

*"Just a fact of life
being a woman in Northern Ireland"*

Violence Against Women and Girls in Northern Ireland:

NI Women's Policy
Group Research
Findings

April 2022

Contact:

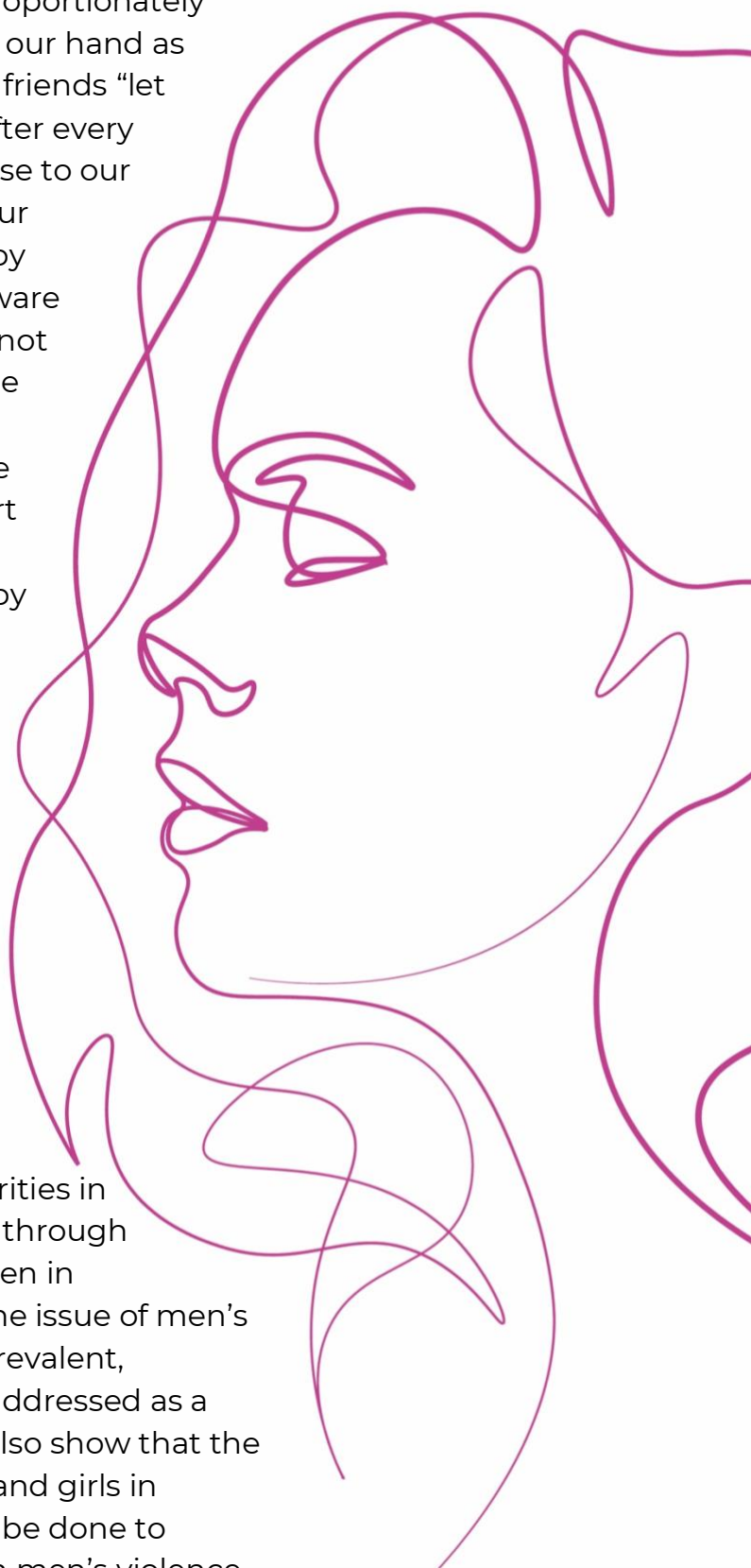
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Women's
Policy Group NI

Foreword

Anecdotally, women know that we face threats to our safety on a daily basis and that these threats disproportionately come from men. We hold keys in our hand as we walk home alone, we text our friends “let me know when you get home” after every night out, and we hold stories close to our hearts about times when we or our loved ones have been impacted by violence. Although women are aware of this reality, until now, we have not had robust local data to reflect the lived experiences of women in Northern Ireland in regards to the violence that they face. This report will highlight findings from pioneering research, conducted by the Women’s Policy Group, into violence against women and girls in Northern Ireland.

The title of this report comes from a quote by one of our survey respondents, who described men’s violence against women and girls as “just a fact of life being a woman in Northern Ireland.” This highlights how normalised this violence has become as a result of inaction by public authorities in tackling it. The findings obtained through this research reiterate what women in Northern Ireland already know: the issue of men’s violence in our society is highly prevalent, incredibly harmful and must be addressed as a matter of urgency. The findings also show that the current system is failing women and girls in Northern Ireland and more must be done to protect and safeguard them from men’s violence.



Comments from the Women's Sector Lobbyist

The Women's Sector in Northern Ireland has been campaigning for many years against the endemic levels of men's violence against women and girls in Northern Ireland. Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) has consistently been deprioritised in the Northern Ireland Assembly, as political instability and divisions take focus instead. For too long, women and girls have been harassed, assaulted, abused and murdered in Northern Ireland without any meaningful action being taken by our Executive to address the widespread levels of misogyny in our society, which often motivates these crimes.

It took until 2021 for the Northern Ireland Executive to even agree that we should have a Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy; many years after strategies were developed, launched and relaunched in our neighbouring jurisdictions. We have waited long enough and cannot continue to fail women and girls in Northern Ireland by affording them less protections than elsewhere, especially as Northern Ireland was deemed the most dangerous place in Europe to be a woman,

given our shockingly high levels of femicide. We don't just need more strategies and legislation, we need a widespread cultural change in our society that has normalised violence against women and girls.

The voices of the 1,065 women in this report are evidence that women and girls in Northern Ireland want and deserve change now. I want to thank all of the women who shared their views and stories with us. We sincerely hope that our political representatives will take this evidence and your lived experiences to enact meaningful change.

I also want to thank the many members of the Women's Policy Group, and broader women's sector in Northern Ireland, who have been working extensively to amplify the voices of women and girls as we work together to try and eradicate VAWG in our society. The findings within this report are absolutely clear and we need to take urgent and radical action to address violence against women and girls.

Rachel Powell
Women's Sector Lobbyist
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Introduction

About the Women's Policy Group



The Northern Ireland 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, LGBTQI+ organisations, migrant groups, support service providers, NGOs, human rights and equality organisations and individuals.

Over the years this important network has ensured there is good communication between politicians, policy makers and women's organisations on the ground. The WPG is endorsed as a group that advocates on behalf of women of Northern Ireland on a policy level and we use our group expertise to lobby to influence the development and implementation of policies affecting women. This group has collective expertise on protected characteristics and focus on identifying the intersectional needs of all women.

About the Research

This research was conducted to inform the WPG's written response to the Executive Office (TEO) Equally Safe: Violence Against Women and Girls Call for Views. This was to ensure that the voices of women were central to our response and to the development of a robust Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Strategy. Women can often find government websites, surveys, consultations and calls for views to be inaccessible. Therefore, by conducting our own primary research, relating to the questions within TEO's call for views, we were able to reach women that would not usually engage with government surveys.

1000+
responses
from women
in NI

This primary research consisted of an anonymous online survey and a one-to-one interview. In response to the WPG Call for Views survey, the Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA) were approached by Beth (not her real name) who offered to share her experiences with violence against women as part of this research. An Independent Contractor for WRDA conducted this interview and used it to develop an anonymous case study highlighting Beth's experiences of domestic abuse during the pandemic.

A word of thanks

Our anonymous survey received 1065 responses from women across different demographics in Northern Ireland. We would like to sincerely thank every single woman who took the time to respond to this survey and engaged with us in this research. This high response rate speaks to the strong desire that women have to share their stories and see action being taken on issues relating to men's violence. We would particularly like to thank Beth (not her real name) who shared her story of domestic abuse with us through a one-to-one interview for the purposes of this research.

Before presenting the methodology and findings from our research, we would like to first share Beth's story.



Case Study



Case Study

Beth's Story

Trigger Warning: Mention of domestic violence and self-harm

"You're told to report domestic violence and then you're thinking, well, I can understand why people don't because look what happens."

Beth became homeless as a result of domestic abuse perpetrated by her ex-husband. This abuse continued for several years and took many forms including physical, psychological, online and financial abuse. Once Beth became separated from her ex-husband, he took ownership of their house and car, leaving Beth homeless in the midst of the pandemic. **Beth lived in a homeless hostel for ten months while working as a frontline NHS worker.**

Throughout her marriage, Beth worked three jobs to financially support her and her ex-husband who did not work and was in considerable debt. Despite this, Beth's ex-husband controlled the couple's finances and spent most of their disposable income on drugs and alcohol. **Beth's ex-husband would lock her in her room, physically attack her and also attack her dogs.** The violence came to a head in spring 2020 when Beth's ex-husband attacked her and caused damage to their house. Beth told her ex-husband not to return to the house, but a few days later he broke in and attacked her and her dogs, leaving them with serious injuries. Beth called the police who removed him from the house, reinforced the windows, alarmed the house, and installed floodlights to prevent any further break-ins.

Despite these interventions, Beth's ex-husband continued to stalk and harass her. Due to the high level of threat against her, **the police advised Beth to wear a body camera, change her work patterns and change her travel routes regularly.** Beth acquired two non-molestation orders which her ex-husband repeatedly broke, forcing her to continuously take time off work to attend court. Beth's ex-husband was eventually charged with a two-year suspended sentence and Beth was granted a one-year restraining order, requiring annual renewal. Beth has little faith that the restraining order will be effective as the non-molestation orders did little to prevent the stalking and harassment by her ex-husband.

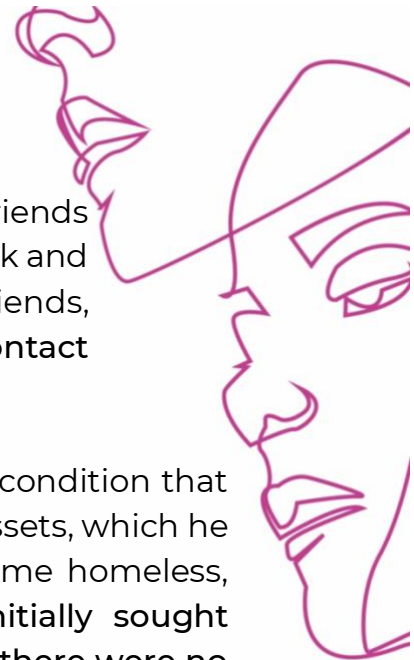
Beth became isolated from her friends as a result of the domestic abuse. Beth's ex-husband subjected her to online abuse by posting confidential and sensitive information about her and their court proceedings on Facebook in an attempt to humiliate and discredit her. He also publicly

accused Beth of lying about the abuse, causing many of her friends to turn against her. This led to Beth deactivating her Facebook and social media. As Beth and her ex-husband shared mutual friends, this caused tension within their friend group and **Beth lost contact with many of them as a result.**

Beth's ex-husband would only agree to a separation on the condition that he was granted ownership of their house and other shared assets, which he sold to repay outstanding debts. This caused Beth to become homeless, forcing her to seek emergency accommodation. **Beth initially sought accommodation in a women's refuge for abuse victims but there were no available spaces due to increased demand** and limited resources during the pandemic. Beth was then offered an apartment by the Housing Executive in north Belfast, but was told two hours before moving in that the apartment was no longer available. The only other option for Beth was to move into a homeless hostel.

Beth is a Catholic and was told by the Housing Executive to move into a homeless hostel located in a loyalist estate, far away from her family and friends. This hostel housed criminals released on bail, people with severe mental health issues and many homeless people struggling with addiction. **Beth was one of the only women in the hostel and one of the only Catholics.** Beth faced intimidation by hostel residents and others from the estate as a result of being a Catholic in a predominantly loyalist area. Beth said that, "When I walked up the street, all the women in the street used to come out and stand at the door and stare at me... because they know I'm a Catholic and I'm from the hostel, so they think I'm a criminal."

Beth's apartment was unsafe for residency as it was unsanitary and had a permanent foul smell, compromising her physical and mental wellbeing. **Beth was "terrorised" in the hostel and experienced harassment, intimidation and assault from the other residents.** For example, Beth was punched in the face and knocked to the ground during a police evacuation of the hostel. Beth was also harassed by a male resident who wore a balaclava and had a criminal record of domestic violence. This resident would wait outside her apartment in the mornings when she left for work and be there in the evenings when she returned. He also self-harmed outside her apartment and spat blood across her front door.



Hostel residents struggling with addiction would frequently post inappropriate items through Beth's letterbox and press her buzzer throughout the night. The hostel was regularly raided by police wearing riot gear who would break into her apartment during the night searching for criminals. There were frequent stabbings and fights in the hostel which meant that police and ambulances were regularly called to the site. **Beth could rarely sleep through the night, despite having to wake up at 6am for work every morning.** Beth continued to work two jobs for the NHS throughout her time in the hostel, which meant that she was not entitled to free accommodation and had to pay £630 per month to live there.

The domestic abuse Beth experienced has had long-term impacts on her employment, health, social life and finances. Once Beth left the hostel, she suffered from a breakdown which left her unable to work and in need of specialised mental health support. Before the abuse, Beth had never experienced mental health issues but now suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and severe anxiety, causing her to have frequent nightmares and fear about leaving the house. Beth is currently on an 18-month waiting list to see a psychiatrist and takes sedation medication to manage her symptoms until she can get an appointment.

Beth's experiences point to the necessity of adequately funding women's refuges so that no survivor of domestic abuse is left homeless after leaving an abusive relationship. Beth felt that although she was a victim of abuse, she was being punished by public services after reporting it. Beth explained, "I was kind of getting punished for reporting him, getting punished for taking him to court, getting punished for being a frontline worker... in the middle of COVID and having to go to a homeless hostel. Like a lot of things could've changed... they [public services] could've done a lot of things differently."

In terms of how public services deal with abuse victims, Beth believes **"there has to be a plan in place to keep women safe...there just needs to be more support."** This involves signposting victims to relevant support services and providing them with adequate and appropriate healthcare support and accommodation.

Methodology



Methodology

Our anonymous online survey included a range of quantitative and qualitative questions focusing on the scope, scale and prevalence of violence against women and girls in Northern Ireland. The WPG worked together to develop a webpage and a short survey for women to respond anonymously with their views on certain aspects of violence against women and girls.

