

Women's Policy Group NI

COVID-19 FEMINIST RECOVERY PLAN

Gender-Based Violence

Contact: Rachel Powell

Women's Sector Lobbyist
rachel.powell@wrda.net

Contents

Introduction	3
Women and Girls in the Media, Rape Culture & Violence Against Women	4
<i>Violence Against Women</i>	4
<i>Domestic and Sexual Violence</i>	5
<i>Rape Myths and Rape Culture</i>	6
<i>Women in the Media</i>	7
Hate Crimes and Online Abuse	11
Conclusion	15

Introduction

A recent survey conducted by UN Women shows that 97% of women aged 18-24 in the UK have experienced sexual harassment, yet 96% of those who said they had been sexually harassed said they did not report the incident due to not believing that it would change anything.¹

Northern Ireland is the only part of the United Kingdom without a dedicated Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy in place. A petition organised by Women's Aid NI has had more than 20,000 signatures so far in support of introducing such a strategy.²

This briefing will summarise some of the key evidence and recommendations regarding gender-based violence from the WPG NI COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan, published in July 2020. The WPG NI Feminist Recovery Plan was created by the [Women's Policy Group Northern Ireland](#) (WPG), which is a platform for women working in policy and advocacy roles in different organisations to share their work and speak with a collective voice on key issues.³

The WPG Feminist Recovery Plan analyses the impact of COVID-19 on women and girls in Northern Ireland in terms of economic justice, health, social justice and cultural inequality. The Feminist Recovery plan advocates for a feminist recovery to COVID-19, in a way which tackles pre-existing gender inequalities. Our full Feminist Recovery Plan is available [here](#).



¹ UN Women (2021) "Prevalence and reporting of sexual harassment in UK public spaces: A [report](#) by the APPG for UN Women."

² Petition by Women's Aid NI '[A Call for a Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy in Northern Ireland](#)'

³ Please note, not all member organisations of the Women's Policy Group have specific policy positions on all the areas covered in the Feminist Recovery Plan. Therefore, individual experts from each of its member organisations contributed to the sections that cover their own areas of expertise.

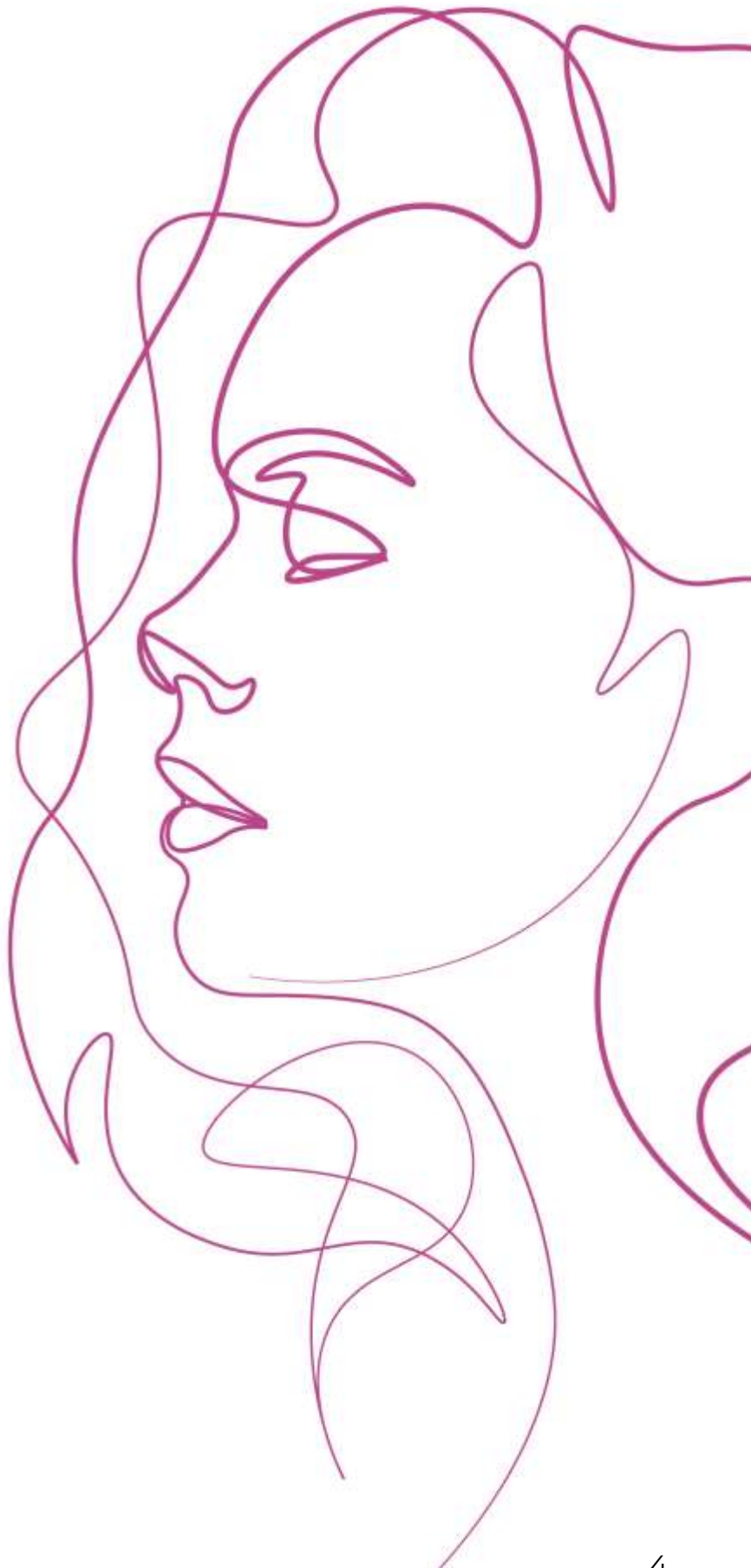
Women and Girls in the Media, Rape Culture & Violence Against Women

