and support to frontline violence against women organisations and refuges on the needs of disabled women in danger of domestic abuse; including the communication and access needs of disabled women and reasonable adjustments.

The Regina Coeli hostel in West Belfast is the only homeless hostel for women in Northern Ireland providing housing and support services for up to 200 women per year. It is funded by the Legion of Mary who own the building but now faces closure after a survey found the building needed significant repairs. It has been chronically neglected in terms of funding and state provision which has meant that workers have been carrying the burden of managing the hostel with a lack of funding and insufficient resources and accommodation. The hostel provides essential services in terms of combatting gender-based violence. Most mixed gender emergency hostels do not cater for the needs of vulnerable women especially those who have faced domestic and sexual violence and abuse. Given that one of the main reasons that women experience homelessness is domestic violence then it is clear that this facility provides an important and essential service. State support for these services is critical to addressing gender-based violence and abuse.

Question 5: How best can protection and justice be secured, in responding to domestic and sexual abuse, so that we protect those that are affected by abuse, address abusive behaviour to reduce numbers of victims and effectively hold offenders to account for their behaviour?

We again stress the importance of involving and genuinely listening to victims/survivors to ensure they remain at the heart of all actions to secure protection and justice. It is important for victims to be listened to, believed and not judged and for them to receive the appropriate services and support to be able to take action to escape and move on from abuse and violence.

“At a basic level people need to be heard. The act of someone being present and listening to a victim’s story provides an opportunity for personal release.”

Many victims reporting domestic or sexual violence have to tell their story multiple times and deal with multiple agencies within the justice system. It does not help them to feel believed, listened to or that they are being taken seriously. It re-traumatises victims and survivors and more must be done to ensure that the process of reporting is streamlined and information is appropriately shared within and between all the agencies involved.

“How can one decision in your life cast such a long shadow. I’m still repeating the same story over and over again around my domestic violence situation.”

Those that deal with domestic and sexual abuse within the police must have clear and well defined responses to the reporting of incidents. This must take account of changing shift patterns so that no matter when incidents are reported trained staff are available to deal with these in a sensitive manner. Information must be available and shared with all those working in this area so that if reports are made staff always have access to any information about the case and previous incidents so they are clear about the risks to victims and avoid re-traumatising them. Victims should not be made to wait for action to be taken because of staffing issues. All staff must recognise that inaction could result in victims living in fear, serious harm and even loss of life. Domestic and sexual abuse must be a priority for the police and must not been seen as a poor relation to other policing activities.

“With the shift patterns in the PSNI you could be waiting days for someone to get back to you. They have no idea what that does to you, waiting. They need to understand that you are afraid.”

“Domestic violence needs to be seen as someone’s life is at risk.”

It is often the case that victims are met with a lack of empathy and understanding of the impact of domestic and sexual violence and coercive control by all the agencies that they come into contact with including the wider justice system. It is clear the difference that sympathetic and respectful attitudes make to victims/survivors and

this should be the norm not the exception. These issues must be addressed to ensure that negative or ignorant attitudes towards victims do not deter them from taking action.

The culture of victim blaming that exists within all the services that deal with victims of domestic and sexual abuse must be tackled. Victim blaming can have serious repercussions not only for the victim but may deter others from coming forward and reporting their abuse. It can lead to significant under-reporting of these issues and can impact on the mental health of victims. The advice to victims must also not further these types of attitudes by asking victims to make changes to their behaviour, for example, victims being advised to close their social media accounts or to avoid going certain places, etc. while the perpetrator continues to cause fear and distress.

“I had to keep reporting breaches of my restraining order. I was told to close my social media accounts, not to post on social media, not to go there or do this and that. I was basically still being controlled and encouraged to make my world smaller. I lost my home as a result of domestic abuse and we had to restart our whole life. Whose behaviour is out of order here? It’s just more victim blaming.”

There is also a perception that physical violence is treated more seriously than other types of abuse such as coercive control, financial abuse, etc. Victims have reported issues with controlling behaviour and getting the services they deal with such as the police and judiciary to understand the meaning of seemingly “petty” behaviours. Perpetrators don’t have to be violent to let victims know they are there, small innocuous incidents can make victims feel really scared. There needs to be greater understanding of patterns/history of behaviour to understand the real impact that relatively minor issues can have on victims.

“Even though I took action about my abuse and left I was still frightened. I wouldn’t go to the Royal Victoria Hospital I went to the Mater Hospital so that I was further away and there was less chance of anyone knowing me because I was scared. The Doctor wasn’t a bit nice to me, he was young and probably thought here we go again, another one who will probably go back to him. He treated me like I was a burden.”

“Everyone who is involved with victims/survivors needs to be trained on how to deal with these issues and take them seriously – GPs, doctors in hospitals, schools, police, courts, etc.”

“When my case went to Court I was brought before the Master, it was a scary experience but he was a lovely man and I was lucky I had a brilliant solicitor.”

“Mental abuse is hard to bring up in court. The signs are there with physical abuse but if there hadn’t been I don’t know what I would have done.”

“It’s very difficult to prove coercive control.”

“The way you are treated through the courts makes a big difference – a kind word, a smile it makes all the difference.”

“I was constantly reporting what seemed to be minor issues and it felt like I was getting an eye roll from the police. Every incident looked like a small thing but if looked at together there was a pattern of behaviour. Was he violent? No, but he was outside my house, he was at my mums, he was at my daughter’s dance class. He was everywhere I was. It doesn’t sound a lot if you didn’t know my history. I was high risk and the police still didn’t seem to understand the effect of this, that there was a risk and a history. Everytime something happened I had to go back to square one, repeating the same story and re-traumatising again.”

“Some people don’t see verbal abuse as much of an issue as physical abuse.”

“I could see the signs, he was trying to control money and he had started drinking but he was sober when he hit me so that isn’t an excuse for his behaviour.”

There is a need to provide clear pathways to safety for victims in abusive relationships to protect them from the most serious outcomes of violence and abuse. There is a general acceptance that reform of the justice system is needed as all too often the law fails victims who need to take action against their abuser. The abuse of court orders needs robust enforcement, violence and abuse needs to result in appropriate sanctions so that violence and attempts to control do not go unpunished and refuges need increased and sustainable funding so there is always space for victims who need to leave.

There is a need for considerable work within the justice system in terms of tackling violence and abuse including increased resourcing and funding for the measures already available which in some cases are not achieving the results they were designed for. For example, many victims report issues with non-molestation orders and a lack of enforceability around breaches of these. If both victims and perpetrators understand that these are not properly enforced, then this can render this measure of protection largely ineffectual.

“Non-molestation orders can be hard to get and they are often not worth the paper they are written on, they’re a joke. They are not worth the paper they are written on you have to have evidence, CCTV, etc and it’s harder to prove with mental torture. You could be dead by the time you get someone out this way.”

“My sister took her own life because she was being mentally abused by her partner and it got too much for her. There is not enough legislation around this. I have also had issues with domestic violence. I had to get a non-molestation order but it’s not worth the paper it’s written on. The first one I got didn’t cover the kids’ schools so I had to go back and get another and then my ex just moved somewhere else. I had to go to court three times to get three different orders. Instead the Judge should just have been able to give me one across them all. It would be good to get the legislation changed around this. It is wasting time and energy and is so draining emotionally.”

“The perpetrator who tortured my sister should have been brought to justice but the police who were coming out thought she was crazy. Some didn’t want to know. There is a difference in treatment between physical violence and mental torture. Some of the police women were more empathetic but most of the men didn’t want to know.”

“If you have income above a certain level you have to pay to get a non-molestation order. I know a single parent who has to pay and it cost her £400. If you are in a coercive control situation you may not have control of your finances to be able to pay for this.”

“Non-molestation orders are not worth the paper they are written on. The police asked me if he had hit me. Do I have to be found dead before they take this seriously?”

“If you report things to the police they say they have enough to do – they are getting their funding cut so this will impact on their ability to respond to these things.”

“The perpetrator’s defense uses the victim’s sexual history against them – that’s conscious bias but there is also lots of unconscious bias too and that’s harder to deal with.”

“Even though I know I should report his behaviour I am afraid of the consequences – is there going to be enough of a deterrent to make him stop?”