This survey opened on Thursday 20th January 2022 and remained open for 25 days until Monday 14th February 2022. Whilst we would have preferred to have this survey open for at least 12 weeks, in line with good practice guidelines on public engagement, this was not possible due to the short eight-week timeframe given by The Executive Office (TEO), Department of Justice (DOJ) and Department of Health (DOH), in relation to the call for views on the VAWG strategy and Domestic Abuse and Sexual Abuse Strategy.

In the past, WPG surveys have been open to men and women. However, on this occasion, we took the decision to only ask women and girls for their views, as we want to know about their views, experiences and suggestions for change. We would recommend that a similar research project is undertaken to gather the specific views of men and boys on this matter. Although this is not within the remit of the WPG, it is crucial to understanding what is needed to tackle VAWG, which is overwhelmingly perpetrated by men and boys.

Call for Views

We shared the following information on the Women's Resource and Development Agency Website:

The Women's Policy Group NI is gathering the views of women on what they believe needs to be addressed in a Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy for Northern Ireland.

We want to ensure that the lived experiences and views from women shape this strategy so that it is as robust and enforceable as possible. We are seeking your views and experiences to shape our evidence submission and influence this strategy. Northern Ireland is currently the only part of the UK or Ireland without a Violence Against Women

and Girls Strategy, and we believe that this needs to urgently change, as this is an issue that has impacted so many women and girls.

All views and experiences shared will be completely anonymous. We are asking women to complete [this short survey](#) to help us understand what we need to be calling for within our response to The Executive Office Call for Views on the develop of the [‘Equally Safe: Strategy to Tackle Violence Against Women and Girls’](#).

Please note – the WPG is also responding to the call for views on the Department of Health (DoH) and Department of Justice (DoJ) Domestic Abuse and Sexual Abuse Strategy. However, this survey is specifically about the strategy to tackle VAWG.

Disclaimer – throughout this survey we reference men’s violence against women and girls. We recognise that violence against women and girls can come from men *and* boys, and when we reference men’s violence this also includes boys’ violence.

In addition, we also note that domestic and sexual abuse is also prevalent among LGBTQ+ relationships and we will be incorporating this into our response on the Domestic Abuse and Sexual Abuse call for views. This survey is to get a better understanding from women on what they want included within the Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy specifically.

Trigger Warning – this survey mentions various types of violence and abuse against women which some may find distressing. [Here](#) is a list of support organisations in case you need to reach out for support.

This survey has 27 questions in total and should take between **5 – 15 minutes to complete**. Only the tick box questions require responses. All other questions are optional. You are welcome to share your own experiences if you feel comfortable and these responses will be kept fully anonymous.

While this survey is completely anonymous, we ask some demographic questions at the beginning to ensure we are reaching a wide and diverse group of women.

Please respond to our survey [here](#)

This survey will close on **Monday 14th February 2022 at 12pm**.

Given the potentially triggering and upsetting nature of this survey, we wanted to ensure women and girls had access to information regarding support organisations at hand. We highlighted the following support organisations via the Raise Your Voice website:

Alliance for Choice - www.alliance4choice.com
Belfast Trans Resource Centre - www.belfasttrans.org.uk
Cara Friend - www.cara-friend.org.uk
Childline - **0800 1111** - www.childline.org.uk
Common Youth - hello@commonyouth.com
Belfast: 028 9032 8866
Coleraine: 028 7034 2178
Domestic & Sexual Violence Helpline - **0808 802 1414**
Equality Commission NI - www.equalityni.org/Home
HereNI - www.hereni.org
Hollaback - www.ihollaback.org/about/
Labour Relations Agency - www.lra.org.uk/
Lifeline - **0808 808 8000**
Mens Advisory Project - www.mapni.co.uk/
Nexus - www.nexusni.org
PSNI - www.psni.police.uk/contact-us
Rainbow Project - www.rainbow-project.org/counselling
Rape Crisis - **08000246991** www.rapecrisisni.org.uk
Rowan Centre - www.therowan.net/contacts
Victim Support - www.victimsupport.org.uk
Women's Aid - www.womensaidni.org
Youth Action - www.youthaction.org

**If you have an issue
of sexual harassment
in your workplace
you should contact
your trade union.**

Further, we included information relating to the TEO and DOH/DOJ public surveys where respondents could also provide views directly.

Once the website was created and the survey questions were agreed, we launched this survey via social media and all WPG members shared widely with our membership. This included various posts across Facebook, Twitter, Instagram as well as mentions in organisational newsletters, bulletins and e-zines going directly to membership. In addition to this, various organisations, including several women's centres and groups, went through the survey with their own members and talked through the questions at hand. The Women's Sector Lobbyist and Good Relations Coordinator in the Women's Resource and Development Agency talked through the survey with various women's centres, women's groups and other community groups to enable them to encourage their own members to respond.

Survey Questions

Our anonymous survey had 27 questions in total, including a range of qualitative and quantitative questions. The majority of qualitative questions were optional and the majority of quantitative questions were mandatory. We did this for several reasons. Firstly, we wanted to ensure that we had enough robust quantitative data in any of the quantitative questions. Secondly, we wanted to give women the option to provide further views and share their experiences in qualitative questions, but not force this due to the triggering nature of the topic at hand. We specifically chose these questions as we believed these would allow us to answer the questions within the TEO Call for Views and DOH/DOJ Call for Views. These questions included the following:

1. Do you think that Northern Ireland has a problem with men's violence against women and girls?

[Mandatory - tick box - Yes / No / Unsure]

2. Do you think that Northern Ireland should have a strategy to tackle men's violence against women and girls?

[Mandatory - tick box - Yes / No / Unsure]

3. Violence against women and girls can take place in many forms. Are you aware of the below forms of violence?

[Mandatory - multiple choice]

- Domestic abuse (physical and verbal)
- Sexual Abuse
- Online Abuse
- Honour-Based Abuse
- Economic Abuse
- Coercive Control
- Sexual Harassment
- Street Harassment
- Emotional Abuse
- Unwanted rough Sex
- Misogynistic Hate Crimes
- Spiritual Abuse
- Workplace Harassment
- Stalking
- Forced isolation from family and friends
- Controlling individual style and appearances
- Systemic violence by the state

- Aware of all of the above

4. Do you think that this strategy should address all of the above forms of violence against women and girls?

[Mandatory - tick box - Yes / No / Unsure]

5. Do you think there are any forms of violence against women and girls that we have not mentioned that should be included in the strategy?

[Optional - short answer box]

6. Have you ever experienced/been impacted by men's violence against women and girls? (This includes but is not limited to: physical and verbal domestic abuse, sexual harassment and sexual assault, coercive control, street or workplace harassment, misogynistic or sexist abuse, online abuse)

[Mandatory - tick box - Yes / No / Unsure]

7. If you answered yes to Q6, would you like to share any details about how you've been impacted by violence against women and girls and what age you were when this first happened?

[Optional - short answer box]

8. If you have experienced or been impacted by men's violence against women and girls, did you report this to the police?

[Optional - tick box - Yes/No]

9. If you did report to the police, did you find this useful?

[Optional - tick box - Yes/No]

10. Do you think the strategy should tackle violence against women and girls in the following places:

[Mandatory - multiple choice]

- Domestic settings (in the home)
- Public spaces (in the streets, bars, parks, other public venues etc.)
- Workplaces
- Educational Institutions (schools, colleges, universities etc.)
- Religious settings
- Sports and leisure spaces
- Community settings
- Media/social media and online

11. Do you think there are any spaces that we have not mentioned that should be included in this strategy to address men's violence against women and girls?

[Optional - short answer box]

12. Do you believe Northern Ireland has a problem with attitudes of sexism and misogyny?

[Mandatory - tick box - Yes / No / Unsure]

13. Do you believe Northern Ireland has a problem with rape myths and rape culture?

[Mandatory - tick box - Yes / No / Unsure]

14. Do you believe Northern Ireland has a problem with victim-blaming?

[Mandatory - tick box - Yes / No / Unsure]

15. If you answered yes to Q12, Q13 or Q14, what do you think are the root causes of sexism, misogyny, victim-blaming, rape myths and rape culture?

[Optional - short answer box]

16. Do you believe there is stigma surrounding issues of violence against women and girls?

[Mandatory - tick box - Yes / No / Unsure]

17. If you answered yes to Q16, why do you believe there is stigma surrounding these issues?

[Optional - short answer box]

18. Do you believe there are barriers to people reporting when they have been victims of men's violence against women and girls?

[Mandatory - tick box - Yes / No / Unsure]

19. If you answered yes to Q18, what do you think the barriers are to victims in reporting?

[Optional - short answer box]

20. Do you think that reducing levels of violence against women and girls requires focusing on changing men and boys' behaviours and actions?

[Mandatory - tick box - Yes / No / Unsure]

21. If you answered yes to Q19, what sort of measures do you think are necessary to change men and boys' actions?

[Optional - short answer box]

22. Different groups of marginalised women can face additional types of abuse (e.g. disabled women, black or minority ethnic women, migrant women, LGBTQ+ women, traveller women, rural women etc.). Do you think additional action needs to be taken in this strategy to address men's violence against these groups of women?

[Mandatory - tick box - Yes / No / Unsure]

23. If you answered yes to Q22, could you please expand on what additional factors need to be considered or what additional action needs to be taken to support these women?

[Optional - short answer box]

24. Do you think there needs to be a review of how the justice system treats victims and survivors of men's violence against women and girls?

[Mandatory - tick box - Yes / No / Unsure]

25. If you answered yes to Q24, what sort of changes would you like to see within the justice system in relation to men's violence against women and girls?

[Optional - short answer box]

26. Do you believe that state violence against women and girls (for example, the mother and baby institutions, denying access to reproductive healthcare or diminishing women's human rights) should be included within this strategy?

[Mandatory - tick box - Yes / No / Unsure]

27. Finally, is there anything else that you would like to share that you think the WPG should be calling for within the Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy?

[Optional - long answer box]

Demographics



Demographics

Section 1 of the survey began with a range of demographic questions to try and ensure we were gathering views from a wide range of women from diverse backgrounds. Before participants went through to the survey questions they found the below message from the WPG:

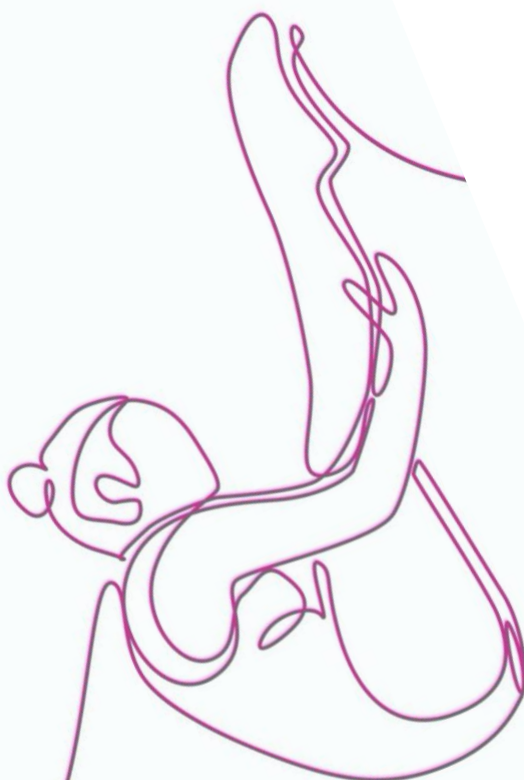
This is a Women's Policy Group NI (WPG) survey to gather views from women on issues relating to the development of a Violence Against Women and Girls strategy for NI - you can sign into google to save your progress if you prefer but it is not required.

In Section 1, we would like to know the demographic backgrounds of survey participants. This is completely anonymous information and we just want to ensure that we are reaching a wide range of women from different backgrounds.

Section 2 includes the survey questions where we would like to hear your views. Here we will ask a range of qualitative and quantitative questions. The majority of these questions are tick box, with some options to provide further views if desired (completely optional). All of this information is anonymous.

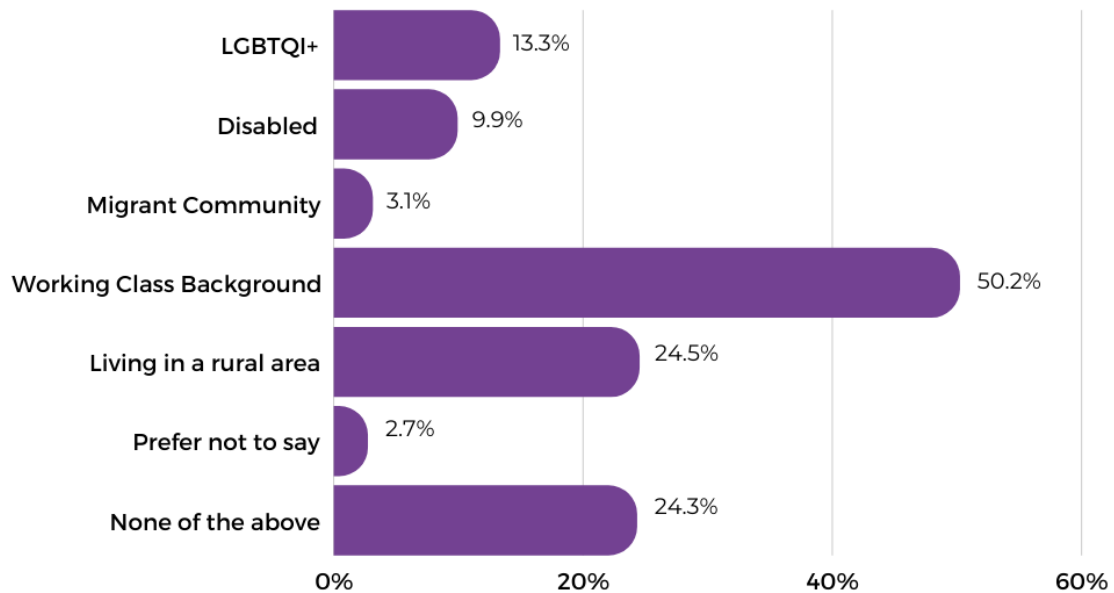
Thank you for taking the time to share your views with us, this is crucial in helping us shape the Women's Policy Group written submission and ensuring that women's voices and experiences are at the core of this strategy.

We will now provide the findings relating to these demographic questions before providing the findings from our survey questions.