Violence Against Women

The NI Women's Policy Group (WPG) welcomes the proposed legislative changes regarding domestic abuse and violence both within the Northern Ireland Assembly and in Westminster Parliament. Activists, women's organisations and support providers have spent many years calling for adequate domestic abuse legislation in Northern Ireland. In the current global pandemic, domestic abuse and violence has sharply increased as many are put at greater risk due to the ongoing government-issued social distancing and lockdown measures.

Creating adequate domestic abuse and violence legislation could not be more pertinent than it is right now. Whilst the quick action to introduce Northern Ireland-specific legislation is to be welcomed, this legislation is now over three years old and it is essential that we learn from the lessons in other jurisdictions and ensure that the women's sector are included in the application and implementation of relevant legislation moving forward.

Our full evidence submission, with detailed recommendations relating to the content of the bill, and most significantly, what is missing, can be read [here](#).



Domestic and Sexual Violence

Between January 2020 and December 2020, there were 31, 848 domestic abuse incidents recorded in Northern Ireland - the highest since records began in 2004/05. In this same time period, domestic abuse crimes constituted almost 20% of all police recorded crime.⁴

Lockdowns have exacerbated domestic violence (“DV”) against women, with three deaths in Northern Ireland attributed to DV during the first three months of lockdown (March-May 2020).⁵ 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 counseling. They also require appropriate therapy and counseling services. Any person who self-identifies as a victim of sexual violence should be able to access services from therapists trained in trauma informed care and victim responses to sexual violence. These services should be provided within a timely manner and prioritised as a matter of urgency.

We recommend that specific funding is allocated for appropriate, safe and rapid therapeutic services to victims of domestic violence and sexual violence.



⁴ PSNI (2020) '[Domestic Abuse Incidents and Crimes Recorded by the PSNI 2020](#)'

⁵ McCormack, J. (April 2020) '[Coronavirus: Three domestic killings since lockdown began.](#)' BBC News.

Rape Myths and Rape Culture

The WPG welcome the publication of the Gillen Review Implementation Plan (June 2020). Many of the changes recommended in the Gillen Review would be transformative for the experience of reporting rape or other serious sexual offences, and since the Gillen review was commissioned by the state, there is an imperative to act upon its recommendations as soon as possible.

One specific recommendation of the Gillen Review was a public awareness campaign, funded by the state, to tackle rape myths and to counter misinformation and confusion on the issue of consent. However, according to the Implementation plan, this will not be carried out until 2022.

Before then, a public awareness campaign should begin in formal educational institutions, specifically schools and third level organisations, and such a programme must deal with issues around consent and boundaries, in an age-appropriate manner.