Women’s Aid NI repeatedly cites family court and child contact as an issue of concern for women and children within their services. Inadequate understanding of domestic abuse as a welfare concern continues to expose women and children to trauma and harm and lead to unsafe contact arrangements. We support the Women’s Policy Group recommendations⁶⁸ which support calls from Women’s Aid NI for an urgent review to improve the safety of child contact through:

- prohibiting unsupervised child contact for a parent on bail for domestic violence and abuse, or where there are ongoing criminal proceedings.
- child contact in cases of domestic abuse are based on an informed judgement on what is in the best interests of children, not the presumption of parental involvement.
- an independent statutory review of family courts in Northern Ireland to assess how they deal with domestic abuse cases to work towards consistent outcomes across Northern Ireland.

Gillen Review Recommendations

The Gillen Review contains more than 200 recommendations that could drastically change the experiences of victims/survivors within the judicial process. There is an urgent need to implement training across all levels of the judiciary (including juries) on how domestic and sexual abuse presents, on harmful myths and internalised beliefs. A timetable to implement the recommendations from the Gillen Review should be published and actioned urgently.

⁶⁸ <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/WPG-NI-Evidence-Submission-to-Justice-Committee-05.06.20.pdf>

Even with the training suggested by the Gillen Review some remain sceptical that this will be enough especially for jurors. The culture of gender inequality and ingrained misogyny as well as issues around unconscious bias may continue to have an impact on how issues with domestic and sexual violence are viewed even with training. There are therefore doubts as to whether the current jury trial system for these offences is fit for purpose and suggestions that the setting up of a judge-led panel with input from experts would work better.

“They are too slow in getting the laws changed and in the meantime people are dying. There needs to be more training for the police/courts around all of this. High profile cases get attention but not normal ones so people don’t see it is a problem and they don’t see people getting punished for it.”

Sexual Offence Legal Advisors (SOLAs)

We welcome the piloting of the use of Sexual Offence Legal Advisors (SOLAs) through Victim Support in Northern Ireland which was a key recommendation from the Gillen Review. SOLAs can provide relevant information and general legal advice in serious sexual offence cases up to the start of the trial. These advisors will provide advice in relation to the disclosure of evidence including medical records, counselling records and personal digital information, such as mobile phone records. They will also provide specific legal advice in relation to the disclosure of previous sexual history and ensure that their clients’ interests and wishes are communicated. While we welcome this pilot we would like to see this important advice and support continue even after the start of any trial.

Domestic Abuse Commissioner

Rising levels of domestic violence in Northern Ireland makes it clear that much more work is needed on a societal level to shift the prevailing culture and provide support to victims. This could be helped by the appointment of an Independent Domestic Abuse Commissioner who could provide important scrutiny and act as an essential mechanism for accountability on the new domestic abuse legislation. The Gender Equality Strategy Expert Panel⁶⁹ has stated that any new legislation requires “huge

⁶⁹ Gender Equality Strategy, Expert Advisory Panel Report, December 2020

amounts of training across the entire Criminal Justice System and a Commissioner could oversee this process and bridge potential gaps while applying learning and best practice from other countries that have introduced similar legislation.” Domestic Abuse Commissioners are already in place in England and Wales and Northern Ireland has Commissioners in place to address other important issues such as child abuse and supporting victims of the Troubles. Given the extent of this problem in Northern Ireland we believe that the appointment of a Domestic Abuse Commissioner should be considered for Northern Ireland.

“How often do you turn on the news and hear about a court case for domestic abuse – there is no naming and shaming unless it’s a celebrity! You have to kill your partner before it gets on the news. You don’t hear about all the other issues that victims have.”

“As a country we are very focused on traditional values and often Northern Ireland is behind other areas. We have a different attitude about speaking out and people are less likely to be vocal about things. It’s very community orientated here and everybody knows everybody else which makes it harder to speak out.”

Holding Perpetrators to Account

There is a need to get the message out to wider society that there are serious consequences for domestic and sexual violence. Perpetrators need to know that there are consequences and that they will be punished appropriately for their actions if they commit this type of behaviour. They need to know that action can be taken and that sentences will be enforced. Unfortunately issues with victim blaming, delays within the justice system and lenient sentencing has put many victims off taking action about their abuse.

We welcome the warning from Northern Ireland’s most senior judge Lady Chief Justice Dame Siobhan Keegan that those responsible for repeated domestic violence offences will face tougher sentences in future for these crimes. The Lady Chief Justice set out the measures in cases involving multiple incidents of abuse

<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/system/files/publications/communities/dfc-social-inclusion-strategy-gender-expert-advisory-panel-report.pdf>

saying: *“In future perpetrators of sustained domestic violence.....can expect to obtain higher sentences for this type of offending. Higher sentencing reflects society’s need to deter this type of behaviour and mark an abhorrence of it. There is also a need for the education of society in general, to understand that this behaviour is not normal, it should not be tolerated, and if it does occur it will result in significant sentences.”*⁷⁰

There is also a need to work with perpetrators and perpetrator programmes should be a mandatory part of the system. These programmes and the availability of counselling services to deal with any other issues that perpetrators may have must be resourced, developed by experts and provided to all perpetrators to maximise the chances of rehabilitation and reduce instances of repeat offending.

“My partner did a perpetrators course and did counselling through work – those things should be more widely available as they helped him.”

“They can do a course, say they’ve done it and they’re all good now and then go on to do it again.”

“Perpetrators are not getting long enough sentences for some of these things. I know of a father who was guilty of abusing his disabled daughter and who got a very short sentence. This isn’t enough of a deterrent against this sort of behaviour.”

“Sometimes there are other issues with perpetrators – they have been abused sometimes by priests, they have turned to alcohol and this has all been kept secret and not talked about. This then results in this type of behaviour.”

“Perpetrators often suffered from physical abuse when they were younger – violence begets violence.”

“I had to run out and leave everything. I had put all the money into the house, he hadn’t but I had to leave and go to my sisters. I lost everything. I had to go to court and it was an awful experience. I lost thousands of pounds but I’m alive, I escaped with my life.”

⁷⁰ [Warning domestic violence offenders to face tougher sentences as Newry abuser fails in appeal | UTV | ITV News](#)

“Perpetrators are well versed in sob stories – they are good at playing the victim.”

“There is a need to look at the root cause of the problem – why the abuser has become an abuser. It would be beneficial if they were forced to go through some kind of therapy but this only works if they recognise they have a problem and they want to be there.”

Children, Sexual Crimes and the Justice System

Statistics show that 56% of all sexual crimes in Northern Ireland were committed against children.⁷¹ The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) has recently stated that children and young people who report abuse are left isolated by a justice system that is not adjusted to their needs. NICCY has recommended a Barnahus (Children’s House) approach - a one door approach to supporting children who have been sexually abused.⁷²

Question 6: How best can linkages within the justice system be strengthened in order to most effectively deal with domestic and sexual abuse more widely?

There is no doubt that better information sharing and linkages between all the services that deal with domestic and sexual abuse would help to more effectively deal with these issues and ultimately be to the benefit of victims and survivors. Clear and well defined pathways in these services as well as strong linkages within and between organisations is essential to ensure the best possible responses.

We have previously mentioned the critical importance of training, provided by experts, across the justice system on domestic and sexual abuse. Without a good knowledge and understanding of domestic abuse and the insidious ways it works legislation will not be enough on its own to protect victims. New legislation is

⁷¹ Police Recorded Crime in Northern Ireland Update to 31st December 2021, PSNI & NISRA, January 2022

<https://www.psnipolice.uk/globalassets/inside-the-psni/our-statistics/police-recorded-crime-statistics/2021/december/crime-bulletin-dec-21.pdf>

⁷² Putting the child at the centre, NICCY, February 2022

<https://www.niccy.org/media/4070/niccy-report-putting-the-child-at-the-centre-final-feb-2022.pdf>

ineffectual if abuse continues to be overlooked, misunderstood and dismissed. That is why training is so important underpinning as it does any new legislation and efforts to tackle domestic abuse. Comprehensive training which is consistent and which creates proper knowledge and understanding of the issues will also help to foster linkages within the system.

There is a need for partnership working to remove the barriers preventing victims getting the protection and support they need. Lack of communication and information sharing between agencies can be a barrier to this. Responsible information sharing plays a key role in enabling organisations and professionals to protect victims. A multi-agency partnership approach, where individual roles and joint responsibilities in relation to tackling domestic and sexual violence and supporting victims are clearly defined, can enable partnerships to effectively address these issues.