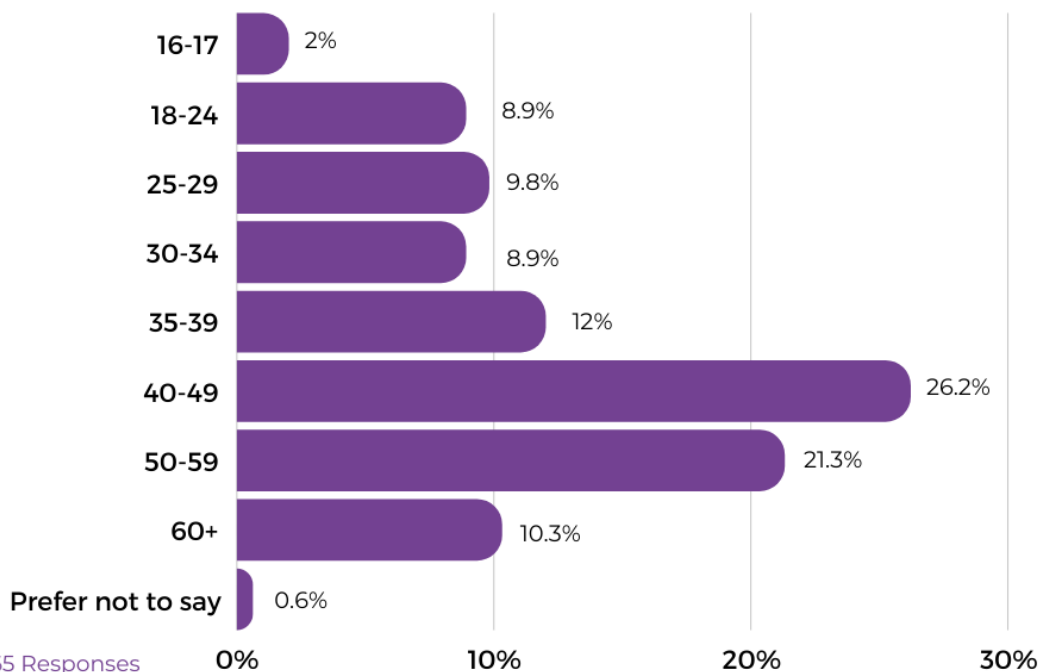
Demographic Findings

Q1. Do you identify as any of the below groups (you can pick more than one if necessary)?



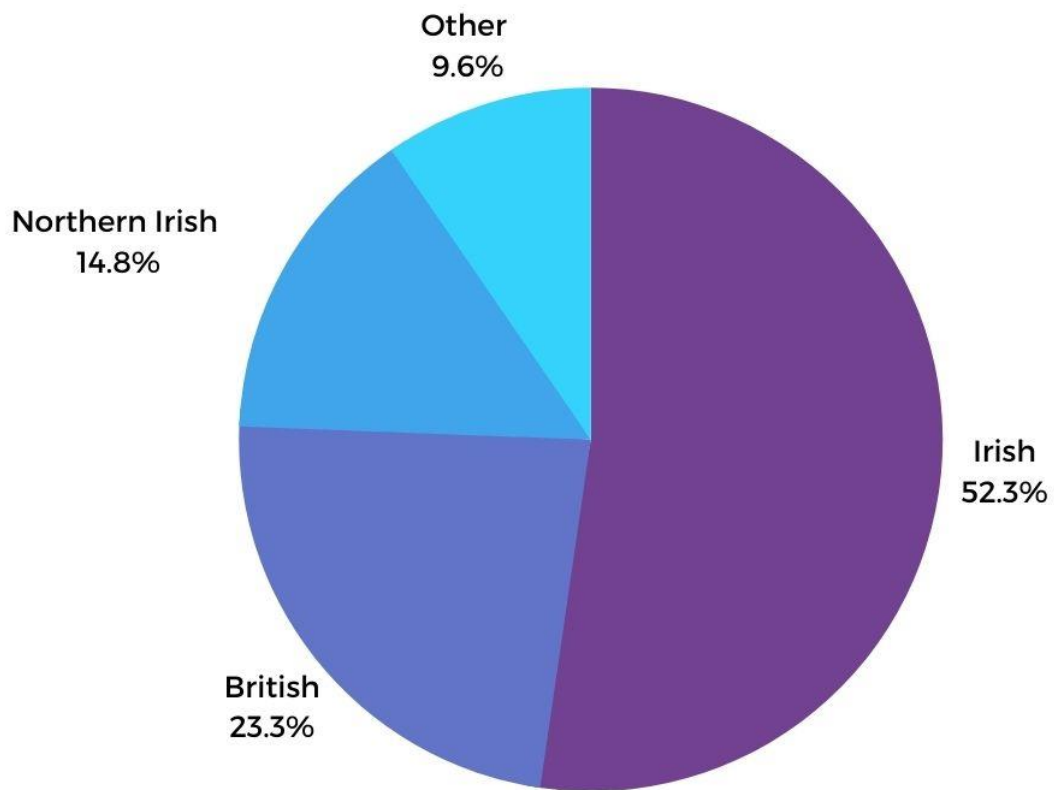
1065 Responses

Q2. What age group are you from?



1065 Responses

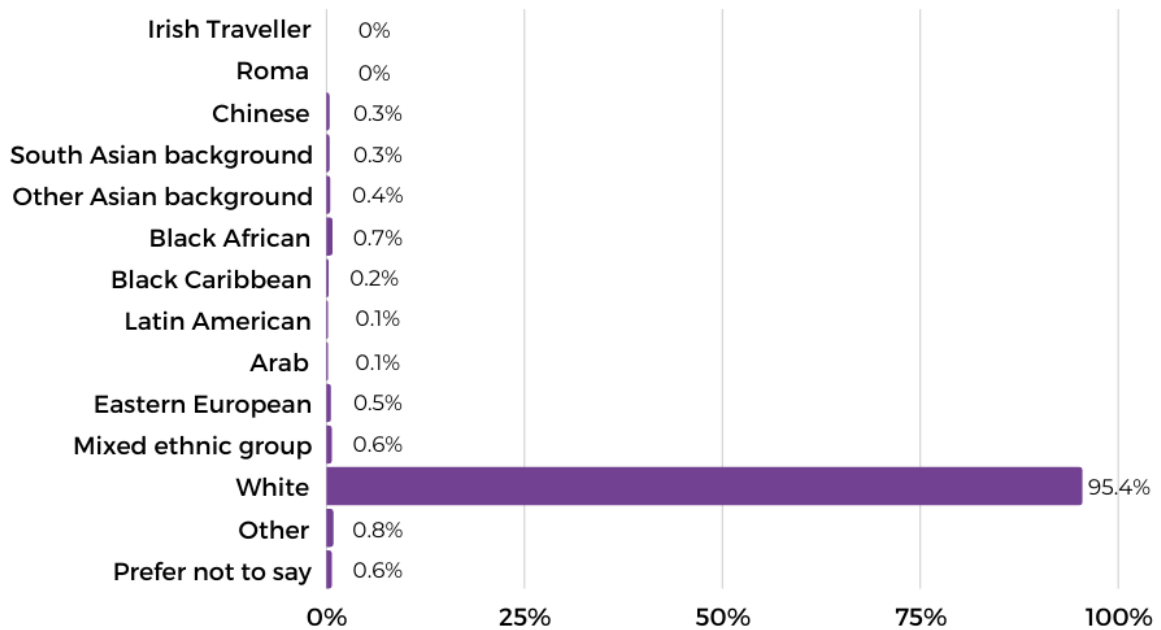
Q.3. What is your nationality?



Other nationalities noted by respondents:

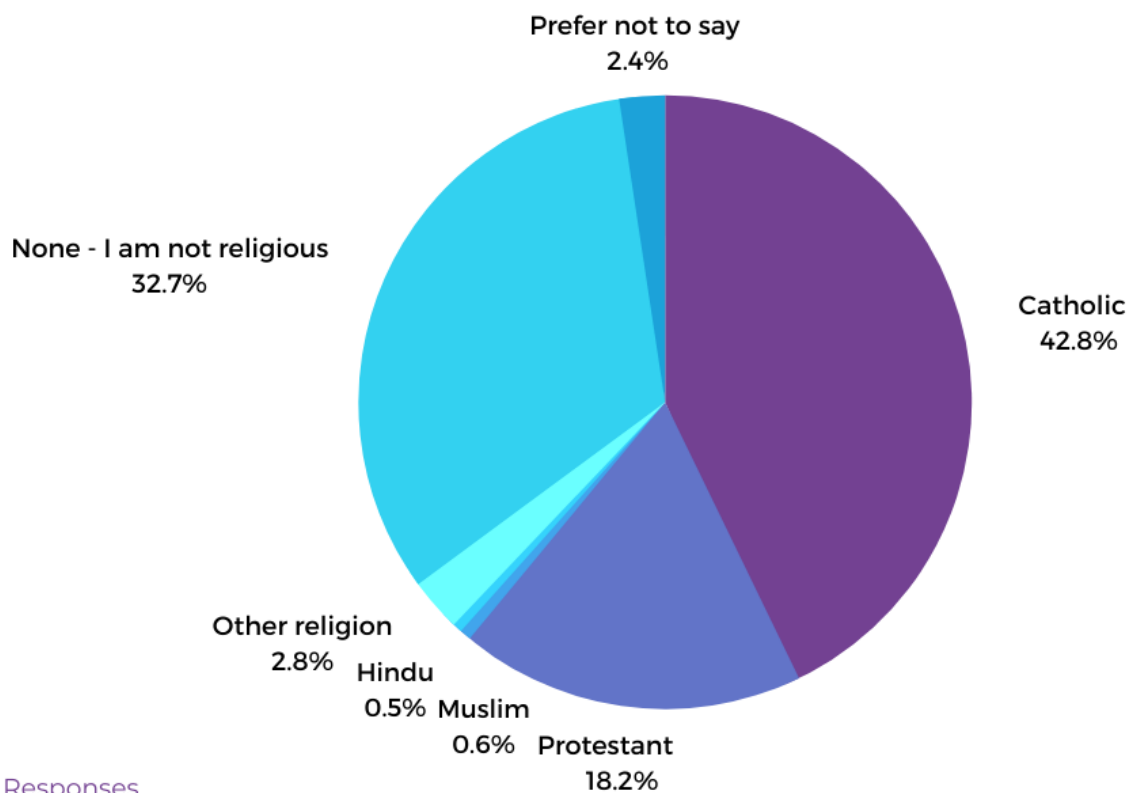
- British and Irish
- Irish and Northern Irish
- British, Irish and Northern Irish
- British and Northern Irish
- Irish and English
- Polish and Irish
- Nigerian and Irish
- American and British
- American and Irish
- Ukrainian
- Italian
- American
- English
- Scottish
- Polish
- Turkish
- Algerian
- Somali
- Jamaican
- Chinese
- Asian
- Nigerian
- Canadian
- Indian
- German
- Zimbabwean
- Black African
- Dutch
- Black Caribbean
- Portuguese
- French
- Spanish
- Bulgarian
- South African
- Latin American
- Arab
- Norwegian
- Danish
- Eastern European
- Mixed ethnicity

Q4. What is your ethnicity?



1065 Responses

Q5. Which religious group do you identify as?



1065 Responses

Survey Findings



Key Findings

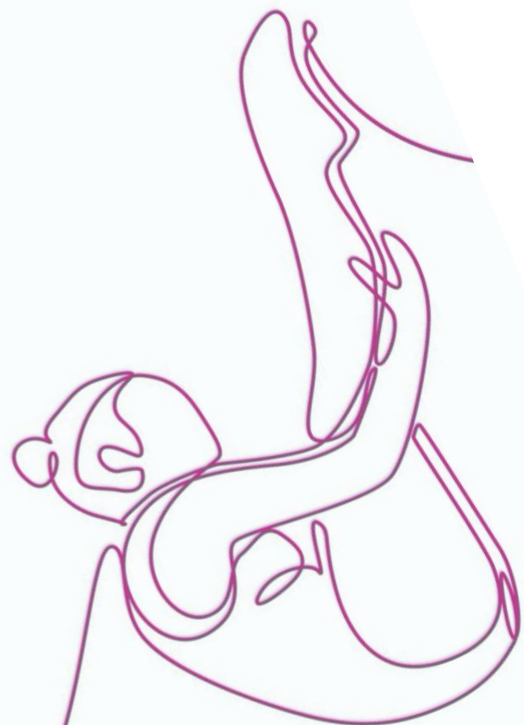
- **91.2%** of women think that Northern Ireland has a problem with men's violence against women and girls.
- **97.2%** of women think that Northern Ireland should have a strategy to tackle men's violence against women and girls.
- **83%** of women have been impacted by men's violence against women and girls but only **21.4%** reported this to the police and **77.4%** of those did not find it useful.
- **89.7%** of women believe Northern Ireland has a problem with attitudes of sexism and misogyny.
- **81.2%** of women believe there is stigma surrounding issues of violence against women and girls.
- **92.3%** of women think that there are barriers to reporting men's violence against women and girls.
- **95.2%** of women think that reducing levels of violence against women and girls requires focusing on changing men and boys' behaviours and actions.
- **86.8%** of women think that there needs to be a review of how the justice system treats victims and survivors of men's violence against women and girls.
- **82%** of women first experienced men's violence before the age of 20.

Key Themes

The survey covered a range of topics including: forms of violence, lived experiences, places where violence occurs, culture, attitudes and beliefs, tackling men's violence, the intersectional impacts of men's violence, barriers to reporting, justice system reform and state violence. We asked respondents several questions relating to each topic and from these responses were able to identify the following key themes.

1. The importance of education
2. Our justice system is failing victims
3. Men's violence must be directly addressed

These key themes represent recurring sentiments expressed by respondents in their responses to various questions on several topics. This included both quantitative and qualitative questions. It is notable that these sentiments were shared by respondents across demographics, including respondents from different religious, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. We will now explore these three key themes in more detail.



Key Theme 1: The importance of education

Looking at both our qualitative and quantitative findings, the importance of education stood out as a key recurring theme. This was particularly the case when looking specifically at questions relating to culture, attitudes and beliefs around violence against women and girls.

In questions 15, 17 and 21, we asked respondents what they thought were the root causes of sexism, misogyny, victim-blaming, rape myths and rape culture, why they thought there is stigma around issues relating to violence against women and girls what sort of measures they thought were necessary to change men and boys' actions. For each of these questions, education was one of the most commonly cited responses. Specifically, a high level of respondents felt that:

- Sexism, misogyny, victim-blaming, rape myths and rape culture are caused by a lack of education.
- A lack of education on violence against women and girls has perpetuated the existence of stigma around issues relating to this violence.
- In order to change men and boys' actions and address men's violence, it is necessary to educate men and boys on issues relating to violence against women and girls. Many respondents specified that this education should begin at a young age in schools and other learning environments.

The importance of education was also a recurring theme when analysing the data from several quantitative questions. For example, we asked respondents if they were aware of various forms of violence against women and girls. Notably, less than 50% were aware of honour-based abuse (37.8%), systemic violence by the state (36.7%) and spiritual abuse (26%). Only 54.3% were aware of all the forms of violence that we listed (this full list has been provided in the survey responses section of this report).