Sex and relationships education is currently dependent on individual schools who can choose who to invite to cover the topic and can do so in a way that does not effectively deal with these issues. In addition, they are sometimes entirely heteronormative, not covering LGBTQ+ relationships at all, and therefore not providing the necessary skills to an especially vulnerable demographic.

The Gillen Review Report contains over 200 recommendations that are wide-ranging and overwhelmingly welcomed by the women's movement in Northern Ireland. One of its key recommendations is Recommendation Number 18: "That the press and media should be party to a voluntary protocol governing how serious sexual offences are reported." This is especially true when reporting on rape myths.⁶ Gillen writes:

"Rape myths are a trial reality and can often form the basis of aggressive cross-examination and may attract the unreasonable thinking of jurors. Moreover, for all kinds of societal reasons, complainants often buy into these myths, blaming themselves. I regard them as potentially a major challenge to the concept of a fair trial."

⁶ Northern Ireland Department of Justice (2019) [Gillen Review](#)



Women in the Media

Sexism and the sexist portrayal of women and girls in the media remains a serious issue in Northern Ireland. Most visibly focused on women in public life, it impacts not just those women, but women and girls who are exposed to it. Research by Girlguiding UK shows that the single biggest reason listed by girls aged 11-16 that they are put off entering public life is because:

“Women leaders are criticised more than male leaders,” with the third largest percentage saying that “there is too much focus on how they look and not on what they do.”⁷

This demonstrates clearly the impact that this kind of media coverage has; while the women directly named may have developed a “thick skin,” the young women looking on will often exclude themselves for careers they would otherwise choose because of this scrutiny.

The same research from Girlguiding UK reports that young women are negatively influenced by advertising, in both traditional media and social media, that promotes certain beauty standards and encourages the use of cosmetic surgery, extremely restrictive dieting and similar methods including medically unsafe detox and diet products. With eating disorders on the rise and the damage that they can do known to medical professionals, this is something that needs to be strictly regulated for a number of different reasons.⁸

Further, media can be especially critical when considering the intersectional identities that people have, with trans women and women of colour particularly impacted by intense media scrutiny. **In addition to this, there are serious issues with the way the media report on sexual offences and on domestic abuse, violence and homicide.** Many headlines, in particular, mislead the reader and can reinforce myths around sexual and intimate partner violence.

Level Up campaigned to have guidelines accepted to prevent further trauma to victims and their families and to avoid sending the wrong message about the nature of intimate partner violence.⁹ While they were successful, there are still numerous instances of this occurring in the media and guidelines therefore need to be enforced more stringently.

⁷ Girlguiding UK (2019), '[Girls' attitudes survey](#)'

⁸ Marsh, S. (2019) "[Hospital admissions for eating disorders surge to highest in eight years](#)". The Guardian [article]

⁹ Petter, O. (2019) "[Feminist Group Wins Campaign to Change how Media Reports Domestic Abuse](#)". The Independent [article]

*Raise Your Voice*¹⁰ recommendations on media guidelines (endorsed by the WPG):

- Guidance must require reports to specify who they are quoting when quotations are used, particularly when they are quoting defence teams' characterisation of a complainant or complainant's behaviour.
- Guidance should encourage fact-based headlines, because merely using quotation marks around words does not necessarily convey to the reader that this is a person's opinion or a defence's argument.
- Guidance that encourages the centring of victims, particularly after a guilty verdict, as opposed to centring the wasted potential or the tribulations of the convicted sex offender.
- Guidelines requiring the clear identification of rape myths as rape myths, for example when a defence lawyer says "why didn't she shout or fight", a responsible publication will follow that reporting with the proviso that in fact that most rape victims do not shout or fight.
- The detailed reporting of the very few cases where somebody has been falsely accused of rape or sexual assault should always be balanced by accounting for how rare these cases actually are. Failure to do so fuels a dangerous and common myth that these kinds of false accusations are common.
- Endeavour to make clear the difference between a failure to prosecute or a failure to convict and a proven false accusation.
- In the case of online content, publications should actively and adequately monitor comments or close comment sections entirely. Publications have a responsibility with regards to the spreading of misinformation and the potential damage to the public as well as to the complainant in any given case.
- When reporting on sexual crimes and especially serious sexual crimes, helplines and helpful websites for victims and survivors should be included at the end of the piece.