In our answer to Question 5 we welcomed the introduction of SOLAs to provide information and general legal advice in serious sexual offences cases up to the start of the trial. Extending their remit to include the case and afterwards could also help to strengthen linkages within the justice system.

“There needs to be better information sharing between the family court and the criminal court. In the criminal court my ex used a defence of mental health issues saying that he had suffered a breakdown. Yet the family court said that he could see the children as his mental health was fine.”

“It’s very stressful to have to go to court every time. There are a lot of grey areas with domestic violence. If you didn’t have to go to court each time it would save a lot of pain for women and children.”

Question 7: Do you agree with the following proposed workstreams suggested for the new Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy? Have you any comments about how best these workstreams can be progressed as well as their content?

- **Driving change together: Delivering change through joint commitment, leadership and partnership working.**
- **Prevention and early intervention: Early and effective interventions that prevent violence and maximise safety.**
- **Responsive services: Building responsive services to ensure victims get the support they need.**
- **Supporting different needs: Taking account of the needs of specific groups of victims.**
- **Protection and Justice: Effective, supportive, responsive and timely protection across the criminal justice system.**

We are in broad agreement with the proposed workstreams suggested for the new Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy.

Driving change together: Delivering change through joint commitment, leadership and partnership working

We believe that change can only be achieved through genuine commitment, leadership and partnership working. This is the only way to effect real and lasting change to ensure victims are supported and perpetrators are properly held to account. Resourcing must be made available to do this work.

We stress the need for true partnership working which values collaboration with other sectors including the input of the voluntary and community sector which has done so much work in this area. The work of the third sector must be valued as part of this process and not simply viewed as an add-on or completely ignored. Many of the organisations working in the community and voluntary sector have years of experience in working with victims and survivors of domestic and sexual abuse and also in working with perpetrators. They are skilled at reaching those who are the most marginalised within communities and provide trusted spaces and skilled people to do this work. It is valuable work that must be recognised and rewarded as such.

The voices of those with lived experience are also a crucial element of this process. The voices and experiences of victims and survivors must be at the heart of the development of the Strategy. Once again there must be genuine engagement and their input must be valued for the expertise and knowledge it brings. Too often this is carried out as a tick-box exercise without giving sufficient importance to its value. We suggest that engagement with victims and survivors must be an integral part of this process and resources allocated to this work.

“The work of the women’s sector and women’s centres is not valued. We are just fed crumbs of funding.”

“We are working in partnership with local Government on a project but they have no sense of what is required on the ground to make it work. They just don’t understand how it works at community level.”

“True partnership working can make a massive difference but the way it works with Government now is not partnership it is Government trying to dictate what’s happening. It is not a level playing field. There’s partnership and there’s partnership – Government are just using the partnership but they don’t truly see community organisations as a partner. They don’t get it at all.”

“The community needs to have a bigger role in this – there’s trust at community level.”

“It needs people working at grass roots level. There needs to be a bottom-up approach so that everyone’s voices will be heard.”

Prevention and early intervention: Early and effective interventions that prevent violence and maximise safety.

We have highlighted throughout this response the importance of education in terms of prevention work and once again stress the importance of education from a young age to prevent all forms of violence and abuse. Justice solutions are in place for existing victims and for the rehabilitation of offenders but do not address the heart of the issue. Prevention involves education, myth-busting and culture change. Resourcing must be made available to do this work.

Responsive services: Building responsive services to ensure victims get the support they need.

We have stressed that services must be response to the needs of victims and survivors. To do this training must be in place for all those involved in service provision in this area and these services must be sufficiently resourced in order to carry out this important work. Once again, the voices of victims and survivors are an important part of this process so that valuable learning can be taken from where service provision fails to provide the right support at the right time. Resourcing must be made available to do this work.

Supporting different needs: Taking account of the needs of specific groups of victims.

We have detailed the importance of taking account of the needs of specific groups of victims. We suggested the best way of doing this was to ask these groups what their needs are, to genuinely listen to what they have to say and to take action to support their particular circumstances. Resourcing must be made available to do this work.

Protection and Justice: Effective, supportive, responsive and timely protection across the criminal justice system.

We have outlined a range of issues with the criminal justice system that impact on the ability for victims to gain protection and justice. The criminal justice system must be truly victim and survivor centred. That means a system of wrap around supports from the moment victims come forward to seek support and disclose abuse and an end to the current piecemeal approach. Listening to their lived experiences of dealing with the criminal justice system should be at the heart of making the necessary changes required to systems and processes. Resourcing must be made available to do this work.

Question 8: Are there any other key issues, on the specific area of domestic and sexual abuse, which you would like to raise?

We are concerned about how work on this Strategy can be progressed given the collapse of the Northern Ireland Executive. Without the appropriate funding across all the workstreams there is no chance of achieving the vision and objectives for the

Strategy. We do not wish to see another Strategy produced which sits on a shelf but does not make a difference to people's lives. It is imperative that priority is given to this Strategy and that it is properly resourced to make the changes needed to ensure that everyone can live without fear and that perpetrators are held to account.

Domestic and sexual abuse do not just have an impact on the victim. In many cases the impacts are much wider affecting children, other family members, friends and work colleagues. The needs of these other groups must also be taken into account and catered for in terms of their need for information, advice, support and guidance.

Many issues can arise from domestic and sexual abuse. Its effects can be widespread cutting across many different areas and government departments, for example, housing, social security, education, health, employment, etc. Unless all these services and departments are working together in a holistic way then it will not be possible to tackle this problem effectively. Joined-up services, partnership working and the availability of adequate resources to work effectively across departments is vital to ensure that victims are given the complete range of protections and help they need in order to escape abuse and live the rest of their lives to their full potential.

Domestic and sexual violence and abuse leads to high social and economic costs for women, their families and societies. Putting in place holistic protections and supports across a range of areas has huge potential not only for the wellbeing and healing of victims but for children's health and wellbeing, the health service, the economy, justice, etc. It would not only prevent much pain, suffering and loss but save money across a range of services.

“How many women are dealing with health problems from the abuse they suffered? It also has mental health impacts and impacts on children – this is all costly for the health service.”

It is important to ensure that this Strategy does not work in isolation from a range of other Strategies on inter-connected issues which have an impact on this area of work including the forthcoming Gender Equality, Anti-Poverty, Disability and

LGBTQI+ Strategies and the Mental Health Strategy, Drug and Alcohol Strategy, Homelessness Strategy, etc.

It is impossible to separate out incidences of domestic and sexual violence from the issue of gender inequality and existing power imbalances within society. Gender inequality is the background to which domestic and sexual violence and all violence against women and girls takes place. Rigid gender roles and harmful gender norms which perpetuate inequitable power relationships disadvantage women and are the root cause of violence against women. Promoting and achieving gender equality is a critical element of the prevention of violence against women.

A gender-neutral policy-making approach exists in Northern Ireland and has prevented progress on tackling gender-based violence and misogyny. The issue of gender neutrality acts as a significant barrier to women's equality and major reforms are needed in order to make progress in this area.

Question 9: How best can we engage with, and draw from, the experience of those affected by domestic and sexual abuse going forward?

We again refer the Department to the guidance on consulting with women produced by Women's Regional Consortium members WRDA.⁷³ This guidance contains advice and tips on promoting women's participation in policy making. We recommend the Department uses this guidance to consider how best to engage local communities. There is a need to consider how best to involve people at all stages of the process and to use different approaches for different groups of people. Those who experience domestic and sexual violence are not all the same, they will have different needs and experiences and some may require additional support.

The term co-design is being frequently used by Government departments but often does not directly involve those with lived experience. There is much time, work and

⁷³ Women at the Heart of Public Consultation, A guide for Public Authorities and Women's Organisations, WRDA, November 2017
[WRDA_WomenAtTheHeartOfPublicConsultation.pdf](#)

resources required to ensure a true co-design process that genuinely involves those with lived experience at all stages of the process.

The voices of those with lived experience are a crucial element in helping to shape solutions around domestic and sexual violence. However, there must be genuine engagement and true value and recognition must be given to this work including the necessary resourcing. Drawing from lived experience must not be a tick box exercise it must be about genuine participation and willingness to learn from those who understand and live the issues. It must recognise the time, energy and personal input required to share lived experience and for many that this can be difficult to share. This engagement should not be flippantly or freely demanded and taken. It should have proper recognition and value and consideration should be given to providing a resource for this work. This engagement must result in meaningful action on what has been learned through this work.