Furthermore, a high proportion of respondents indicated that they were 'unsure' about the existence of various types of violence against women and girls, particularly in relation to culture, attitudes and beliefs. For example:

- **16.9%** of respondents were unsure about whether Northern Ireland has a problem with rape myths and rape culture.
- **15.5%** of respondents were unsure about whether there is stigma surrounding issues of violence against women and girls.
- **11%** of respondents were unsure if Northern Ireland has a problem with victim-blaming.
- **9.5%** of respondents were unsure if Northern Ireland has a problem with attitudes of sexism and misogyny.

This suggests that more education may be needed on these key concepts, such as rape myths, rape culture, stigma, victim-blaming, sexism and misogyny. This could be done through incorporating these topics into school curriculums or delivering a widespread public education campaign.

*"...**Consent needs taught at school** from primary age, when kids aren't given proper sex education they find and use unregulated porn as their teacher..."*

"...Education is key..."

"The education system is not doing enough to fight these issues..."

*"Misogynistic opinions that go unchallenged. Wider cultural 'norms' which elevate males, power imbalance. **Lack of education about feminism** and also sexual consent...or just consent in general..."*

*"...Our education system promotes stigma. Abusive men and women who have internalised misogyny thrive on silence and so **promote this taboo culture.**"*

Key Theme 2: Our justice system is failing victims

Another key theme that ran through the findings of this research was that our justice system is failing women and girls who are victims of men's violence. Again, this was observable in responses to both qualitative and quantitative questions. For example, in regards to quantitative findings, we found that:

- **83%** of women have been impacted by men's violence against women and girls but only **21.4%** reported this to the police.
- **77.4%** of women who reported violence to the police did not find it useful.
- **92.3%** of women think that there are barriers to reporting men's violence against women and girls.
- **86.8%** of women think that there needs to be a review of how the justice system treats victims and survivors of men's violence against women and girls.

These statistics show that women have low levels of confidence in how the justice system, including the police service, deals with issues relating to men's violence against women and girls. They also show that women and girls who are victims of men's violence require more support when engaging with the justice system, for example, when going through the courts system or reporting violence.

This theme was also observable in responses to qualitative questions. For example, in questions 7, 19 and 25, we asked respondents about how they had been impacted by violence against women and girls, what they thought the barriers were to reporting violence and what changes they would like to see within the justice system in relation to men's violence against women and girls. We received hundreds of qualitative responses to these questions and a common theme running through the majority of them was that the justice system is failing women and girls who are victims of men's violence.



For example, common responses to these questions included:

- Victim-blaming in court and by police officers deters women and girls from reporting men's violence.
- Women and girls fear that they will not be believed if they report men's violence to the police.
- Women and girls who are victims of men's violence often feel shame around their experiences which deters them from reporting.
- The low level of prosecution rates for men's violence against women and girls deters victims from reporting.
- Victims of men's violence are not given enough support by the justice system, for example, when they go through court processes.
- Punishment and sentencing for perpetrators of violence against women and girls is too lenient.
- Women and girls who report men's violence and engage with the justice system are often retraumatised in the process.

"The punishment never warrants reporting it..."

*"...I spent over two years being **retraumatised** going through the court system..."*

"...Women only report abuse when there are large bruises to photograph..."

*"...Statistically there is **no justice** for rapists."*

"Don't have faith in justice system..."

Key Theme 3: Men's violence must be directly addressed

The Women's Policy Group believe that in order to effectively tackle the issue of violence against women and girls, the root cause of this issue must be directly addressed. Violence against women and girls is primarily and disproportionately perpetrated by men, which is why, throughout this research, the WPG makes explicit reference to this issue as being one of 'men's violence.' The findings from this research support and reiterate the importance of adopting this stance.

Overwhelmingly, women in Northern Ireland have told us that in order to eradicate violence against women and girls, our focus must be on changing the beliefs and attitudes of men towards women. This theme ran through responses to various quantitative and qualitative questions. In terms of quantitative findings, our data showed that:

- **91.2%** of women think that Northern Ireland has a problem with men's violence against women and girls.
- **97.2%** of women think that Northern Ireland should have a strategy to tackle men's violence against women and girls.
- **83%** of women have been impacted by men's violence against women and girls.
- **95.2%** of women think that reducing levels of violence against women and girls requires focusing on changing men and boys' behaviours and actions.

In terms of qualitative findings, we found that education was the most commonly cited response to questions which asked women what sort of measures they think are necessary to change men and boys' actions. Many respondents specifically referred to the importance of starting this education at a young age and introducing adequate relationships and sexuality education (RSE) in schools. Our survey data overwhelmingly showed that women are aware that eradicating violence against women and girls requires specifically focusing on changing men and boys' behaviour. For example, we received numerous responses that shared the sentiment expressed in the following testimony:

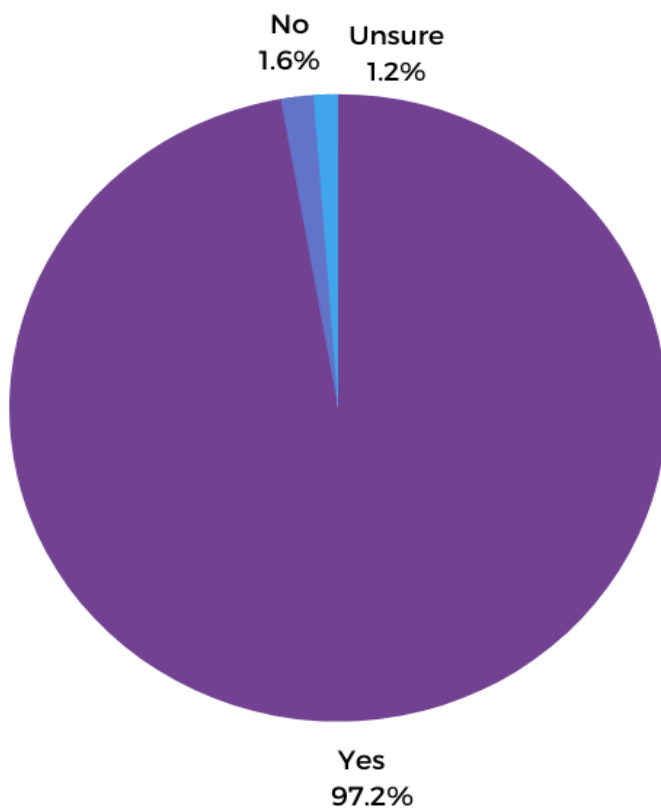
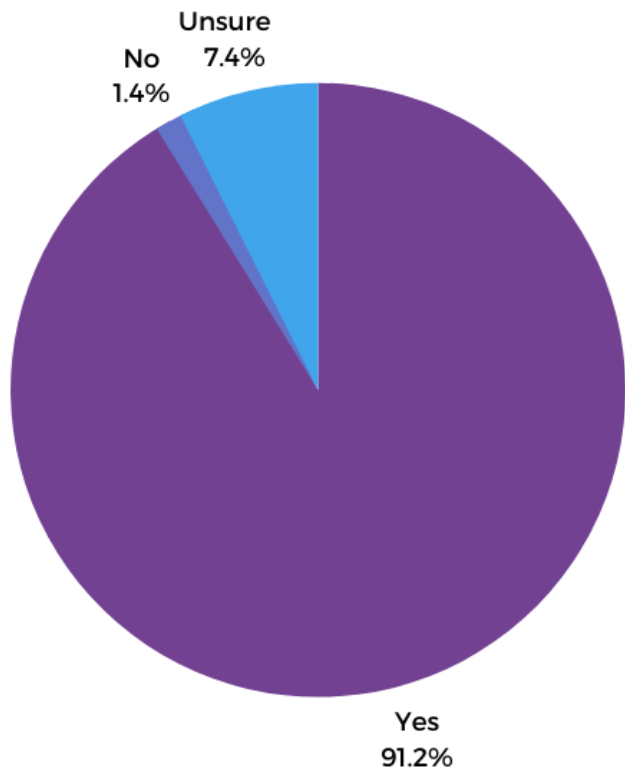
*"We need to recognise this problem for what it is - it is MEN'S violence against women and girls. Simply saying "violence against women and girls" makes it seem like this violence is happening out of nowhere. **Men need to change their behaviour** and a first step is actually giving this strategy the proper name."*

Survey Responses

Introductory Questions

Question 1: Do you think that Northern Ireland has a problem with men's violence against women and girls?

Total responses: 1065
'Yes' responses: 91.2%
'No' responses: 1.4%
'Unsure' responses: 7.4%



Question 2: Do you think that Northern Ireland should have a strategy to tackle men's violence against women and girls?

Total responses: 1065
'Yes' responses: 97.2%
'No' responses: 1.6%
'Unsure' responses: 1.2%

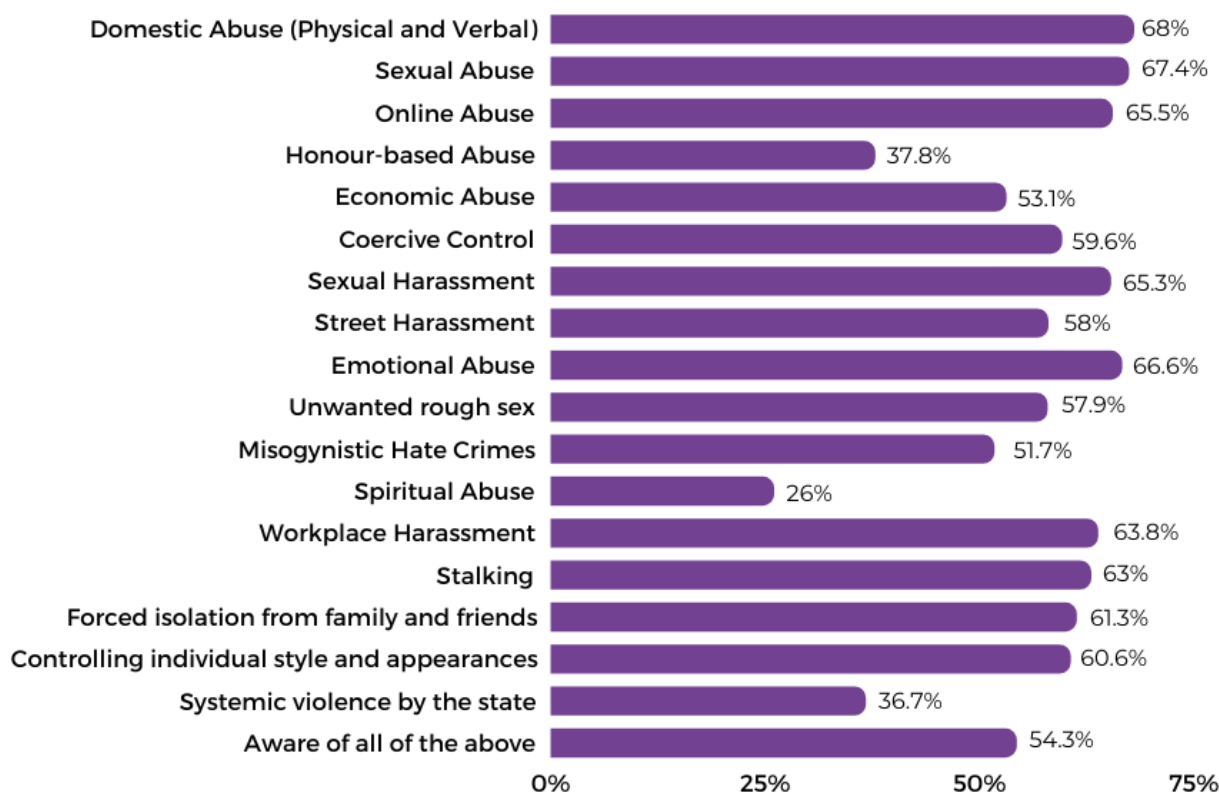
Forms of Violence

Question 3: Violence against women and girls can take place in many forms. Are you aware of the below forms of violence?

Total responses: 1065

Responses:

- Domestic abuse (physical and verbal) (68%)
- Sexual Abuse (67.4%)
- Online Abuse (65.5%)
- Honour-Based Abuse (37.8%)
- Economic Abuse (53.1%)
- Coercive Control (59.6%)
- Sexual Harassment (65.3%)
- Street Harassment (58%)
- Emotional Abuse (66.6%)
- Unwanted rough Sex (57.9%)
- Misogynistic Hate Crimes (51.7%)
- Spiritual Abuse (26%)
- Workplace Harassment (63.8%)
- Stalking (63%)
- Forced isolation from family and friends (61.3%)
- Controlling individual style and appearances (60.6%)
- Systemic violence by the state (36.7%)
- Aware of all of the above (54.3%)



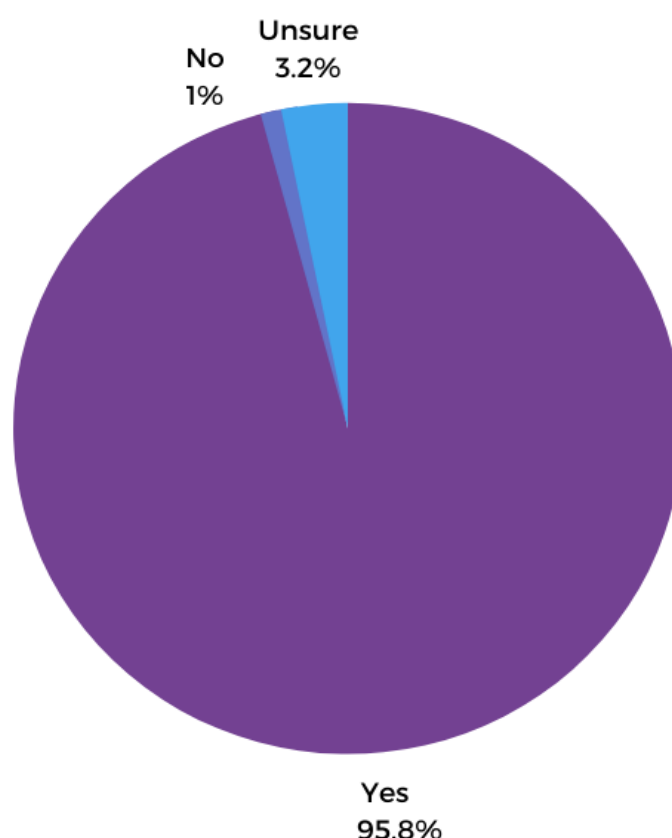
Question 4: Do you think that this strategy should address all of the above forms of violence against women and girls?

Total responses: 1065

'Yes' responses: 95.8%

'No' responses: 1%

'Unsure' responses: 3.2%



Question 5: Do you think there are any forms of violence against women and girls that we have not mentioned that should be included in the strategy?