Summary of Recommendations:

- * Begin a public awareness campaign as soon as possible on the importance of responsible reporting on sexual offences, including an awareness campaign targeted at formal education institutions.
- * Ensure all awareness raising programmes in schools are in line with CEDAW General Recommendation 35, with a focus on informing and educating individuals on consent, sexual harassment and victim blaming to dismantle the belief that women and girls are responsible for their own safety.

¹⁰ Raise Your Voice NI (2021) [[Website](#)]

- * We also recommend that a comprehensive, inclusive programme is developed on sex and relationships education, for all schools and third level institutions.
- * Ensure that effective measures are taken within the justice system to address high attrition and low conviction rates for sexual offences.
- * Ensure that Violence Against Women and Girls is being reported in a responsible manner across media platforms so as to discourage victim blaming and rape myths as laid out in article 17 of the Istanbul Convention.¹¹
- * Address issues with reporting gender-based violence and threats to eradicate practices of victim-blaming, perpetuating myths and suggestions that women's behaviour should change.¹²
- * Ensure that programmes and policies dealing with the elimination of exploitation, violence and abuse contain specific actions for disabled women.
- * Introduction of Stalking legislation
- * Introduction of non-fatal and fatal strangulation legislation
- * Recognition of Violence against Women and Girls and gender-based violence in line with the Istanbul Convention
- * Grant 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.
- * Review of the court systems in NI including criminal, civil and family courts
- * Introduce a Domestic Abuse Commissioner for Northern Ireland (already in post for England and Wales).
- * Secure funding for specialised services and a review of tendering and procurement in relation to domestic violence and abuse services.
- * Provide guidelines to employers on recognising the signs of abusive behaviour.
- * Fully funded programme to raise public awareness of domestic abuse.
- * Tackle heteronormative assumptions and increase awareness of domestic violence within the context of LGBT+ people,
- * Recognition of disproportionate impact on rural women, areas of paramilitary control, migrant women, LGBT+ groups, disabled women etc.,
- * An independent statutory review of family courts in NI to assess how they deal with domestic abuse cases to work towards consistent outcomes across NI.
- * More rigorous and innovative evidence collection approaches to support successful prosecutions including:
 - Use of the Domestic Violence register showing the number of times police have been called to the house, to build a picture of the frequency and

¹¹ Council of Europe (2011) [Istanbul Convention](#)

¹² For example, following the misogynistic attacks on three women in South Belfast in October 2020, [PSNI advice](#) was centred around the need for women to stay indoors and not go out alone at night; rather than on the need for targeted action against misogynistic hate crime in Northern Ireland.

- nature of abuse (in line with CEDAW Recommendation 35 on gender-based violence),
- Use of PSNI intelligence and evidence gathered from incidents to build a picture of coercive control as a course of conduct,
 - * Use of body worn camera evidence from the scene on each occasion to effectively demonstrate the impact and seriousness of abuse. In parts of England where body worn cameras have been rolled out, there is a marked increase in the severity of sentences for domestic violence related crimes.
 - * NI has not fully implemented an Independent Domestic Violence Advisor service nine years after its recommendation; any service should be specialised and not gender-neutral and consideration should be given to the introduction of children's IDVAs and making IDVAs mandatory in police stations.
 - * Ensure there is effective reporting and monitoring of all section 75 groups by the PSNI to ensure the diverse needs of victims from various minority groups can be met.
 - * Address re-offending (there is currently a lack of an adequate framework for prevention, rehabilitation and restorative justice in NI).
 - * Introduce guidelines for sentencing for coercive control,
 - * Introduce guidelines for measuring non-physical harm,
 - * Ensure victims' statements cannot be weaponised by prosecutors.
 - * Provide guarantees that women with uncertain immigration status can seek justice without their cases being reported to the Home Office.
 - * Create an inter-departmental approach for the implementation and creation of other legislation with the collaboration of the third sector.
 - * Provide guidance and support to frontline violence against women organisations and refuges to the needs of disabled women in danger of domestic abuse; including the communication and access needs of disabled women and reasonable adjustments,
 - * Create greater flexibility in the provision of care packages, particularly for disabled women trapped in social isolation and in danger from Domestic Abuse,
 - * Support particular provisions of support for disabled women in both the Domestic Abuse Bill (for example, the StaySafe East amendments) and through specific support in any miscellaneous bill to follow the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill.

