

# **NI Women's Policy Group Response to Home Affairs Committee Inquiry into Spiking January 2022**

## **1. Introduction**

The Women's Policy Group (WPG) 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. It is made up of women from trade unions, grassroots women's organisations, women's networks, feminist campaigning organisations, LGBT+ organisations, migrant groups, support service providers, NGOs, human rights and equality organisations and individuals. Over the years, this important network has ensured that there is good communication between politicians, policy makers and women's organisations on the ground.

The WPG uses our group expertise to lobby to influence the development and implementation of policies affecting women. The WPG is endorsed as a coalition of expert voices that advocates for women in Northern Ireland on a policy level. This group has collective expertise on protected characteristics and focus on identifying the intersectional needs of all women; in line with international human rights mechanisms.

The organisations represented in this response have extensive experience and expertise through working with a range of groups impacted by various forms of violence against women, including; women, girls, trans men, non-binary people, disabled people, bisexual and lesbian women, victims of domestic abuse, victims of rape and sexual assault, rural women, those with dependants, migrant women and more.

If you have any questions or queries about this consultation response, or would like the WPG and the relevant membership organisations to discuss recommendations in this response further, please contact Rachel Powell, Women's Sector Lobbyist, at [rachel.powell@wrda.net](mailto:rachel.powell@wrda.net).

## **1.2 Endorsements**

This response has been developed and/or endorsed by the following Women's Policy Group organisations:

- Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA)
- Raise Your Voice NI
- Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN)

- Northern Ireland Women's European Platform (NIWEP)
- Women's Aid NI
- Northern Ireland Women's Budget Group (NIWBG)
- Rape Crisis Northern Ireland
- Women's Support Network (WSN)
- Women's Regional Consortium (WRC)

## 2. The prevalence of spiking

Rates of spiking across the UK have increased by 108% in the last three years (Sky News, 2021)<sup>1</sup>. Spiking primarily takes place in bars, house parties and clubs, where the majority of those in attendance are young people. Although spiking is more likely to take place at these locations, spiking can occur anywhere and at any time. Spiking can include spiking someone's drink or injecting someone with drugs or chemicals.

Although we know that spiking is a widespread issue across the UK, victim under-reporting and failure of public authorities to properly investigate reports of this crime mean that there is a considerable lack of data on the true scale and extent of spiking.<sup>2</sup> Existing data shows that women are more likely than men to be victims of spiking. Recent research by YouGov shows that:

“One in nine women (11%) say they have been a victim of drink spiking. Another 8% say a family member has been spiked, while a further 12% have friends who have had drinks spiked in the past. In total, a third of women have either been spiked themselves or know someone who has.”<sup>3</sup>

Research by Dr Suzanne Swan (University of South Carolina) found that 79% of victims of spiked drinks are women (Global Citizen, 2021)<sup>4</sup>. This study also showed that women were more likely

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<sup>1</sup> Sky News (2021) 'Incidents of spiking double in three years, official figures show' Available at: <https://news.sky.com/story/incidents-of-spiking-double-in-three-years-official-figures-show-11501371>

<sup>2</sup> The Conversation (2021) 'Drink spiking: Why so little is still known about this horrifying trend' Available at: <https://theconversation.com/drink-spiking-why-so-little-is-still-known-about-this-horrifying-trend-170421>

<sup>3</sup> You Gov (2021) 'One in nine women say they have had their drink spiked' Available at: <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/lifestyle/articles-reports/2021/11/18/one-nine-women-have-been-drink-spiked>

<sup>4</sup> Global Citizen (2018) 'Drink spiking in the UK has increased by 108% in just three years' Available at: <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/drink-spiking-uk-britain-alcohol-police/>

than men to experience negative outcomes, as a result of being spiked. For example, they were more likely to ‘black out’ or be sexually assaulted (Swan et. al., 2016)<sup>5</sup>.

### 3. How spiking should be prevented and addressed

As previously mentioned, spiking is a crime that disproportionately impacts women, and therefore should be treated by government and public authorities as a gendered crime with gendered impacts. Spiking is one of many forms of violence against women and girls that continues to stifle progress on gender equality in the UK. Until women are safe to participate fully and equally in society, gender equality will not be achieved.

Current and past efforts to address the issue of spiking have proven to be insufficient, evidenced by the increasing rates of spiking across the UK. Presently the effectiveness of partnership working between police and other authorities varies widely. The most promising initiatives seem to stem from local authorities that have taken the initiative to appoint night-time economy advisors and to fund pilot programmes<sup>6</sup>. These initiatives hold a great deal of promise and should be monitored carefully for effectiveness and to see what lessons can be learned for elsewhere.

We must also be mindful that spiking may be most commonly reported in large cities, which in turn may have the resources to launch such programmes. However, incidents of spiking also happen in small towns and rural areas, which may present further issues for victims and survivors who may be physically distant from places where they can access medical attention or counselling, such as hospitals or rape crisis services. Victims of spiking in rural areas can also face additional barriers to reporting this crime, particularly if the community is small and the attacker is widely known.