Total responses: 498

There were almost 500 written responses to this question. Some of the comments wanted to emphasise the importance of including some types of violence that were already referenced in question 3, while others included new suggestions for other forms of violence that should be included.

Examples of the other forms of violence provided by survey respondents included:

- Medical abuse,
- Gaslighting,
- Marital rape,
- Grooming,
- Spiking,
- Lack of abortion access,
- Caste-based violence,
- Violence against sex workers,
- Female genital mutilations,
- Pornography,
- Institutional abuse,
- Human trafficking,
- Stealthing,
- Sectarian abuse,
- Homophobic and transphobic abuse against LGBTQ+ women,
- Corrective rape.

Lived Experiences

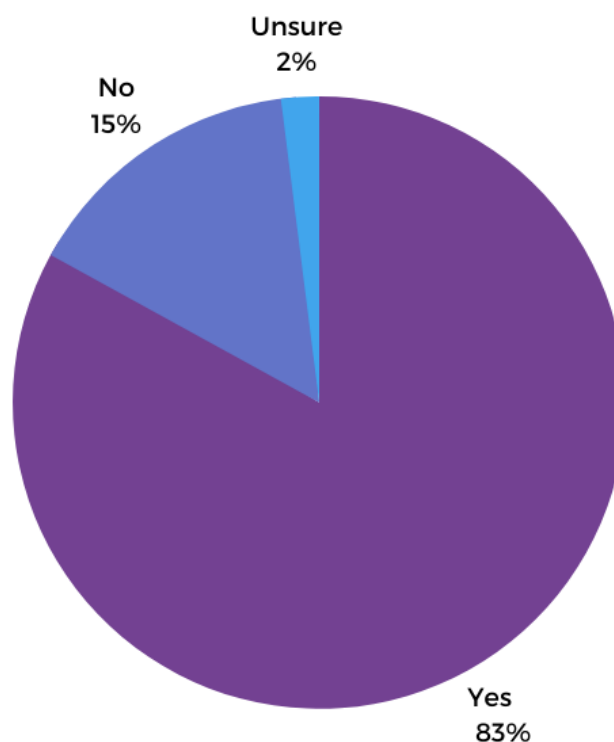
Question 6: Have you ever experienced/been impacted by men's violence against women and girls? (This includes but is not limited to: physical and verbal domestic abuse, sexual harassment and sexual assault, coercive control, street or workplace harassment, misogynistic or sexist abuse, online abuse).

Total responses: 1060

'Yes' responses: 83%

'No' responses: 15%

'Unsure' responses: 2%



This was an optional question and yet almost every single woman or girl responded to this question.

Marginalised Groups and Likelihood of experiencing violence

In our survey, we asked respondents a series of questions relating to demographics so that we could highlight which groups of women are at increased risk of experiencing men's violence. It is important to note that several respondents designated themselves as being from multiple of the following categories. As mentioned previously in this report, out of 1065 respondents, 13.3% were from the LGBTQI+ community, 9.9% were disabled, 3.1% were from the migrant community, 50.2% were from a working class background and 24.5% live in a rural area.

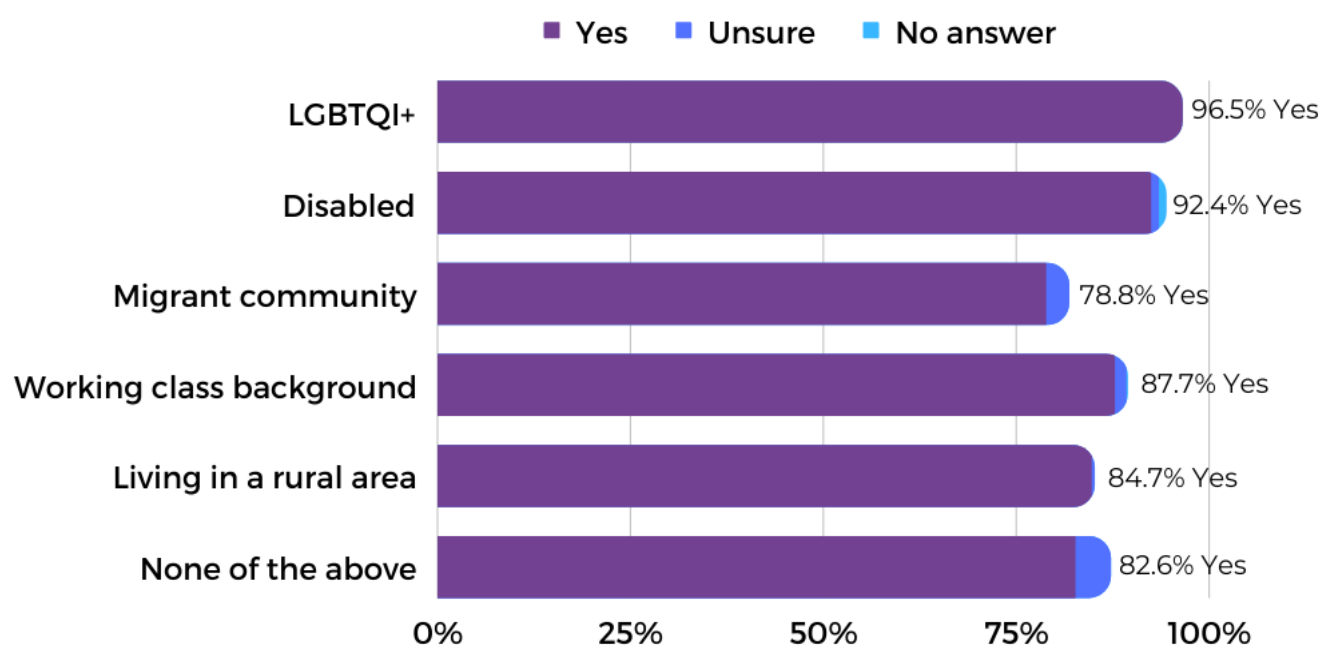
The following percentages of women belonging to these groups said that they had experienced or been impacted by men's violence:

- LGBTQI+ (96.5%)
- Disabled (92.4%)
- Migrant community (78.8%)
- Working class background (87.7%)
- Live in rural area (84.7%)



In contrast, for those who belonged to 'none of the above' categories, 82.6% had experienced or been impacted by men's violence. This shows that LGBTQI+, Disabled, those from a working class background and those who live in a rural area were **more likely to have experienced or been impacted by men's violence** than those who were not LGBTQI+, Disabled, migrant, from a working class background or living rurally.

The following percentages show the percentage of women from each group who said they had experienced men's violence



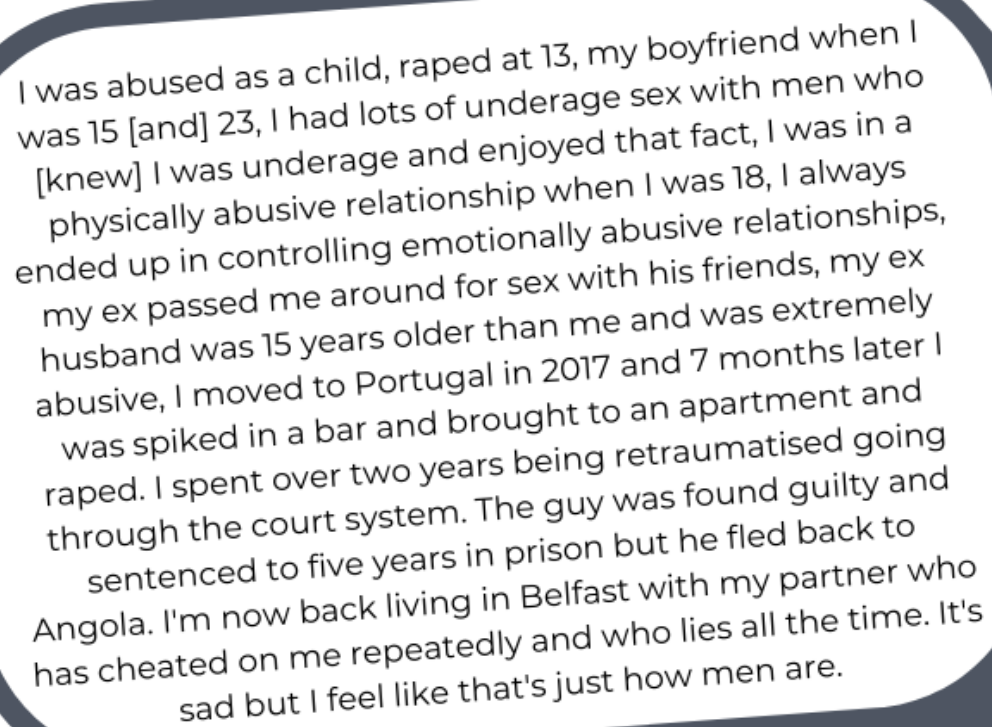
Question 7: If you answered yes to Q6, would you like to share any details about how you've been impacted by violence against women and girls and what age you were when this first happened?

We decided to split the findings of this question into two parts (7a and 7b) to highlight the experiences women shared with us and at what age they first experienced violence.

Question 7a: Details of how women have been impacted by violence

Total responses: 735

This was an optional question and we are grateful to the 735 respondents who shared their experiences with us. We received some extremely detailed accounts from several participants who shared with us every experience of men's violence they had had since they were a child. **Many of these responses are extremely upsetting and triggering to read.** Here are some of the qualitative responses:



I was abused as a child, raped at 13, my boyfriend when I was 15 [and] 23, I had lots of underage sex with men who [knew] I was underage and enjoyed that fact, I was in a physically abusive relationship when I was 18, I always ended up in controlling emotionally abusive relationships, my ex passed me around for sex with his friends, my ex husband was 15 years older than me and was extremely abusive, I moved to Portugal in 2017 and 7 months later I was spiked in a bar and brought to an apartment and raped. I spent over two years being retraumatised going through the court system. The guy was found guilty and sentenced to five years in prison but he fled back to Angola. I'm now back living in Belfast with my partner who has cheated on me repeatedly and who lies all the time. It's sad but I feel like that's just how men are.

Coercive control in relationship in my teens and 20s, attempted rape while in uni, pursued by a man at night in my late 20s while cycling home, multiple incidents of street harassment and everyday misogyny throughout my life, since I was in secondary school so maybe 13 or 14. The impact of this is to have normalised a lot of it to the point that I have to remind myself that it's not ok, while at the same time **having a sense of not quite being safe ever really**. The usual, the strategising what to do when I'm walking or jogging alone, not going out alone at night, pretending to talk to someone on the phone or actually calling my other half if I feel unsafe. It sucks.

As a child (aged 8 - 10) in a rural area the local shopkeeper (only one shop) would grab me rub himself against me, **I later found out he did this to all girls**.

Raped by a man when I was 12 and again at 22. Sexually assaulted and abused by men multiple times. Taken advantage of when I was drunk by male friends.

It has impacted my confidence, the way I view myself and how I live my life. I'm not sure what age I was when it first happened as **I can't remember a time in my life when it wasn't happening**.

As a young woman men would frequently touch you, hand on shoulder/arm etc as if they had a right to. Whistling at you, staring at you, making lewd comments - an assumption that they had a right to do this. Now that I am older whilst is not soo overt, but I am still subject to staring, leering etc. I have also curtailed my activity - where I go, at what time etc. But in essence **that is just a fact of life being a woman in NI**.

The following quotes are examples of other responses we received to this question:

*"I was 7 years old when a fourteen year old boy made sexual advances to me in a room where I was playing alone. I was terrified and left to find other people but was too shaken to tell anyone what happened for over a year. I have witnessed or been subject to numerous other incidents by boys who were at school/under 18, and this behaviour in boys and younger men is especially concerning to me. As an adult I have been subject to street harassment, threatened with a knife and had my drink spiked on different occasions though thankfully was not physically harmed in any of these instances. More **recently I was outside a pub when a girl approached asking for help - she had cable ties round her wrists and had been assaulted and abused by a man in a nearby flat.** I called the police and stayed with her. I now know he wasn't charged and is a serial offender - because my partner overheard him openly bragging about it in a barbers shop weeks later."*

*"I first experienced **sexual abuse at the age of 6 until 10.** I also have had intimate photos shared when I was 16. I have had experiences with street harassment from the age of 12. I was in a coercive and emotionally abusive relationship at 15 where I experienced unwanted rough sex. I was groped in school at 14. I was **unable to access an abortion when I got pregnant during my A levels.** I have received online abuse, both anonymous and from people that I know from the age of 12 until recently."*

*"Too many incidents to describe, started in childhood from about aged 10. Many different incidents involved men or boys that were complete strangers or well known to me and were all different ages. It was as simple as catcalling, beeping car horns etc to being groped, being touched under my clothes in my sleep, having my clothes pulled at or off in public, having my underwear pulled at in school and hands up my skirt at assembly and the list goes on to much more serious incidents which I don't like to talk about. **A lifetime of these experiences, which happened more often when I was under 18** has left me with great difficulty trusting men, even those I care about, as my primary experience left me seeing them as predatory. It's difficult to form healthy relationships and difficult even to leave my children in male company even when I know it's unreasonable of me to think this way about every man."*

The following testimony is an example of some of the longer, more detailed responses we received to this question. Both pages of text are from the same respondent:

I will list them by age - these don't include the more everyday stuff like cat calls etc. 12 is the first time I remember, school bullying because I developed early. 12 is also when I began to be sexual assaulted regularly by a family friend and police officer. 14 sexual violence with boyfriend 16 yrs. 14 slut shaming in school because of sexual relationship. 14 sexually assaulted by boy I knew - 17 years - tried to tell people but he had a girlfriend and **I was made to apologise to him because of his reputation.** 15 house broke into, sister's ex-boyfriend stole family photos of us on beach holiday with me and sis in bikinis and shared round her school. 16 unwanted attention/stalking from boy. 17 witnessed mother raped by local police man. 17 sexual relationship with 27 year old man. 17 science teacher asked me in front of class to stay behind so he could paint watercolours of me. 17 groped on bottom by science teacher whilst at the school formal 17.

Stalking by 27 yr old when relationship ended. Came to work and wouldn't leave me alone, stole items, his adult gf beat me up, followed me home from school bus. **At one point he locked me in his flat and threatened me** with throwing my television he had borrowed at me and some friends came and rescued me. 17 made to sit on knee of work manager while he cashed the till. 17 told I had to wear a tight skirt as a waitress. 18 sexually groped under dress in bar in Belfast, I got thrown out not the man, when I caused a fuss. 18 stalked by a fellow student union rep at Uni in Belfast, he was a photographer and used to take pictures off me all the time and follow me wherever I went.