Stigma and fear may mean that some victims/survivors may find it difficult to share their experiences. This may mean that they would be reluctant to attend events which are specific to domestic violence. The Department should consider other ways of engaging victims/survivors. Domestic abuse links to many other areas including housing, mental health, debt, etc so carrying out engagement in these areas may be a useful way of accessing this information in a less obvious way. Discussions around domestic and sexual violence can be factored in to many other areas not just as a standalone issue. Naturally, all relevant information, advice, support and signposting must be made available to victims who are triggered by sharing their experiences.

The Department should also consider specific engagement around the lived experience of those who are the most hard to reach and whose voices are often not heard. Voluntary & Community sector organisations are often the best way of reaching out to these groups as they have years of experience in working for those who are the most marginalised. They also provide trusted, local spaces where people are encouraged to share their views and are more comfortable in sharing the issues they face. Once again, the involvement of the Voluntary & Community sector

who represent many of those with lived experience must be recognised and their expertise and time must be valued.

SECTION 3: RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS ON EQUALLY SAFE – A STRATEGY TO TACKLE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

Question 1: We are inclined to the view that this new Equally Safe Strategy should focus on women and girls. This reflects the different forms of violence and unwanted behaviour against women and its impact within the gendered reality of men's and women's lives. We welcome your views on whether this approach or another approach is more appropriate?

We believe this is the right approach and that the Equally Safe Strategy should focus on women and girls. Violence against women and girls does not just happen, it is because of the patriarchal structures that exist and harmful gender norms and stereotypes putting women and girls at much greater risk of violence. There is a need to understand that violence against women and girls is both a cause and consequence of gender inequality as these forms of abuse are committed disproportionately against women and girls and the perpetrators are overwhelmingly male. The Strategy must therefore focus on male violence against women and girls. While men also experience violence it is not systemic in the same way with violence against women and girls existing on a much larger scale. It is also the case that much of the violence that happens to men and boys is also perpetrated by males.

A Strategy tackling violence against women and girls will not discount the experiences of other gender identities which are also valid but will instead address the fact that women and girls are more affected by this violence.

All women are at risk of violence regardless of their social background and identity. Every woman's experience of violence and abuse is shaped by many different factors with many facing intersecting forms of discrimination based on race, sexual orientation, disability, ethnicity, age, etc. Women's further inequality as a result of this intersectionality makes them more likely to experience violence and less likely to access justice and support. The Strategy must address this intersectionality and that women are more vulnerable to violence because of this.

Question 2: We would like to hear your views on whether the draft vision set out below, or different words would best catch the ambition of what we want to do. Every woman and girl is safe in our communities, feels safe and can reach their potential. We have a society in which violence against women is not tolerated in any form, in which all victims are supported, and perpetrators are held to account.

We are broadly supportive of the draft vision. We feel it is important that the draft vision sets out that every woman and girl should not only be safe but feel safe in our communities.

We are concerned that the use of the word 'violence' may create more of a focus on physical abuse. The Strategy must take in the whole range of unwanted behaviours that women experience every day many of which may not be physical but can make them feel equally unsafe. We are keen to see a broad definition of 'violence' within the Strategy which encompasses all forms of violence including state violence.

In line with international standards we believe that it is important to refer to women and girls throughout. We also believe that the word 'effectively' should be added in terms of supports. While support can be available it may not be in the right form or meet the victims needs. This means that the last sentence of the draft vision should read as follows: *"We have a society in which violence against women and **girls** is not tolerated in any form, in which all victims are **effectively** supported, and perpetrators are held to account."*

It is important to recognise the connection between women being and feeling safe and reaching their potential. Even if women and girls don't directly experience violence they grow up in a culture of violence against women and girls which limits the choices that they make, where they go and what they do. This is also connected to the culture of victim-blaming which forces women and girls to make changes to protect their safety.

The fact that women and girls are unable to reach their full potential as a result of violence is a shame on our society. It not only impacts on individual women and girls and on women and girls in general but it has wider costs to society in terms of a lack of participation of women and girls which stunts economic growth and hinders development.

It is important to recognise that what is outlined in the draft vision is currently not available for women and girls and that work needs to start from where we are now. There is a need to recognise that a full cultural shift is required. It is impossible to separate out incidences of violence against women and girls from the issue of gender inequality and existing power imbalances within society. Gender inequality is the background to which all violence against women and girls takes place. Rigid gender roles and harmful gender norms which perpetuate inequitable power relationships disadvantage women and are the root cause of violence against women. Promoting and achieving gender equality is a critical element of the prevention of violence against women.

There is a great need to shift the focus away from victim-blaming and other safety approaches such as street lighting, CCTV or increased police patrols as these fail to get to the root cause of the problem. Government must now properly fund this work so future generations are free from gender-based violence.

The fact that Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK without a Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy is indicative of how far we have to go to deal with this issue. Having a Strategy is an essential first step in tackling the disproportionately gendered impact of violence in our society.

It is vitally important that the need for perpetrators to be held to account is addressed within the draft vision. This is an important element of tackling violence against women and girls. A culture of ignoring this type of behaviour, victim-blaming and a failure to take this issue seriously by the justice system (including lenient sentencing) deters victims from reporting incidents and when they do report often leaves them feeling failed by the justice system. In turn this can allow perpetrators to continue

their abusive and violent behaviours with impunity. Placing an emphasis on this issue means that perpetrators understand that carrying out this type of behaviour has consequences and that they will be punished for their actions.

It must be noted however that this Strategy will not work without the necessary funding attached. It must be properly funded and connect with a range of other Strategies within and between Government departments in order to be successful and achieve its vision.

Question 3: Do you agree with the draft objectives suggested for the new strategy? Are there any other objectives that should be included?

- **Understanding the scope and scale of the problem the strategy is seeking to tackle.**
- **Prevention - Early intervention to get upstream of violence.**
- **A co-designed strategy which is delivered in a collaborative manner and is based on local and international evidence.**
- **Responsive services to ensure women and girls are equally safe.**

We are in broad agreement with the draft objectives suggested for the new strategy. However, under each of these objectives there is much to consider as we have outlined below. We also wish to reiterate the importance of funding for this Strategy. It will only progress and meet its vision if there is money to do the work required under each of these objectives.

We also suggest that a further objective around the need for cultural change should be added to the list of objectives within the Strategy. As we have previously outlined violence against women and girls comes stems from gender inequality, discrimination and harmful gender norms and stereotypes. Truly tackling the issue of violence against women and girls will need work on wider cultural change and challenging misogyny in all its forms in wider society.

“The way women are treated comes from a lack of respect – women are treated as if they are a possession. Women are seen as the ‘weaker sex’ and when a man does something to a woman he says he didn’t mean it or he’s had too much to drink. There’s always an excuse for it.”

Understanding the scope and scale of the problem the strategy is seeking to tackle.

It is important to have access to robust, accurate and up to date data in order to properly understand the scope and scale of violence against women and girls. It is clear that better data is needed in Northern Ireland as there are considerable gaps in relation to both victims and perpetrators which does little to help with awareness raising, provision of support and prevention work.

A report by the Expert Advisory Panel on a Gender Equality Strategy⁷⁴ highlighted the challenge faced by a lack of robust, disaggregated data. This report referred to data gaps across a range of areas for many of the Section 75 groups including gender. The expert panel stressed that *“this is an issue of critical concern and one which requires urgent action.”* This is an important consideration for this Strategy as having access to relevant, up to date data broken down across the Section 75 groups allows for a greater understanding of the scale and nature of the problem for all groups as well as the targeting of policies and decision making to where it is needed most.

Prevention - Early intervention to get upstream of violence.

Prevention of violence against women and gender-based violence is better than intervention at a later date when the harms have already been caused. We believe that education is key to prevention. We believe that comprehensive Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) standardised across all schools is vital to aid the prevention of violence against women and girls. Young people need to be educated on what constitutes a healthy relationship and they need to be taught about consent and about respect with the aim of addressing behaviours that can lead to violence and abuse. They need to be given the information and skills to recognise what

⁷⁴ Gender Equality Strategy, Expert Advisory Panel Report, December 2020
<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/system/files/publications/communities/dfc-social-inclusion-strategy-gender-expert-advisory-panel-report.pdf>

behaviours are acceptable, what is right and wrong in relationships and take this into their adult lives and relationships.

