

Women's Policy Group NI

WPG Letter to All Executive Office Ministers – Urging Executive Approval for the Introduction of the Justice Bill as a matter of Urgency

26th May 2021

Dear Executive Office Minister,

I am writing on behalf of the [Women's Policy Group NI](#) to urge you and your party colleagues to support the introduction of the Justice Bill to the NI Assembly as **a matter of urgency**. The Women's Policy Group has lobbied and campaigned extensively on a number of issues relating to gender-based violence, which the Justice Bill will go some way to address.

Given the long history, and vast rise of violence against women and girls throughout the pandemic, we would like to urge the Northern Ireland Executive to approve the introduction of the Justice Bill this week to ensure that this Bill can be moved to the next stage and be legislated for in this Assembly mandate. We are deeply concerned that if this Bill is not progressed this week, many victims and survivors in Northern Ireland will be afforded less protections than other jurisdictions at a time when gender-based violence should be addressed as a matter of urgency.

This Bill will include necessary provisions and legislative reforms to enhance legal protections and recourse for both child and adult victims of sexual offences and exploitation.

Specifically, this Bill would address a number of priority provisions that the WPG and our membership organisations have campaigned extensively on including:

- Measures to increase public safety and help create a more efficient and effective justice system,
- Provisions to address a number of priority issues including provisions arising from the Gillen review to exclude the public from all serious sexual offence hearings and to introduce anonymity for defendants pre-charge,
- Removing the “rough sex” defence,
- Provisions to give effect to the outcome of a review of the law on child sexual exploitation and sexual offences against children, to include live streamed images in the definition of exploitation for sexual purposes and to create a new offence of adults masquerading as children online,
- A new offence of up-skirting and down-blousing alongside a number of other measures to ensure the law operates as intended in these areas,

Given the severity of the crimes included in this Bill, and the ongoing campaigning from the women's sector on many of the issues included within the Bill, it would be extremely disappointing if Executive approval is not reached, and the legislation cannot progress as a result.

Due to the collapse of the Assembly for three years, it has not been possible to introduce this necessary legislation before now. With limited time remaining in the current mandate, it is crucial that the NI Executive provides approval for the introduction of the Justice Bill **this week**. The content of this Bill was agreed in November 2020, and the Women's Sector and many other sectors have worked tirelessly in responding to public consultations, providing evidence to committees and raising public awareness on these issues in this time, therefore we urge you to take this urgent action to introduce this Bill before it is too late.

Victims and survivors in Northern Ireland have waited too long for these necessary legal protections contained in the Justice Bill and we share concerns that if it is not approved this week, it may not be possible to pass the Bill in this current mandate.

For all of the reasons outlined above, we ask you to approve this Bill to the next stage.

If you have any questions or queries regarding this message from the Women's Policy Group, please do not hesitate to get in touch.

Kind regards,

Rachel Powell

[She/Her]

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