Had to pretend closet gay friend in class was my bf. 18 sexual slurs, biphobia and slut shaming from older lesbian after we kissed and she discovered I was a bisexual. 19 inappropriate comments by male tutor during interview for undergraduate course. 20 groped whilst unconscious by 3 men at party, luckily disturbed by male friend who threw them out. 21 stalked by man while I worked in bar, followed me repeatedly, came into bar when I was on shift, even **found him staring in a window on the escape stairs while I was having sex**, had to ask friends to walk me to work.

(Continued on next page)

21 Uni tutor suggested I become a sex worker to make an interesting project. 22 Attempted rape by security guard in Hospital - received multiple injuries, found by another security guard because of my screaming, **thought I was going to die.** Went to court a year later, he never showed up. End of that...

23 Stalked by male colleague who forced his way into my room after a night out. 23 groped by older man on bus sitting beside me, he kept widening his leg and I couldn't get out until I said very loudly "stop trying to grope me" and he laughed and let me out and I got off 4 stops early.

24 male manager touched my knee every time he squeezed past me. 25 colleague made image with my head and my managers head pasted on to a porn image and shared in work. 25 Sexually assaulted by stranger walking home in Barcelona. Thought oh this time I am definitely going to die, **he banged my head against the shop shutters repeatedly and violently punched me in the groin** repeatedly and held me by the neck. Reported to police, who scanned streets immediately, but we couldn't find him. Told embassy, they didn't care.

26 Woman stranger I made friends with on 15 hour bus journey in Bolivia tried to get into my bedroom then bed repeatedly sexually harassed me. 30 images made of me in online art/tech forum of mostly men, with my face on porn image. 31 images of me naked shared without my permission. 32 partner brought man into our bed and had sex with him with me there without my consent. 33 - **had to come off dating app when I added I was bisexual as I was inundated with inappropriate sexual advances.** Now I only ever say looking for women.

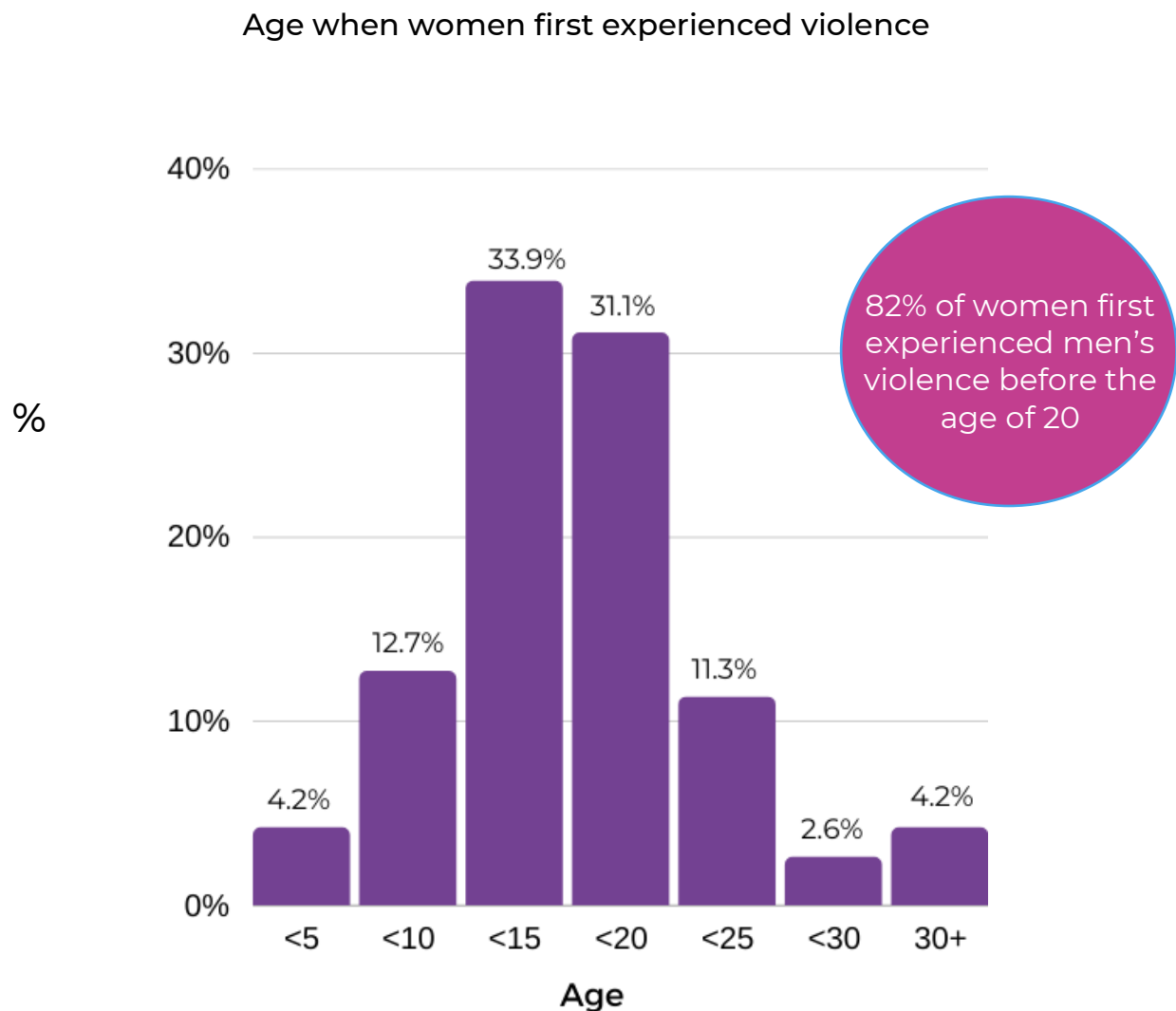
34-40 in abusive relationship, many instances of coercion and control, 3 incidents of choking, couple of incidents of rape. Violence towards possessions, controlling behaviour, financial abuse, addiction issues, violence and abusive language in front of children. 32-now multiple incidents of sexually abusive comments online, including rape and sexual assault threats. Unsolicited penis images.

END.

Question 7b: The age when women first experienced violence

Total responses: 425

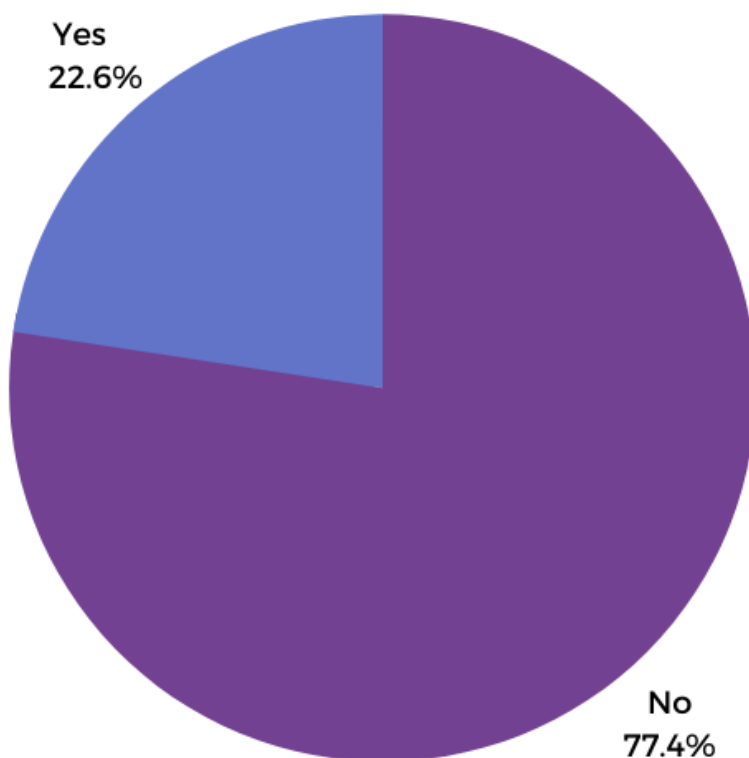
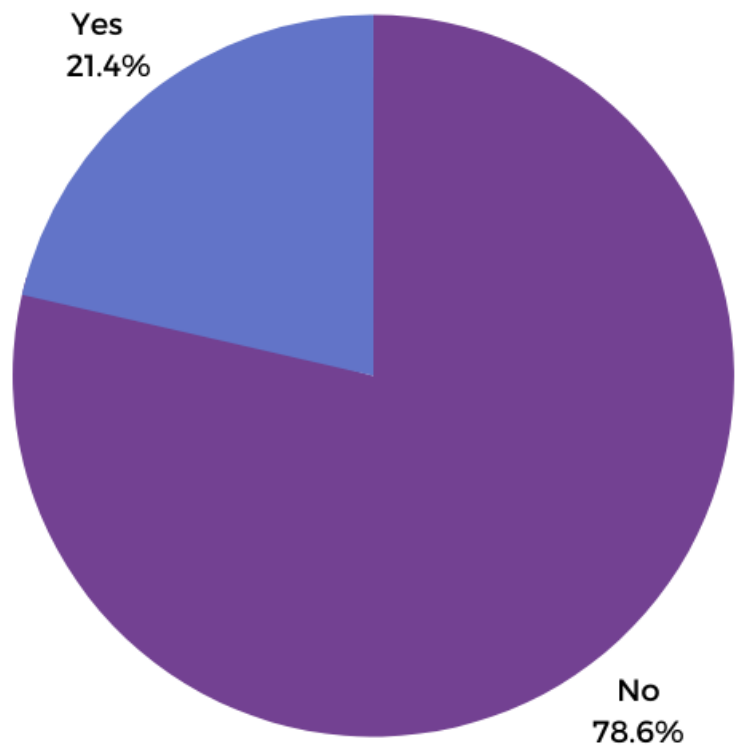
While this was an optional question, 425 respondents highlighted the age they were first impacted by, or experienced, men's violence against women and girls. Strikingly, **82% of those respondents experienced men's violence against women and girls before the age of 20**. This means that the vast majority of respondents experienced men and boys' violence while they were either a child or teenager.



Police Reporting

Question 8: If you have experienced or been impacted by men's violence against women and girls, did you report this to the police?

Total responses: 915
'Yes' responses: 21.4%
'No' responses: 78.6%



Question 9: If you did report to the police, did you find this useful?

Total responses: 283
'Yes' responses: 22.6%
'No' responses: 77.4%

Where violence takes place

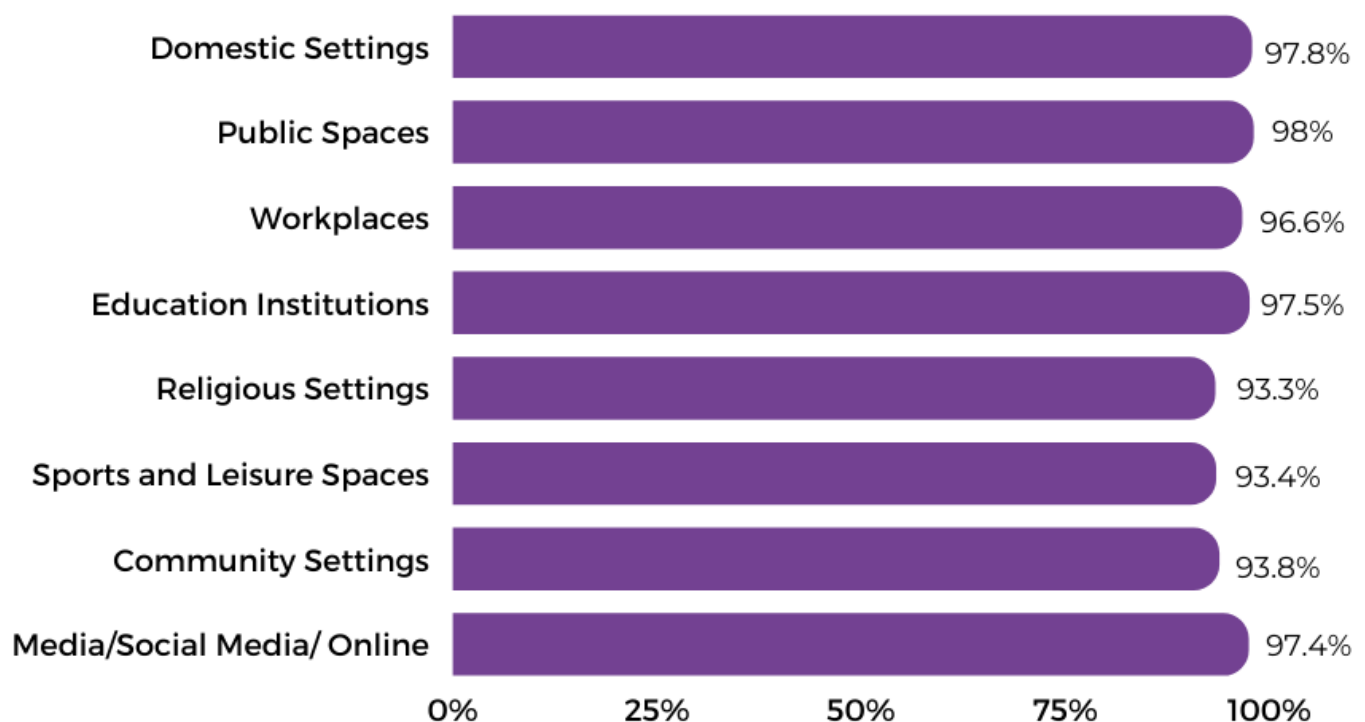
Question 10: Do you think the strategy should tackle violence against women and girls in the following places?

Total responses: 1065

Responses:

- Domestic settings (in the home) (97.8%)
- Public spaces (in the streets, bars, parks, other public venues etc.) (98%)
- Workplaces (96.6%)
- Educational Institutions (schools, colleges, universities etc.) (97.5%)
- Religious settings (93.3%)
- Sports and leisure spaces (93.4%)
- Community settings (93.8%)
- Media/social media and online (97.4%)

As you can see from the graph below, tackling violence against women and girls in public spaces received the most support from respondents.



"Given my own experience, it should not be assumed that women are not subject to abuse in health and care settings, or underestimated how difficult it can be to challenge those that women are relying on for care when they are vulnerable due to illness etc."

"Prisons and juvenile institutions as often in these facilities there is a large amount of vulnerable women victimised by violence perpetuated by men."

"There should not be limited areas. Respect should happen at all places at all times."

"Court settings. My ex used to sit opposite me in a corridor before being called into court he would ring childline and the Samaritans and tell them I was abusing my children as I sat there and everyone else also waiting to go into court this was before I got help from woman's aid and was offered a room so I didn't have to sit beside him."

Question 11: Do you think there are any spaces that we have not mentioned that should be included in this strategy to address men's violence against women and girls?

Total responses: 378

Some of these responses include references to places that are included in Question 10 that some respondents wanted to particularly highlight. Others include additional settings that respondents felt should be considered.