Currently RSE provision in schools is up to each school to develop its own RSE policy which is a mandatory part of the curriculum. However, the content of what is taught to pupils is up to each individual school to decide based on the school ethos. In many cases this means that RSE provision is inadequate with a focus on heterosexual relationships only. The expert panel for the Gender Equality Strategy has also said that RSE in schools in Northern Ireland is “inconsistent and insufficient.”⁷⁵ The expert panel called for RSE which is fit for purpose and inclusive of the experiences of all young people⁷⁶ and that it should take account of the CEDAW Recommendation⁷⁷ to: *“take measures to introduce mandatory age-appropriate education on sexual and reproductive rights in school curricula, including issues such as gender relations and responsible sexual behaviour, throughout the State party.”*

RSE in its current form is failing children in Northern Ireland. If children do not have the tools to understand and navigate relationships they are more vulnerable to violence. Traditional education is failing to equip young people with the language and skills they need to deal with these issues in their lives. It needs to inform them on consent, sexual harassment, victim-blaming and work to dismantle the beliefs that women and girls are responsible for their own safety from sexual harassment and assault.

RSE must be age appropriate and begin at a young age so that these messages can be reinforced over the course of school life. If comprehensive RSE including issues around consent are integrated into education from an early stage it removes the idea

⁷⁵ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-56378106>

⁷⁶ Gender Equality Strategy Expert Advisory Panel Report, December 2020
<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/system/files/publications/communities/dfc-social-inclusion-strategy-gender-expert-advisory-panel-report.pdf>

⁷⁷ Concluding observations on the eighth periodic report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, March 2019, Para 42 (c)
https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW/C/GBR/CO/8&Lang=En

that it is 'naughty' or 'dirty' or something we don't talk about. If it is integrated more regularly into young people's education then they will be equipped with the knowledge and confidence to understand these issues, to know their boundaries and to confront violence. RSE should be delivered in collaboration with civil society organisations with experience in these areas.

“There is a need to keep repeating the right messages through school life – if it's just once it's not enough. This education need to be developed every year. It should start off really young in nursery with age appropriate messages and continue throughout school life.”

Women's experience of violence and harassment exists on a continuum which includes everyday sexism and street harassment through to assault and sexual offences. These behaviours are illustrated on the 'Pyramid of Sexual Violence' – see Section 2.11, which shows how everyday behaviours like sexist banter and rape jokes bolster up the culture of misogyny. It shows how common attitudes and beliefs uphold and form the basis for more extreme acts of sexual violence. There is an important role for education to play in ensuring that people understand that a failure to challenge these everyday behaviours makes it possible for other forms of violence to take place.

“When it crosses the line these behaviours need to be addressed but then whoever is doing it just says ‘I was only joking’”

As we have previously stated a full cultural shift is required to prevent this type of violence. Wider training and education around issues of sexual harassment and violence is also needed to tackle this endemic problem. Projects like Raise Your Voice is doing vital work in local communities to raise awareness and to educate people on how to identify, challenge and prevent this type of behaviour. We believe that this type of work is invaluable in addressing the issues of sexual harassment and sexual violence in society. Raise Your voice works directly with local communities, increasing public awareness, educating organisations on best practice and lobbies for legislative change in this area. Its goal is to create true cultural change in order to tackle the root causes of these behaviours and empower people to act to change this in their own lives and communities. See further information in Section 2.12. We would

like to see adequate, long-term and sustainable funding to be available to such campaigns to continue and develop this important work in shifting attitudes and societal norms.

Education is an important way to address learned behaviour. Many perpetrators carry out abusive and violent behaviour because of what they have been exposed to in wider society or have seen in relationships around them including their parents. Northern Ireland's violent history has also meant greater levels of acceptance of violence and abuse here.

It is also important that education informs victims about abusive and violent behaviours and the full range of behaviours that are included. This is important in terms of both recognising and challenging these behaviours as well as being able to seek necessary support and services.

There are concerns about pornography which is readily available for young people and how this impacts on attitudes towards women and girls. There is an increasing need to address the harms caused by attitudes arising from pornography and to provide education around healthy sexual relationships and respect for women and girls.

“There needs to be education around the way women are spoken about. We had a talk in work about the issues around all this – how women are spoken about, respect and pornography. Pornography is so readily available now and so easy to get hold of on mobile phones so that even young kids have access to it. This makes men think it's OK to treat women in this way.”

There is a need for greater levels of public awareness on the full range of behaviours that constitute violence against women and girls. Some victims do not realise that some aspects of this behaviour is wrong and that they can therefore challenge it. Some of these behaviours are more recognised than others and there is a need to include violence which happens in the online world, eg, sharing naked images. Ongoing work is needed to raise awareness of all these issues which will help victims to recognise these behaviours, take action and mu. Increasing public

awareness will also help inform perpetrators of the potential repercussions of this behaviour. We would like to see an adequately funded public awareness campaign on tackling the issues around violence against women and girls which is co-designed with community organisations working in these areas. This must include online harassment and violence.

Early intervention is a vital part of this Strategy. It not only helps to protect future victims and spare them from the harm, distress and pain caused by violence but it is also cost effective in that it reduces the impact on other services such as health, education and justice, etc. and reduces the impact and cost to the economy.

A co-designed strategy which is delivered in a collaborative manner and is based on local and international evidence.

The voices of those with lived experience are a crucial element of this process. The voices and experiences of victims must be at the heart of the development of the Strategy. There must be genuine engagement and their input must be valued for the expertise and knowledge it brings. Too often this is carried out as a tick-box exercise without giving sufficient importance to its value.

The voices of those with lived experience are a crucial element in helping to shape solutions around violence against women and girls. Drawing from lived experience must be about genuine participation and willingness to learn from those who understand and live the issues. It must recognise the time, energy and personal input required to share lived experience and for many that this can be difficult to share. This engagement should be provided with all the necessary supports for victims. It should have proper recognition and value and consideration should be given to providing a resource for this work. This engagement must result in meaningful action on what has been learned through this work.

The term co-design is being frequently used by Government departments but often does not directly involve those with lived experience. There is much time, work and resources required to ensure a true co-design process that genuinely involves those with lived experience at all stages of the process.

Specific engagement should be carried out around the lived experience of those who are the most hard to reach and whose voices are often not heard. Voluntary & Community sector organisations are often the best way of reaching out to these groups as they have years of experience in working for those who are the most marginalised. They also provide trusted, local spaces where people are encouraged to share their views and are more comfortable in sharing the issues they face. The involvement of the Voluntary & Community sector who represent many of those with lived experience must be recognised and their expertise and time must be valued.

Responsive services to ensure women and girls are equally safe.

Providing access to victim-centred services is important in helping women and girls address the violence they face and start the recovery process. There is much more that needs to be done to ensure that women are supported to take action against violent behaviours. Without adequate and timely support many will be deterred from taking action and may continue to suffer from this violence. Not enough is being done to fund specialist services to provide this important work.

Positive initial contacts with services are crucial for victims of violence. High quality responses are needed which understand the issues they face and are accessible to all women and girls including those who are at greater risk of experiencing violence. Training is an important part of this to ensure that all the services that victims comes into contact with know the issues that women and girls face and are trained in how to appropriately respond.

We wish to highlight the important work of Women's Centres in relation to supporting women who have been the victim of violence. Women's Centres are trusted local organisations that women and families are more likely to turn to or accept being referred to for support and advice at times of stress and difficulty. Frontline services delivered through these organisations complement statutory and other voluntary sector provision ensuring that women and their families have access to the information, advice and support they need in these situations. These services are vital to tackling disadvantage and promoting gender equality. Much greater value must be placed on these unique and trusted services which provide holistic services

for women and their families. In order to continue these vital services, they need to have long-term sustainable funding for this work.

There is much work to be done in terms of regular and ongoing monitoring and scrutinising of the objectives to ensure that they are achieving the Strategy's vision and this must be factored in to this work.

Question 4: What information can you provide on the scope, scale and prevalence of acts or threats of gender based violence (apart from that addressed by the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy) that result in, or are likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women and girls?

We refer the Department to the recent comprehensive statistics collected by the Women's Policy Group in their response.

Anecdotal research with local women by the Women's Regional Consortium for this call for evidence suggests that issues with gender-based violence are a common experience for women and girls in Northern Ireland. It suggests that issues around gender-based violence can happen anywhere – in the street, at work, when socialising, in the gym, etc. It happens to women of all ages, backgrounds and characteristics. This is a result of a society where gender inequality is ingrained and a culture of discrimination and lack of respect for women and girls is allowed to flourish.