Hate Crimes and Online Abuse

With the recent publication of Judge Marrinan's Northern Ireland Hate Crime Review,¹³ it is vital that elected representatives take rapid action to create updated legislation to address the growing crisis of increased hate crimes and online abuse towards women and minority groups. Tackling hate crime should be an immediate priority for the Executive moving forward out of COVID-19. The Women's Policy Group submitted a detailed Hate Crime Legislation Review consultation response which you can read [here](#).

While the WPG welcomes gender being recognised as a protected characteristic in Hate Crime legislation, it will continue to call for; misogyny and transphobia to be added as hate crime characteristics; legislation to account for intersecting identities; the recognition of the harm caused by online abuse towards women; a full review of outdated and absent legislation in Northern Ireland relating to hate crime, and more mass investment into training and education throughout the judicial system and society as a whole.

There were 1,220 reports of online violence towards women in Northern Ireland between 2015-2020 (the total could be even higher than the figures suggest as not all crimes specified the gender of the victim). In 2017-18 the PSNI saw the highest annual figure ever recorded with 433 women feeling so threatened they reported to the police – 30 of these involved death threats with another 394 constituting harassment.¹⁴



¹³ Judge Marrinan (2020) '[Hate Crime Legislation in Northern Ireland: Independent Review](#)'

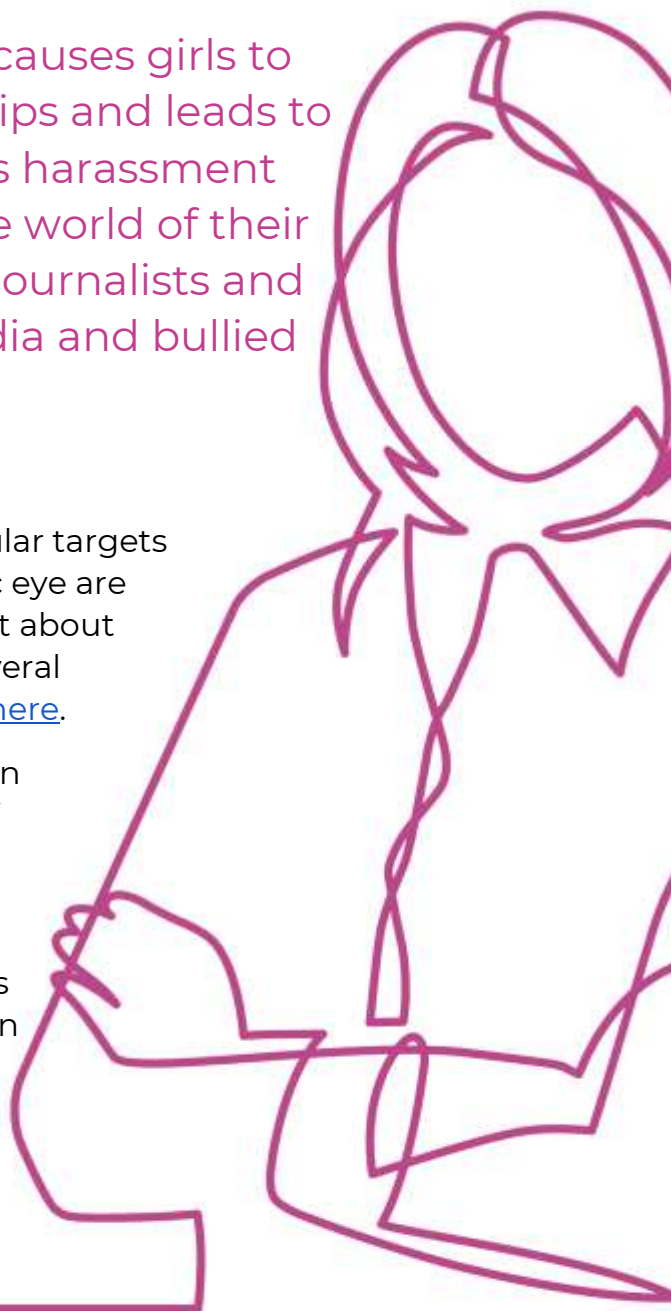
¹⁴ ITV News (2018) '[Reports of Online Violence Towards Women in NI](#)' [article]

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.”¹⁵ Berners-Lee stated 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.” Berners-Lee 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.”

Public figures, MPs and journalists are often particular targets of online abuse, 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. Several recommendations were made and can be viewed [here](#).