These included the below common responses:

- Public and private transport (including taxis),
- Healthcare settings,
- Police, army and prisons,
- Courts and Judicial settings,
- Political institutions e.g. local councils and NI assembly,
- Male-dominated spaces (e.g. football clubs).

"On public transport I have witnessed older men act inappropriately with women and young girls."

"Women within the forces are abused by their male peers each day which is overlooked."

"Anywhere alcohol is served. Female staff in these venues are particularly at risk, from customers and co-workers."

*"Medical settings. People always assume you're safe in a hospital or care home, but disabled people can tell you this is not always true, and **sometimes the people you're not safe from are staff in those settings.**"*

Several respondents also emphasised that they should not need to specify spaces to be included in the Strategy as it should protect women and girls from men's violence in all spaces.

*"Spaces should not have to be specified - **the strategy should blanket cover all settings.**"*

Culture, attitudes and beliefs

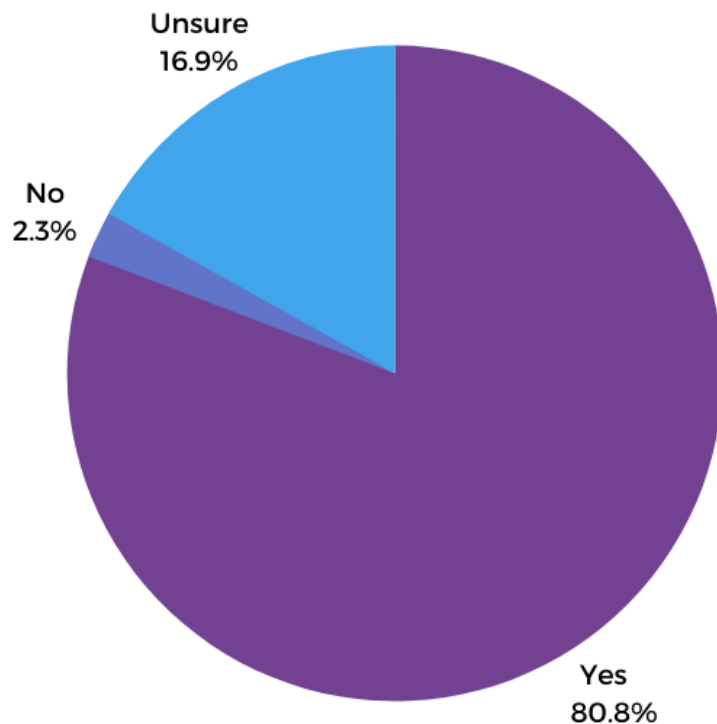
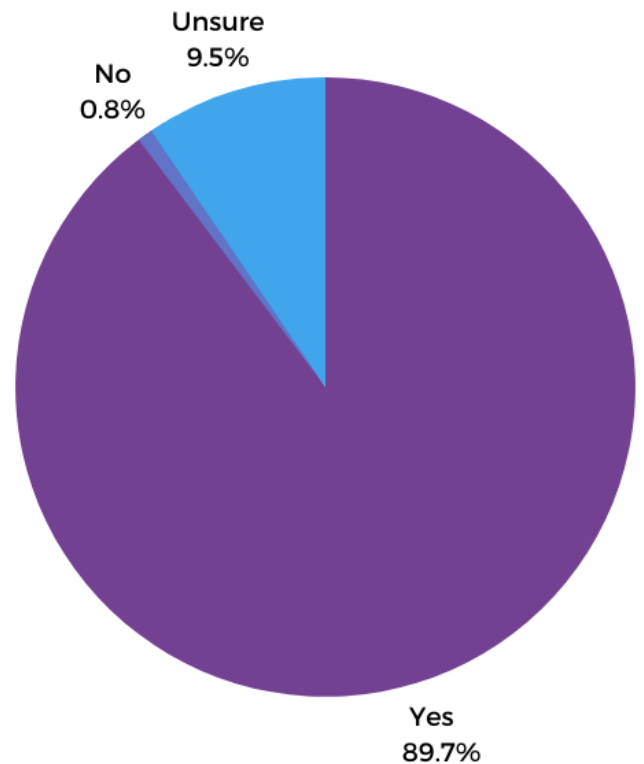
Question 12: Do you believe Northern Ireland has a problem with attitudes of sexism and misogyny?

Total responses: 1065

'Yes' responses: 89.7%

'No' responses: 0.8%

'Unsure' responses: 9.5%



Question 13: Do you believe Northern Ireland has a problem with rape myths and rape culture?

Total responses: 1065

'Yes' responses: 80.8%

'No' responses: 2.3%

'Unsure' responses: 16.9%

A large proportion of women (16.9%) said that they were unsure if Northern Ireland has a problem with rape myths and rape culture. This emphasises the need for widescale education about the various ways that violence against women and girls can manifest.

"Women and girls are often accused of "asking for it" because of the clothes they wear having had a drink etc way they dress, or being inebriated."

"Ingrained societal attitudes and expectations of how women should look and behave."

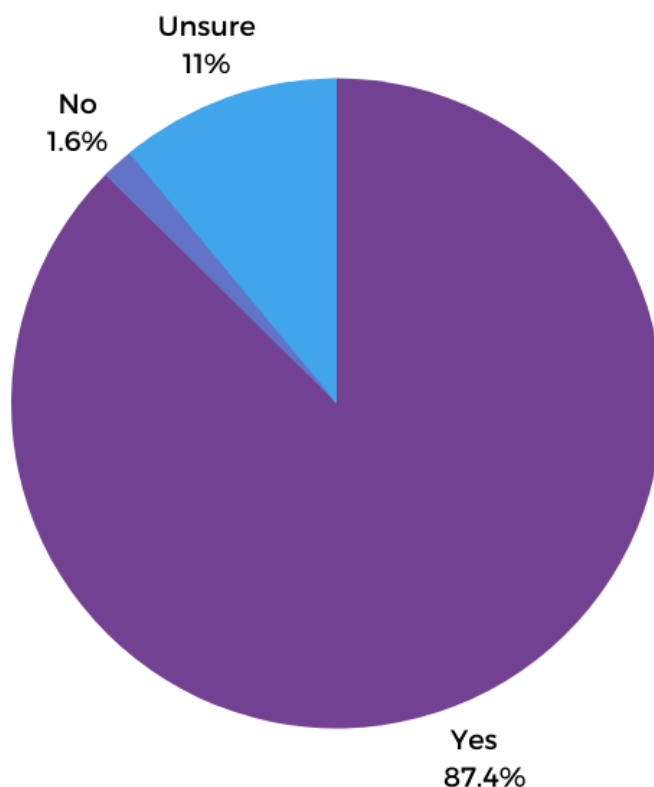
"Its passed down through generations sometimes from the women in the family as the only way for girls to protect themselves is to not dress provocatively."

"Reported cases are not taken seriously by police and they usually take the side of the man."

"Toxic masculinity is embedded into our society, deriving from historical roots, whether it's religious institutions and paramilitary activity. Households can perpetuate gender norms and stereotypes through child rearing and everyday casual sexism. There isn't enough being done to change these aspects of our society through education."

Question 14: Do you believe Northern Ireland has a problem with victim-blaming?

Total responses: 1065
'Yes' responses: 87.4%
'No' responses: 1.6%
'Unsure' responses: 11%



Question 15: If you answered yes to Q12, Q13 or Q14, what do you think are the root causes of sexism, misogyny, victim-blaming, rape myths and rape culture?

Total responses: 828

The five most common causes cited by respondents included:

- Religion,
- Patriarchy,
- Culture,
- Lack of education,
- Generational attitudes.

Other responses highlighted issues such as:

- The portrayal of women in the media (and social media),
- The legacy of the Northern Ireland conflict,
- Capitalism.

We would like to highlight some of the qualitative responses to this question. These have been included on the following page.

*"Religion, the education system, people afraid of speaking out and afraid of making changes. We, as women also bring up our sons and the culture of mummy and son, my son wouldn't do that etc etc has to stop. **Laws are one thing changing peoples attitudes is harder.**"*

*"Societal acceptance of toxic masculinity as a norm and **lack of education for both boys and girls on issues around consent, healthy relationships, empathy and acceptable behaviours.**"*

*"Traditional views of women in the home still exist. Political leaders/parties often do little to promote equality. Women in sport under-promoted in the media. Lack of education around the issue of respect for women. **Lack of regulation/policing of social media platforms** And so much more...."*

"Young boys being socialised at a very early age that they are superior than women by their family, media and peers. This then develops into a sense of entitlement over women as they grow older."

"Education, conservative society, transgenerational trauma, legacy of conflict, segregated education system."

*"Patriarchal culture perpetuated over the years through Church Structure (both communities). Media imaging of and pejorative presentation of women (Male Gaze). **Women & girls seen as unequal in society.** Sports culture of toxic masculinity that it is ok to objectify and disrespect women. Page 3 of tabloid papers, the list is endless."*

"Capitalism and the socialisation of men."

*"I think the legacy of conflict and culture of silence and make power certainly has a particular impact in NI. **Years of not talking about violence against women** or only seeing violence as something experienced by men, primarily as physically, has invisibilised VAWG."*

The patriarchal, religious structure of the NI culture which is propped up by our history of violence and the political manipulation of deep seated fears of men involved with the troubles and the legacy of the troubles. This is further compounded by **lad culture and toxic masculinity, where being a 'hard man' is revered** and seen as a leadership trait in communities where community development is anchored in workers who are (ex?) combatants as role models. I also do not think there is a political option for equality based thinking outside the traditional split which means the issues women work to address are downgraded in terms of importance as politicians manipulate the legacy of the troubles to stay in power."

The current economic and power structures require that women - or at least certain groups of women - are **excluded from equal access to rights and resources** in order to provide free/cheap caring labour. Shame, fear and stigma are effective ways to enforce this, including by having women police themselves and each other.

I feel it comes from years of women being told to do whatever and whenever their husbands want, even if you don't. It comes from no clear boundaries in society. Social media. Even marketing how many TV advertising has a sexual hint in it. Rape culture comes from 'guy talk' that is supposedly ok to say because your with the 'lads.' There needs to be proper education about consent, no means no at any time. Also women/girls need to be educated on all the platforms of abuse otherwise it will continue. **Society also needs to stop sex shaming girls for having more than one partner** - a guy is a hero, a girl is a slut- because this also plays a part as to why women/girls feel they shouldn't report it.

“Class and nationality background being used to stigmatise that these are only issues that effect other communities.”

“I think it can be embarrassing to admit you are a victim because it can make you think people will believe it's your fault and there is something wrong with you. Especially if the abuse is done by a parent or partner it makes you think you are unlovable because they should love you the most.”

“Men are uncomfortable at hearing that the issue is male violence and get defensive, wrongfully taking it personally when the issue of male violence is raised. This leads to victims' experiences being diminished for the sake of men's comfort, often mob mentality kicks in and men will defend their gender instead of listening to the victim.”

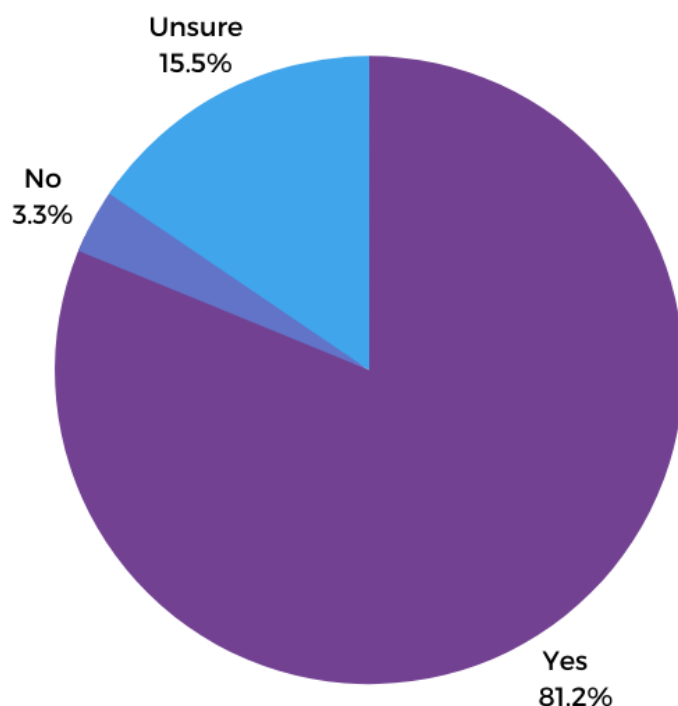
Question 16: Do you believe there is stigma surrounding issues of violence against women and girls?

Total responses: 1065

'Yes' responses: 81.2%

'No' responses: 3.3%

'Unsure' responses: 15.5%



Question 17: If you answered yes to Q16, why do you believe there is stigma surrounding these issues?

Total responses: 680

Recurring responses to this question included the following:

- Male defensiveness e.g. “not all men” comments,
- Misogyny,
- Lack of compassion,
- Vilification of those who speak out,
- Lack of respect for women,
- Shame,
- Linked to mental health stigma,
- Lack of understanding,
- Victim-blaming,
- Society doesn't believe or support victims.

Other examples of responses have been included on the following page.

Men are uncomfortable at hearing that the issue is male violence and get defensive, wrongfully taking it personally when the issue of male violence is raised. This leads to **victims' experiences being diminished for the sake of men's comfort**, often mob mentality kicks in and men will defend their gender instead of listening to the victim.

It's considered a lower class issue.

It's not talked about enough, it is hushed up and not highlighted enough.

Too many people are uncomfortable with thinking someone they know could be violent and so wouldn't be believed.

I think a lot of it comes from generational issues and patriarchal attitudes. Women were seen to be subservient to men and shouldn't question things. So all of these issues were secretive and kept to themselves for fear of rocking the boat. Lots of **gender stereotyping where girls/women taught to be soft and gentle** and not assertive or speak out about things.

The nature of sexual violence is destruction of the victim and victims can shut the trauma away to protect themselves from any other damage. The mental aspects of such criminal offences are so personal and complicated that the stigma is sometimes from within. That's the really difficult situation and I'm sure a direct result of **insidious misogynistic indoctrination**.

*Because it is seen as a private matter.
Because it requires acknowledgement of attitudes and historic abuses and neglect.*

"Fear of backlash, not knowing they deserve better, lack of easy ways to get help, lack of trust in police and lack of appropriate response by police and courts."

"Race, background, person having friends in the PSNI/prosecution, paramilitaries."