Question 5: We want to understand the “unwanted” behaviour or actions (including on-line) that emanate from an attitude to, or perception of, women and girls that lacks respect. What information can you provide on the scope, scale and prevalence of such behaviour?

The women we spoke to gave examples of a range of “unwanted behaviour” that took place in a range of settings and across all age groups and circumstances. We have detailed the issues they faced through the following quotes from the women at

our focus group sessions on this issue. In many cases this type of behaviour is described as just being “banter” or “slagging” which tries to undermine its seriousness and the impact that it has on those who experience it.

“In work I was called names and I complained about it but they kept going with crude jokes and sex talk and nobody did anything about it. It made me feel really uncomfortable.”

“You get things said to you like “I’ll fix your bed anytime”. Sometimes the confidence of whoever is saying these things frightens you. The confidence of these men. They have never been told what way to behave around women.”

“The whole culture of Page 3 and people saying things like “get your tits out for the boys”. This was all commonplace and accepted.”

“A man came over to a group of us girls who were out for the night. He brought a stool over in front of us and trapped us in behind the table – we didn’t invite him over!”

“When you say you’re not interested in advances you get ‘accused’ of being a lesbian – it’s done in an accusatory derogatory way.”

“A man came over to me and when I said I didn’t want his attention he told me my top was too low and I really did want the attention.”

“Men offering to buy you drinks is another minefield. They want something in return.”

“When I was younger and you had refused a man’s advances you would get called a lesbian or frigid. They would call you names to make you feel bad for refusing them.”

“Now with phones they take videos which can be used to humiliate you – you worry what could be posted about you online.”

“I was in the late stages of pregnancy, not drinking and at a dance. A man who was really drunk came up right up close to me talking to me and asking if I wanted a drink. When I told him I wasn’t interested he started shouting and accusing me of all sorts.”

“In my work an elderly man ran his hand up and down my back and pinged my bra strap. I called it out loud. We feel embarrassed but it should be them who are embarrassed. I told him you shouldn’t do that.”

“My neighbor was at a school event with her husband and someone felt her on the bum. It was a man from the school board of governors that did it. When she told her husband that she wanted to report it he said no he’s a neighbor. A man blew in my ear. It sounds so small but it was a really big deal for me. You end up taking the blame on yourself when it’s not your fault.”

“When we go out I always tell the group of women I’m with don’t look, don’t engage, don’t give eye contact as it often seems to give men permission to be aggressive.”

Question 6: We want to understand the root causes of violence against women and girls, and would especially welcome learning on intersectional approaches and on what works in promoting behavioural and attitudinal change.

We suggest that the best way to understand the root causes of violence against women and girls and what could work in effecting change is to involve women and girls who have experienced this harassment and violence. This must include women from a diverse range of backgrounds who may have experienced harassment and violence on an intersectional basis. Women and girls are the experts on their own experiences and what changes they want to see.

At the core of violence against women and girls is gender inequality, misogyny, harmful gender stereotypes and sexism. If the causes of violence against women and girls are not addressed, then it will not be possible to stop it. Seemingly small incidents including sexist banter and cat calling have a much deeper impact and cumulative negative effects reinforcing the inequality women and girls face in their daily lives and normalising these harmful attitudes. Gender stereotypes shape attitudes to relationships and self-worth and self-esteem which can limit women’s lives and participation in society.

“The root causes are from societal expectations of people to be a certain way. This has allowed these sexist comments, slapping people on the bum, etc. Nobody is focusing on these things as they are just allowed to happen and then it becomes expected behaviour.”

The response must include challenging gender inequality, misogyny and harmful gender stereotypes. Gender equality prevents violence against women and girls. It is essential for economic prosperity as societies that value women and men as equal are safer and healthier. Wider cultural change is needed across all levels of society including in schools, health services, transport, business, the police and judicial systems, etc. Investment must be made in prevention work and changing these harmful societal attitudes. This must include measures that go beyond the traditional ideas of public space to comprehensively tackle violence against women and girls that takes place in online environments.

The approach to ending violence against women and girls must take a human rights based approach for all women and not one that focuses on safety. Women and girls are constantly having to change where they go, what they wear, etc to try and prevent harassment and violence. This means that they end up not being able to do what they want, wear what they want and go to certain places. Women and girls have the right to move freely, express themselves and take part in activities without the fear of harassment and violence. The onus is always put on women and girls to stop it from happening to them. However, the same effort is not directed to those perpetrating harassment and violence that their behaviour must stop and this needs to change.

We have previously referred to the pyramid of sexual violence (see further information in Section 2.11) and we reiterate the importance of tackling everyday sexism that props up more serious incidences of violence and abuse. Everyday sexism is an almost universal experience for women and girls and these behaviours are often trivialised leading to a culture of acceptance and normalisation of this behaviour. This everyday sexism is a symptom of gender inequality and discrimination. These inequalities must be tackled in order to challenge the acceptability of commenting on women's appearance and a sense of entitlement to their bodies that very often gives way to more serious violence and abuse. It requires an approach that shifts the culture of misogyny and sexism in society and which prioritises the prevention of violence.

There are clear connections between everyday sexism, consent and healthy relationships which can be addressed by better education and awareness around all these issues. This should start with young people giving them the information and skills to challenge and change negative stereotypes about women and men, better understand consent and know how to spot the early signs of abuse.

Most experts agree that education is the foundation for challenging and changing the culture of everyday gender-based harassment and violence. We have highlighted throughout our response the importance of education in tackling these issues and we refer to our previous comments around the need for comprehensive, statutory and standardised RSE in schools. What is needed is real and systemic change in the education system to address these issues. There needs to be a modern curriculum to tackle misogyny and gender-based violence. It must be mandatory and developed with organisations who have experience in these areas and it must be funded so that it can be delivered across all schools in Northern Ireland.

Educate, educate, educate! As is referred to in evaluation feedback on the Raise Your Voice project (see more information in Section 2.12) the need for wider education around the issues of gender-based violence is essential. This training has included specific work with men and boys which is important in encouraging men and boys to look at their own norms and behaviours. Future developments in this project will offer training around bystander intervention and online abuse which will help people to call out bad behaviour when they see it and equip them to deal with these issues in an online environment.

We believe that Raise Your Voice is providing much needed work around promoting behavioural and attitudinal change. The evaluation results from the project are testament to this and the need for it to have long-term sustainable funding so that the project can grow and develop to effect further change in these areas.

Given the pervasive nature of harassment and violence against women and girls and the culture that enables it to continue there is a need for education and awareness work on tackling this problem and the acceptability of these behaviours in society.

Training and education around intervention is an important part of this. People often feel like they don't know what to say in these situations yet even small interventions can make a big difference to those experiencing harassment and violence. The role of bystanders and the wider community should not be underestimated as a tool in delivering behavioural and attitudinal change.

Women also told us that they felt that training and education work for women and girls around challenging acts of everyday sexism, harassment and violence would be beneficial. Some of the women didn't know what to do when they experienced these issues and this meant that they remained silent even though they were upset by what had happened to them. Some of the women felt that the reason they had not said anything to the perpetrator was because they were afraid of being rude or speaking out about someone they knew. Women need to be supported to call out these behaviours and know that they will be believed.

“Girls need to be able to know what to do if something happens to them. I was in a gym and a man came up behind me and touched me on the bum. I didn't say anything I ran upstairs and he came after me. I ran into a room with other people. It would be good to know what to say or do in those circumstances.”

“Women don't want to upset people by saying something to them especially if they know them, if they are a neighbour, etc.”

“You're afraid of saying anything – you feel embarrassed and you take this on yourself when it is them that should feel embarrassed about their behaviour.”

“My neighbour who is 20 years older than me and married stopped me and asked me to meet up. In my head I just wanted to just say no but I just can't get the words out to be forceful about it. You are conditioned not to want to be rude. Girls need to be told from a young age it is fine to say no. It's OK to say no.”

“You're conditioned to be a certain way. Women are encouraged to be quiet and demure and men are seen to be a 'lad' if they sleep around. Sons often carry on the behaviour of their fathers and daughters are taught to put up with it – there is a need to break the cycle.”