In the independent review of hate crime in Northern Ireland, Judge Marrinan acknowledged the issue of hateful abuse online as part of this Review, citing the abuse that many women politicians both in Westminster and locally in the Northern Ireland Assembly have to endure often on a daily basis. This is a significant issue which has led to the resignation of a number of women MPs in recent years with obvious impacts for gender equality and ensuring that the voices of women in politics are heard.



¹⁵ Sir Tim Berners-Lee (2020) “[Why the web needs to work for women and girls](#)” Web Foundation.

Online abuse of some of Northern Ireland's female politicians has prompted calls to establish a cross-party working group on misogyny. Cara Hunter, SDLP MLA and Deputy Mayor of Derry has been subjected to near-constant "sexual and violent messages and threatening voicemails." DUP MLA Carla Lockhart said that online abuse was something she had become accustomed to. She explained:

“Any time there’s a picture of me on Twitter, no matter what it’s connected with, I will have someone picking on my appearance.”

It is important to have the best people involved in Government representing their communities. It is not possible to achieve this if women feel excluded from these positions due to this type of misogyny and online hate. Women make up half the population and their rights and interests cannot be adequately protected unless women are involved in positions of power and in Government. Misogynistic behaviour of this kind limits women's representation and visibility not just in politics but in other spheres and it is therefore vital that this is tackled.

Online abuse against women and girls has specific implications, and often has a specific ferocity and disproportionate volume, for racialised women, LGBT+ women, and disabled women. In a wider UK context, the MP who received the most online abuse during the 2017 election was Diane Abbott, the first black woman to be elected MP.¹⁶ Further, online abuse against trans women and girls has skyrocketed in the past number of years, fuelled by animosity in the media, lack of political support, and lack of accountability for multinational social media companies.



¹⁶ Amnesty International (2017) '[Unsocial Media: Tracking Twitter Abuse against Women MPs](#)', Amnesty Insights

Summary of Recommendations:

- * Introduce an adequate working definition of hate crime,
- * Create a consolidated hate crime legislation model for Northern Ireland,
- * Replacing the enhanced sentencing model with the statutory aggravation model,
- * Apply the statutory aggravation model to all protected characteristics,
- * Introduce specific guidelines and extensive programmes of training and education on any new model of hate crime legislation; including what the protected characteristics are and the consequences of committing a hate crime,
- * Recognise gender as a protected characteristic through specifically treating misogyny as a standalone hate crime,
- * Recognise transgender identity a protected characteristic,
- * Recognise intersex identity as a protected characteristic,
- * Create a legal framework that recognises the importance of intersectionality to adequately reflect the experiences and identities of victims and motivations of perpetrators,
- * Require the court to state if offences are aggravated, reflect this on court records and outline the difference the aggravation had on sentencing,
- * Record aggravated offences on criminal justice records,
- * Create a statutory legal definition of "hostility,"
- * Add equivalent provisions to Sections 4, 4A and 5 of the Public Order Act 1986 to the Public Order (Northern Ireland) Order 1987,
- * Include all protected groups under the stirring up provisions of the Public Order (NI) Order 1987,
- * Recognise the severe harm caused by online hate speech against women,
- * Update and amend existing legislation dealing with public order, malicious communications and harassment to reflect the changing nature of communications due to social media,
- * Ensure online harm is fully covered within hate crime legislation,
- * Strengthen law relating to public authorities tackling hate expressions in public spaces,
- * Implement victim-led restorative justice programmes in collaboration with community-based organisations,
- * Commission extensive research specific to Northern Ireland to tackle the under-reporting of hate crime and mistrust from minorities in reporting services,
- * Adequately fund and expand the Hate Crime Advocacy Scheme,
- * Restrict the press reporting of hate crime victims where appropriate,
- * Create measures for legislative consolidations and scrutiny.

Conclusion

This briefing has highlighted some of the key evidence and recommendations regarding gender-based violence in Northern Ireland from the WPG NI COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan.

All Government Departments, but particularly the Department of Justice, have a responsibility to protect women and girls in Northern Ireland from the injustices they currently face on the basis of their gender. It is crucial that Departments work together to tackle the issues raised in this report.

Further information on the issues raised in this briefing can be found in the full WPG Feminist Recovery Plan, which can be accessed [here](#).

Women's
Policy Group NI

*For any questions or queries regarding
the WPG Feminist Recovery Plan:*

Contact: Rachel Powell

Women's Sector Lobbyist
rachel.powell@wrda.net