Guidance used to train, educate and support those involved in handling incidents of spiking is, at present, focused primarily on putting the onus on people to “protect” themselves and their drinks<sup>7</sup>. Information materials, such as those focused on spiking, are often spread widely among the general public (and often rely on the community for its messaging and spread). This means that they can be easily “gamed” by those who practice spiking. If perpetrators know what steps people are taking to keep themselves safe, they can work out ways around those steps. In addition, they may have

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<sup>5</sup> Swan, S. C. et al. (2017) ‘Just a Dare or Unaware? Outcomes and Motives of Drugging (“Drink Spiking”) Among Students at Three College Campuses’ *Psychology of Violence*, Vol. 7 (2), pp 253-264. Available at: <https://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/releases/vio-vio0000060.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Local Gov (2021) ‘New partnership will roll out anti-spiking tests across Greater Manchester’ Available at: <https://www.localgov.co.uk/New-partnership-will-roll-out-anti-spiking-tests-across-Greater-Manchester/53243>

<sup>7</sup> Talk to Frank (2021) ‘Spiking – top tips to stay safe’ Available at: <https://www.talktofrank.com/news/spiking>

the effect of encouraging victims to hold themselves responsible for what has happened to them, believing that they have not been careful enough.

For these reasons, it is vital that there is:

1. A dedicated awareness programme on spiking. This should be specific to certain areas of work, such as nightclub security staff, A&E staff and paramedics, and also generalised for the public. It should be developed in consultation with charities and service providers such as Rape Crisis.
2. This awareness programme must be firm and unequivocal in placing responsibility for spiking on those who engage in this behaviour, and never on individuals to prevent this from happening to them. This is not just because blaming oneself leads to delayed reporting or no reporting at all, and this has a corresponding impact on the chances of catching and prosecuting perpetrators and therefore keeping the public safe, but also because doing so feeds into a victim blaming narrative that has a corrosive impact on the mental health of survivors and indeed on the faith of the general public in the justice system.<sup>8</sup>
3. A corresponding training programme directed specifically at those who may be present at locations vulnerable to spiking incidents, such as nightclubs and bars. Reports from victims of spiking often refer to people being presumed to be drunk and removed from a venue, making them even more vulnerable. This should form part of a wider training programme for staff who already undergo training, and could sit alongside bystander intervention and de-escalation training as part of the arsenal of security staff.

Victims face several barriers to reporting spiking incidents and obtaining treatment and support. These can include:

- Fear of not being believed or taken seriously
- Embarrassment or feelings of shame
- Threats by the perpetrator
- Perception that police response will be limited and ineffective

One of the barriers that must be overcome is the perception that there is little police can do to pursue an incident if spiking itself cannot be proven. Because there is a window of time in which spiking can be demonstrated in clinical tests, many victims do not report at all. When reports are made, police must commit to pursuing these incidents with all the resources available to them; the potential difficulties of prosecution or conviction should not alter the investigative process and there should be dedicated training for police who respond to such reports, covering in detail the potentially traumatised victims who may not remember any of what happened after they were spiked, or whose memories may be fragmented, not linear, or unclear.

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<sup>8</sup> Victim-blaming means putting the responsibility on victims to prevent the spiking, rather than holding perpetrators accountable for their actions.

Government has an important role to play in tackling spiking. To date, successive Governments have taken a rather hands-off approach to discussing this particular kind of crime. Where spiking results in sexual assault, rape or physical assault, victims have struggled to be taken seriously and while some of this is the responsibility of police forces and others to whom they have reported, such responses should be lead from the top. The Government needs to demonstrate its commitment to tackling this issue by:

- Consulting with experts in the field to design training programmes and an awareness campaign
- Properly funding such an awareness campaign and being prepared for a potential increase in reports because of its effectiveness
- The creation of training for police officers to be rolled out across all areas of the UK after a pilot programme
- Funding the creation of a similarly focused but specialised training for emergency responders, nightclub security, bar staff and more to allow them to respond safely and responsibly in the moment.

#### 4. International Mechanisms and Standards

Northern Ireland is currently the only part of the UK without a specific strategy to recognise and combat violence against women and girls. Under CEDAW's General Recommendation 35 on gender-based violence, it is stated that violence against women<sup>9</sup>:

‘Occurs in all spaces and spheres of human interaction, whether public or private, including in the contexts of 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.’

State parties are required to pursue by all appropriate means, and without delay, a policy of eliminating discrimination against women, including gender-based violence. This also requires the engagement of the private sector in efforts to eradicate all forms of gender-based violence against women.

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<sup>9</sup> 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](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW/C/GC/35&Lang=en)

Further, in the 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, Scotland and Wales, 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.’<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, 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.’<sup>11</sup>

It is worth noting that the UK Government is the State party responsible for meeting these international obligations, and that the UK Government has signed, but not yet ratified the Istanbul Convention which aims to prevent all forms of violence against women, protect those who experience it and prosecute perpetrators<sup>12</sup>.

## 5. Concluding remarks

The NI Women’s Policy Group considers spiking to be an extremely serious and highly prevalent crime that disproportionately impacts women. Spiking is one of many forms of violence against women and girls that continues to plague our society and stifle progress on gender equality.

Effective partnership between the police and other authorities and effective measures to prevent spiking are crucial to addressing this crime. Victims of spiking face several significant barriers to reporting these crimes and also face barriers to obtaining treatment and support, following an incident of spiking. These barriers must be directly addressed by the Government when considering how best to tackle the issue of spiking in the UK.

*ENDS*

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<sup>10</sup> 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](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW%2fC%2f%20GBR%2fCO%2f8&Lang=en)

<sup>11</sup> *ibid* (n8), para 30(b).

<sup>12</sup> 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>

For any questions or queries relating to this submission, please contact:

- Rachel Powell, Women's Sector Lobbyist, Women's Resource and Development Agency at [rachel.powell@wrda.net](mailto:rachel.powell@wrda.net) or
- Elaine Crory, Good Relations Coordinator at [elaine.crory@wrda.net](mailto:elaine.crory@wrda.net).