There is also a need to change how women are portrayed in the media and in the online world. According to UNICEF *“the objectification and sexualisation of girls in the media is linked to violence against women and girls worldwide.”*⁷⁸ The media often portrays women as purely sexual objects and sends the message that women and girls should be pretty rather than powerful and respected. This influences the subconscious biases of how men and boys view women legitimising violence and harassment towards women and girls. This is very harmful not just to women and girls but to our wider culture.

“There’s a lack of respect in society now and everything in films, social media and in the media in general in relation to women is over sexualized. People are being bombarded with sexualized images which means women’s lives are reduced to this and they are viewed as sexual objects. Social media fuels this as there are more likes and acceptance with these type of images.”

“The media and social media are a big issue – there’s a lot of victim blaming that does on there.”

It is important in trying to change the root causes of this violence against women and girls that women and girls feel supported to speak out and when they do that they will be listened to and supported to take action. This could be helped by public messaging campaigns to help spread awareness of these issues, encourage public intolerance of harassment and violence against women and girls, ensure that women and girls know where they can go to get help and which show that they will be taken seriously if they do report these issues.

As we have outlined throughout our response we also believe that it is vital that adequate and sustainable funding is given to specialist women’s services to meet the immediate and long-term challenges that women and girls face.

⁷⁸ [Not An Object: On Sexualization and Exploitation of Women and Girls | UNICEF USA](#)

Question 7: We want to understand whether there are particular groups of women and girls, including those with specific vulnerabilities, who are more at risk of particular offences or ‘unwanted’ behaviour or actions.

Once again we wish to raise the need for good quality, up to date and disaggregated data across the full range of Section 75 groups. This would help to give an understanding of the particular groups of women and girls who are at greater risk of harassment and violence.

It is clear from research that certain groups of women and girls are more at risk of harassment and violence including:

- Girls and young women
- Trans communities suffer disproportionately from societal stigma and violence
- Women living with a disability including those with learning disabilities who may be unable to report violence and abuse.
- Black and Minority Ethnic Women
- LGBTQI+ women

Aside from these groups women told us that they felt that women and girls who lack proper support, for example, if they don't have good family support or family structure around them they can be more vulnerable to harassment and violence.

The women we spoke to also felt that in some families especially where there are old fashioned values there may be more of an acceptance of violence against women and girls with attitudes like “boys will be boys” and a general culture of girls being subservient to men. These messages can be passed on through families.

Question 8: We want to understand whether there are any aspects of the experience of women and girls who are victims of crime (apart from that addressed by the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy) in the criminal justice system that you would like to draw to our attention.

Victims of violence must never have their trauma compounded by their experience of the criminal justice system. Victims need to know that their experiences will be heard, actively listened to and acted on. They need to know that their complaints will be taken seriously. The criminal justice system must be truly victim-centred. This should include a system of wrap around supports from the moment women come forward to seek support.

A culture of disbelief and victim-blaming within the policing and criminal justice system prevents women and girls from accessing justice. As previously outlined training, provided by experts, on the issues around harassment and violence against women and girls is an important aspect of efforts to tackle these problems and creates a proper knowledge of the issues which should help to support victims through the system. Victims must know that they will get the right response first time and that their case will be treated with the respect and seriousness that it deserves.

There is a clear need for transformation of the criminal justice system so that it delivers for all victims of violence against women and girls. The system is adversarial with victims being put on trial and their behaviour interrogated which completely re-traumatises them. This acts as a deterrent for victims to take action and allows perpetrators to get away with these types of harmful behaviours. The system acts as a barrier to holding perpetrators to account and it is therefore unsurprising that women often do not pursue convictions. Perpetrators know this too and therefore the cycle continues. Victims need to see pursuing cases through the criminal justice system as a viable option.

Lenient sentencing does little to encourage victims to pursue cases through the criminal justice system. This sends out a strong message that this is a tolerable crime.

We wish to highlight a number of areas which we believe are examples of state violence against women. These arise from the welfare reform and austerity cuts that have taken place over the last decade. As outlined in Section 2.5 these welfare reform changes have disproportionately impacted on women. Research has shown

that 86% of the savings to the Treasury from the tax and benefit changes since 2010 will have come from women.⁷⁹

Analysis by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC)⁸⁰ of the winners and losers from the reforms found that the proportion of losers is much higher among some groups. Female lone parents and female single pensioners are the household type with the highest proportion of losers (over 87% in both cases). At an individual level, women lost on average considerably more from changes to direct taxes and benefits than men. Women lose about £400 per year on average, and men only £30. Lone parents in the bottom fifth of the household income distribution lose around 25% of their net income, or one pound in every four, on average.

Locally an analysis of the impact of the reforms by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC)⁸¹ showed that across most income levels the overall cash impact of the reforms is more negative for women than for men. The research showed that women lose more on average from these reforms than men mainly because they are more likely to be receiving benefits and tax credits than men.

The social security system has a vital role to play in easing the impact of poverty on people and families. However, the welfare reform and austerity measures introduced have tended to limit the ability of the system to protect against poverty and as outlined many of these changes have had more negative impacts on women than men. The welfare and austerity changes have meant that those on the lowest incomes are more likely to have to resort to borrowing and debt to make ends meet. Borrowing and debt is far from gender neutral. As women's incomes are generally lower over their lifetimes this leaves them vulnerable to short-term financial problems or income

⁷⁹ Estimating the gender impact of tax and benefit changes, Richard Cracknell, Richard Keen, Commons Briefing Papers SN06758, December 2017

<http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06758/SN06758.pdf>

⁸⁰ The cumulative impact of tax and welfare reforms, Equality and Human Rights Commission, March 2018

<https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/cumulative-impact-tax-and-welfare-reforms>

⁸¹ Cumulative impact assessment of tax and social security reforms in Northern Ireland, NIHRC, November 2019

https://www.nihrc.org/uploads/publications/Final_CIA_report_Oct_2019.pdf

shocks making them more likely to have to rely on borrowing and debt often for essential items.

“I think the Universal Credit process is cruel. I was offered £1,400 for my Advance Payment. They have agreed to pause the repayments for me for a time but only once and they would not consider reducing them during Covid so I could afford to buy food for my children.”

“The Universal Credit five-week wait was horrendous. I sold my sofa and had to borrow as well. I got an Advance Payment but had to pay my rent since it didn’t get covered for the month when I changed from Income Support to Universal Credit so I was left with £50. It feels as though you’re being punished and just made to struggle when you most need the help.”

“Austerity needs to stop! The lowest income people in society should not have to pay for the mistakes of government.”

“Government need to do more for people who are working and struggling to make ends meet. People are working very hard and have 2 or 3 jobs and eventually bad health because of this.”

“The system causes more mental health issues – when people come off the phone they are ready to scream.”

“Government are treating people so badly – it is hitting the most vulnerable.”

“Living costs are up, the cost of everything is going up but benefits are not. But government just don’t care.”

Many women who are struggling financially on benefits and in low-income work are vulnerable to high-cost credit including illegal forms of lending. Often they have limited options to access cheaper forms of credit because of their low income. Some of the most vulnerable borrowers are forced into using illegal lending or loan sharking because of an urgent need for money. This often leads to a cycle of dependence on this type of lending that they find it hard to escape from.

Paramilitaries are known to be involved in loan sharking in Northern Ireland and this gives cause for concern in terms of the associated fear and violence that can

accompany this type of lending. This particularly impacts on those living on low incomes who are often forced into this type of lending and then can really struggle to meet these repayments putting them at increased risk of harassment and violence.

Research by Ulster University and the Consumer Council⁸² suggests that those involved in illegal money lending fall into two broad groups: paramilitaries and ‘regular’ members of the community. Respondents to this research agreed that money lenders in Northern Ireland must have some form of local influence or legitimacy, which may stem from a paramilitary connection, but must have the ability to carry out enforcement measures in order to settle or recoup the debt, including coercing debtors to facilitate criminal activity.

This research⁸³ also found that Universal Credit was repeatedly described as a driver for illegal lending particularly around the harm caused by the five-week wait and issues with short-term benefits loans that were repaid from future benefits. This ensured that benefit claimants were often short of the funds they needed to support their household leading them to look to other means of getting the money they needed.

Research by the Women’s Regional Consortium⁸⁴ on women and debt showed a number of examples of borrowing through loan sharks including paramilitaries and the fear of violence that accompanied this type of borrowing.

We believe that much more needs to be done to tackle the issue of illegal money lending and loan sharks in Northern Ireland. There is a need to divert vulnerable people from accessing borrowing through illegal lending by providing routes out of poverty and financial hardship. This includes more adequate support through the

⁸² Illegal Money Lending and Debt Project, Research Report of Findings, Ulster University and the Consumer Council, March 2020

[Illegal Money Lending Report.PDF \(consumercouncil.org.uk\)](https://www.consumer-council.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Illegal-Money-Lending-Report.pdf)

⁸³ Ibid

⁸⁴ Making Ends Meet: Women’s Perspectives on Access to Lending, Women’s Regional Consortium, February 2020

<https://womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Making-Ends-Meet-Womens-Perspectives-on-Access-to-Lending.pdf>

social security system to ensure that people have sufficient income to live decent, healthy lives without resorting to this type of debt and the fear of violence which accompanies it.

“If you don’t pay back you get your windows put in first. I heard a local woman got her windows put in for not paying back a loan.”

“You get your knees done if you don’t repay – there are so many things they can do.”

“They scare the life out of me [paramilitary lenders] but people have no other ways or means.”

Question 9: We want to understand whether there are any aspects of the treatment of perpetrators of violence against women and girls by the criminal justice system or other public services which reflect good practice, or which could be improved.

If perpetrators are not punished quickly and severely then women and girls will never feel safe and confident to report harassment and violence. As previously stated if sentences are too lenient it allows perpetrators to think they can carry out this type of behaviour with impunity.

We believe that the criminal justice system must do much more to deal with online violence, harassment and abuse. As technology becomes more advanced, playing an increasing role in our lives so too does the ability of abusers to terrorise their victims through online and tech abuse. This is a huge area with which the law has failed to keep up to date with. Much more needs to be done to provide protections against online harms which are a significant issue for women and girls. A report by Refuge⁸⁵ found that one in three women in the UK have experienced online abuse the equivalent of 11 million women.

⁸⁵ Unsocial Spaces, Refuge, October 2021
[Unsocial-Spaces-for-web.pdf \(refuge.org.uk\)](https://www.refuge.org.uk/unsocial-spaces-for-web.pdf)

Perpetrators are able to create anonymous accounts, close accounts and create new ones to escape being caught and to continue their abusive behaviours online.

The issue of online abuse against women is extremely concerning. It has prompted the creator of the internet, Sir Tim Berners-Lee, to say that *“the web is not working for women and girls.”*⁸⁶ He said that while the world has made important progress on gender equality he is *“seriously concerned that online harms facing women and girls – especially those of colour, from LGBTQ+ communities and other marginalised groups – threaten that progress.”* Sir Tim said that *“for many who are online, the web is simply not safe enough”* and that online abuse *“forces women out of jobs and causes girls to skip school, it damages relationships and leads to tremendous distress. Relentless harassment silences women and deprives the world of their opinions and ideas, with female journalists and politicians pushed off social media and bullied out of office.”*

Amnesty International published research on ‘Toxic Twitter’⁸⁷ which exposed how for many women, Twitter is a platform where violence and abuse against them flourishes, often with little accountability. As a company, Twitter is failing in its responsibility to respect women’s rights online by inadequately investigating and responding to reports of violence and abuse in a transparent manner. Women’s testimony in the research details the shocking nature of violence and abuse they are receiving on Twitter, including death threats, rape threats and racist, transphobic and homophobic abuse. Public figures, MPs and journalists are often particular targets, but people who aren’t in the public eye are also experiencing abuse, especially if they speak out about issues like sexism and use campaign hashtags.

There is a need to review rehabilitation programmes for perpetrators of violence against women and girls. Most perpetrators have learned behaviours or societal beliefs that increase their likelihood of violence against women and girls. Traditional

⁸⁶ Why the web needs to work for women and girls, Sir Tim Berners-Lee, March 2020
<https://webfoundation.org/2020/03/web-birthday-31/>

⁸⁷ Toxic Twitter – A Toxic Place for Women, Amnesty International, March 2018
[Toxic Twitter - A Toxic Place for Women - Amnesty International](#)

gender role beliefs and stereotypical attitudes of how men should behave make violence towards women and girls more likely. A personal history of abuse or exposure to it can mean that perpetrators find such actions acceptable and tolerable behaviour making it more likely to happen. These issues are not easy or quickly solved as they involve overturning long-held cultural and societal beliefs but unless they are tackled then violence against women and girls will continue despite the best efforts to minimise women and girls vulnerability to it.

Men who view women as equals are less likely to commit acts of harassment and violence towards women and girls. Rehabilitation programmes therefore need to be designed to change the way men think about women and the way they behave towards them. These must be designed with the organisations that have expertise in these issues.

Question 10: We want to understand whether there are any aspects of the experience of women and girls, or of men and boys, in the community, which you would like to draw to our attention in understanding violence against women and girls and how it can be combatted.

As we have previously stated throughout our response violence against women and girls is endemic throughout our society and requires widespread cultural change to make the necessary changes. There is a need for Government to understand just how widespread it is and to truly understand the impact on victims and women and girls more generally. This is best achieved by ensuring that victims are involved throughout the process and that their views and experiences are integral to work in this area.

It is impossible to separate out incidences of violence against women and girls from the issue of gender inequality and existing power imbalances within society. Gender inequality is the background to which violence against women and girls takes place. Rigid gender roles and harmful gender norms which perpetuate inequitable power relationships disadvantage women and are the root cause of violence against

women. Promoting and achieving gender equality is a critical element of the prevention of violence against women.

A gender-neutral policy-making approach exists in Northern Ireland and has prevented progress on tackling gender-based violence and misogyny. The issue of gender neutrality acts as a significant barrier to women's equality and major reforms are needed in order to make progress in this area.

It is important for men and boys to understand the impact of harassment and violence against women and girls. Some perpetrators do not understand the wider impacts of misogynistic behaviour and how they can add to a culture of fear for women and girls and limit their lives. There is a lack of understanding of how even low levels of everyday sexism have an impact. Men and boys need to understand the consequences of these actions not only on the victim but on the actions of women and girls in society more generally. Added to this there is a need to provide men and boys with the skills to take action on these issues so that intervening in these situations is normalised and they have the knowledge, vocabulary and courage to do this.

As a society we have to stop enabling aggressors. We have outlined throughout this response the need to educate men and boys through comprehensive, standardised RSE in schools from an early age and the need for wider training around relationships, consent and bystander intervention like that provided by the Raise Your Voice project – see section 2.12. In working with men and boys on these issues it can be more effective if information is absorbed passively and repeated over time rather than being directed at them. They are less likely to be defensive and may be more open to the information and learning this way.

It is important when looking at the issue of violence against women and girls that it is not looked at as a standalone issue. Violence against women and girls requires action across many areas and involves the work of many Government departments and Strategies which all must work together to achieve the end goal which is the eradication of this violence in our society. Violence against women and girls has

impacts in relation to health, education, justice, housing, employment and welfare. Unless all these services and departments are working together in a holistic way then it will not be possible to tackle this problem effectively. Joined-up services, partnership working and the availability of adequate resources to work effectively across departments is vital to ensure that victims are given the complete range of protections and help they need and live the rest of their lives to their full potential.

Violence against women and girls leads to high social and economic costs for women, their families and societies. Putting in place holistic protections and supports across a range of areas has huge potential for the wellbeing of victims preventing much pain, suffering and loss but it would also save money across a range of services.

It is important to ensure that this Strategy does not work in isolation from a range of other Strategies on inter-connected issues which have an impact on this area of work including the forthcoming Gender Equality, Anti-Poverty, Disability and LGBTQI+ Strategies and the Mental Health Strategy, Drug and Alcohol Strategy, to name but a few.

Violence against women and girls is a mental health issue. It can cause long-term physical and mental health problems. Even incidents of everyday sexism can cause women and girls to alter their behaviours, avoid going certain places and shrink their worlds and possibilities. It affects not just the women and girls involved but can impact on their families, children and communities. Many victims will suffer anxiety, fear and depression as well as more serious mental health issues including suicidal thoughts as a result of these harmful behaviours.

Very often the traumatic experiences of victims are dismissed, belittled as banter or “boys being boys” and even disbelieved. This has serious and severe impacts on the mental health of victims and gets in the way of their access to support and recovery from this trauma. There is a need to recognise the impact of violence against women and girls and for funding for specialist support to help them address

these issues. Mental health services are chronically underfunded and women's lived experiences of trauma are not accounted for enough in policy making.