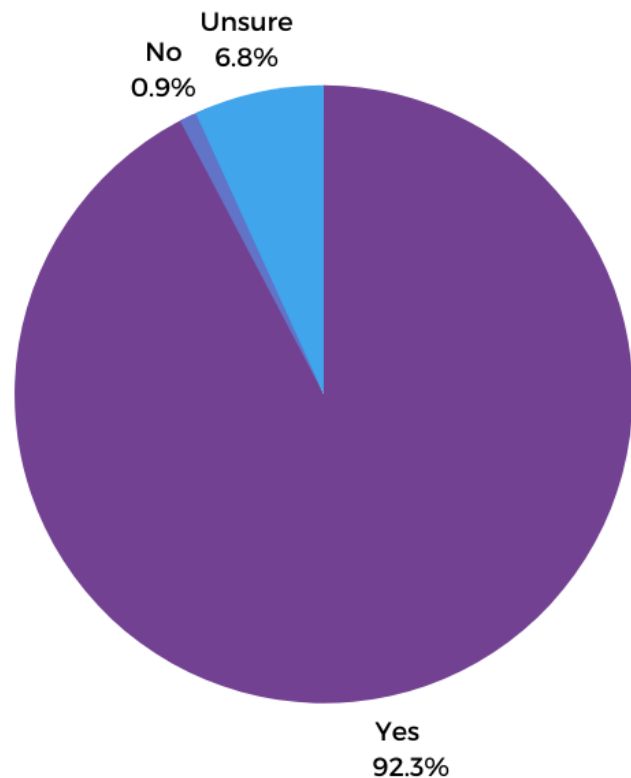
"Victim blaming/ perceived self blame/ fear of not being believed/ shunned by community/ bringing shame to a family, community."

"Women know the low prosecution rate for sexual assaults. Also courts constantly do not take protective or appropriate action when abusers breach court orders. Women lose trust in the system and the lack of enforcement from first offence emboldens perpetrators and abusers have scant regard for authority to start with."

Barriers to reporting

Question 18: Do you believe there are barriers to people reporting when they have been victims of men's violence against women and girls?

Total responses: 1065
'Yes' responses: 92.3%
'No' responses: 0.9%
'Unsure' responses: 6.8%



Question 19: If you answered yes to Q18, what do you think the barriers are to victims in reporting?

Total responses: 863

The five most common barriers cited by respondents included:

- Concerns about not being believed
- Fear about being stigmatised or judged
- Shame
- Victim-blaming
- Stigma



Other common responses:

- Lack of prosecution
- Lack of support thorough legal and justices systems
- Threat of more violence

The following quotes are examples of other responses we received to this question:

*"Often the victim knows the perpetrator and there are many reasons why she might not report. She may be in a relationship with him, she might love him, have children with him, be protecting her children from getting social services involved. She may also think there is no evidence and **why would they believe her anyway?** She may not want to relive the trauma by reporting it."*

*"Lack of female officers. Lack of officers trained in this type of crime. Lack of convictions for this type of crime could make a victim wonder **what even is the point of going through this ordeal of reporting** if it leads to no punishment."*

*"Fear of not being believed, the very real trauma of having the details of the worst thing that's ever happened to you made public for others to comment and pass judgement on, the reality that it is GRUELLING to go through the justice system and will take years and even at the end the conviction rate is very low. And if you have insecure immigration status, fear of police ignoring your report and focusing on immigration instead, or fear that **as a woman with no recourse to public funds reporting abuse could mean you are destitute**. For LGBTQ+, fear that you may get a homophobic or transphobic police officer that adds to the trauma of reporting and what you've been through."*

*"Feeling they will not get the support they need from the relevant agencies, afraid they may be blamed, shamed and victim shamed. Unaware of who and where to report incidents/assaults too. Lack of education of what constitutes sexual assault/harrassment themselves. **Being from a religious family or community may make it difficult reporting incidents**. Being afraid to report violence against them as they do not believe their case will be taken seriously or result in anything."*

*"Conviction rates are so low why would you put yourself through it? Also **I don't massively trust the police**. Look at things like how they policed BLM protests and that pic of the chief constable posing with a massive gun in south Armagh one Christmas really impacted me."*

*"Not knowing that certain behaviours constitute VAG, many are normalised. If we don't see and hear about it, we don't recognise and response to it. The history of relations with police and communities/lack of trust in the police and **a culture of not touting** make reporting difficult. Low conviction rates and the nature of rape trials can also be a barrier to reporting sexual violence."*

“Educate our boys, hold them to account, and get them to hold each other to account and call out each other's misogyny.”

“Intersectional education starting at primary school age that promotes positive, healthy relationships. A judicial system that actually serves justice. A complete cultural overhaul where men are accountable for their actions.”

“Initiatives trying to stop victims being victims just reinforces that it's the woman's of girls responsibility. Moving the focus onto perpetrators seems more appropriate.”

“As the problem runs through the culture and society, systemic change is required in everything from media to education, policing, healthcare, justice, employers and workplaces, religious communities, trade unions, political parties etc.”

Tackling men's violence

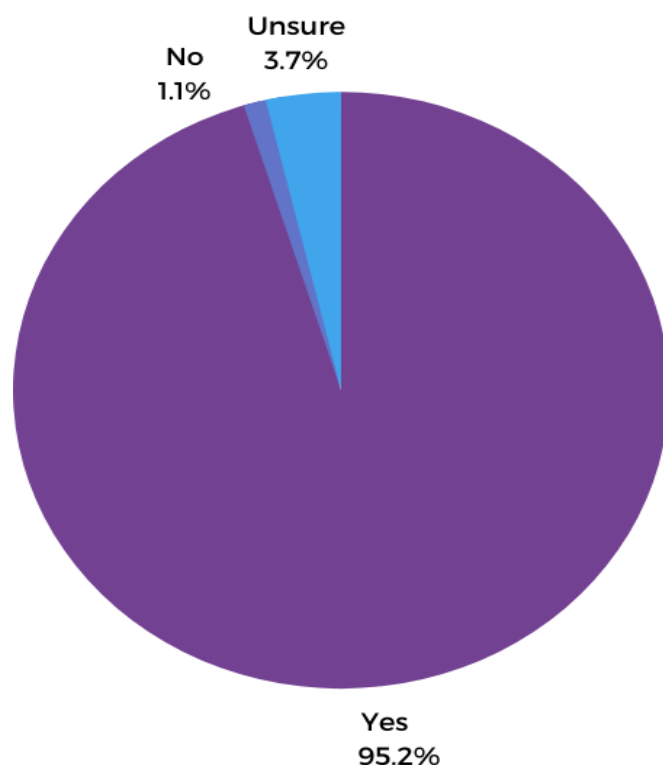
Question 20: Do you think that reducing levels of violence against women and girls requires focusing on changing men and boys' behaviours and actions?

Total responses: 1065

'Yes' responses: 95.2%

'No' responses: 1.1%

'Unsure' responses: 3.7%



Question 21: If you answered yes to Q19, what sort of measures do you think are necessary to change men and boys' actions?

Total responses: 877

Education was the most commonly cited response to this question, with many specifically referring to the importance of starting this at a young age and introducing adequate relationships and sexuality education (RSE) in schools.

*Better education around relationships, sex and consent starting from a young age. Learning about respect and **respect for difference**. Help for men and boys to challenge things that they feel/know are wrong among their friends/strangers.*

Other common responses included:

- Justice system reform,
- Increasing public awareness,
- Legal reform,
- Tackling sexist societal attitudes,
- Address the media portrayal of women.



"You don't need to sing to the choir. So telling girls how to handle men's violence is a waste of time. Go to boys schools. Go look at what boys are consuming online. Talk to old men in pubs and clubs. Talk to male teachers. Go out to the GAA clubs and the tractor meetups. Those are the spaces you need to target."

"We need to recognise this problem for what it is - it is MEN'S violence against women and girls. Simply saying "violence against women and girls" makes it seem like this violence is happening out of nowhere. **Men need to change their behaviour** and a first step is actually giving this strategy the proper name."

"I think we need a cultural shift to change men and boys behaviour. I think that comes when men and boys face consequence for their actions. By this I mean losing social capital - when we hear whispers of certain men being creepy we should not go. When a football team hires a rapist, there should be consequences. **There should be constant challenging conversations happening within men's groups** - not a box ticking of "we have the women in to talk to us so that's all sorted."

Boys and men are the problem but also the solution. We need our sons, brothers, fathers, uncles, friends to challenge this behaviour. This also **needs to be part of the curriculum at schools**, for both girls and boys as some women also perpetuate this.

"Changing attitudes at an early age, highlighting lived experiences, publicity (including in schools) and not just violent behaviour but using examples which often get misread as normal behaviour or overlooked i.e. minor comments, control issues which don't seem that bad in a single event/moment but are more likely happening on a regular basis over time and people don't see the bigger picture (or don't want to)."

Understanding patriarchy and how it is embedded in our society and how it is [un]acceptable and we buy into it.

Tackling myths, toxic masculinity, 'banter' and 'boys will be boys' mentality, focus on equality for women. But also **investing in education and mental health** services for both men and women.

"If this strategy does not work for the most marginalised women and girls, then it is not a human rights-based strategy."

"Support facilities and resources available which are mindful of the specific needs of the groups."

"Take in consideration that trans women are more vulnerable and have less options for getting help because of societal stigma, but also stigma within some 'women only' safe spaces."

"Increased awareness of the specific issues and cultural needs of certain groups. Improved communication methods and language resources."

"Language barriers and cultural expectations can prevent women from speaking out."

Intersectional Impacts of Men's Violence

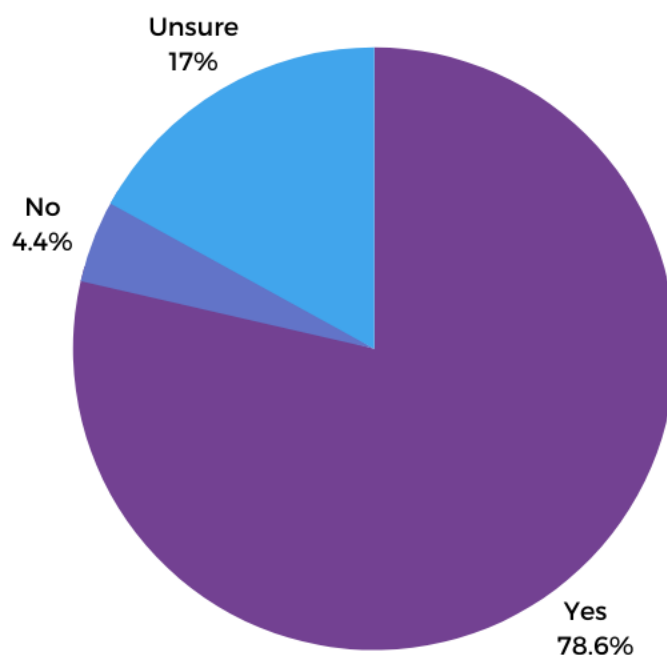
Question 22: Different groups of marginalised women can face additional types of abuse (e.g. disabled women, black or minority ethnic women, migrant women, LGBTQ+ women, traveller women, rural women etc.). Do you think additional action needs to be taken in this strategy to address men's violence against these groups of women?

Total responses: 1065

'Yes' responses: 78.6%

'No' responses: 4.4%

'Unsure' responses: 17%



Question 23: If you answered yes to Q22, could you please expand on what additional factors need to be considered or what additional action needs to be taken to support these women?

Total responses: 569

The most common responses to this question included:

- Funded specialised support services,
- Accessible and inclusive education,
- Listen to those lived experiences,
- Early intervention and preventative measures,
- Better knowledge and understanding of the barriers faced,
- More community-led support.



Other examples of responses to this question included:

*"Much more complex for these groups as it is dealing with intersectionality - this needs to be recognised and tackled on various fronts not just because they are a woman. There needs to be **more resources put into this work** as often there is not the data/evidence to support the issues they face."*

*"Women, and therefore violence against women must be seen as the diverse issue that it is. **Women are not one homogenous group** and experiences differ significantly between women. Any work that hopes to address violence against women should engage with intersectionality in a meaningful way."*

"Marginalised women need to be included in any discussion/debate about policies as only they know what it is like to experience men's violence from their cultural/social perspective."

*"Violence against women in traveller communities has been quite prevalent and difficult to challenge as these women are **more vulnerable and less autonomy** in decision making for example".*

Experiences of LGBTQI+ women

I think in particular transwomen are in need of protection because of the change in the political climate around transwomen in particular (but all trans individuals). It distresses me deeply that we allow our media outlets to perpetuate straight up lies and myths that used to be levelled against queer people, now just against people who are trans. I also think that **recognising that abuse is often intersectional is key to preventing it**. We cannot discuss the rights of girls and women without also speaking about how misogyny often goes hand in hand with ableism, racism, homophobia and xenophobia.

As a lesbian, I've been groped by as many gay men as straight men. **Men collectively need to understand consent** and that touching you only touch if invited. I think some men hide behind their sexuality.

Experiences of disabled women

From my experience I lived undiagnosed with ADHD and Autism until age 27. Autistic girls need extra support and guidance to navigate this area, these situations and understand them. This includes those undiagnosed so the basic information on handling such situations and how to say no or safely escape needs to be presented to ALL girls. Autistic women are at much higher risk of experiencing gender based violence and of committing suicide. As a queer and non-binary person I wish education around same sex couples was given. I was bullied (physically and verbally) for being bi sexual when young and it made me reject women and date older men to make myself look straighter which led to many more problems. **I had absolutely no sex education from my school.**

I've explained a bit of this above, but for starters, disabled and neurodivergent people need specially trained keyworkers to help us deal with all the different dimensions of what it means to report abuse and to try to leave an abuse situation. We simply don't have the level of freedom and autonomy that even a non-disabled abuse victim has. Leaving an abuser can take us out of the catchment areas of services or supportive people we depend on. Nothing in the system is set up with us in mind, and the expectations of services like Women's Aid that we be "independent" impose problematic additional pressures on us before we can benefit from their help. Often, services that people assume will help us do not - I have gone from pillar to post in the social work system, as three different departments have passed me around, and the much-lauded Citizens Advice gave me inaccurate info about benefits. You can't say this is separate from the issue of reporting abuse in the first place, because for us, **reporting is more dangerous than for other victims** and we cannot report unless we know that we have a genuine safety net waiting in terms of real practical tailored help to leave. Communication differences of neurodivergent people need to be part of the training of all agencies involved, also. And in general, services need to be codesigned and coproduced with disabled and neurodivergent people in order for meaningful improvements to happen.

"I was told that there was not enough evidence and I would lose in court as it would be his word against mine. I think there should be more done to stop taking the attackers word for everything."

"As a victim I got no help whatsoever from police or victim support.. I had to ring all the time and ask what happened in court nobody would have told me otherwise."

"It seems that getting convictions for rape or violence against woman are not being taken on board by the Public Prosecution Service as they ultimately make the decision to take the case to court."

"Stop treating the reputation of a man as a paramount feature. Stop putting the victim under trial for how she dressed, what make up, what underwear, alcohol consumption, whether she's ever had an abortion, if she's on the pill."

Justice System Reform

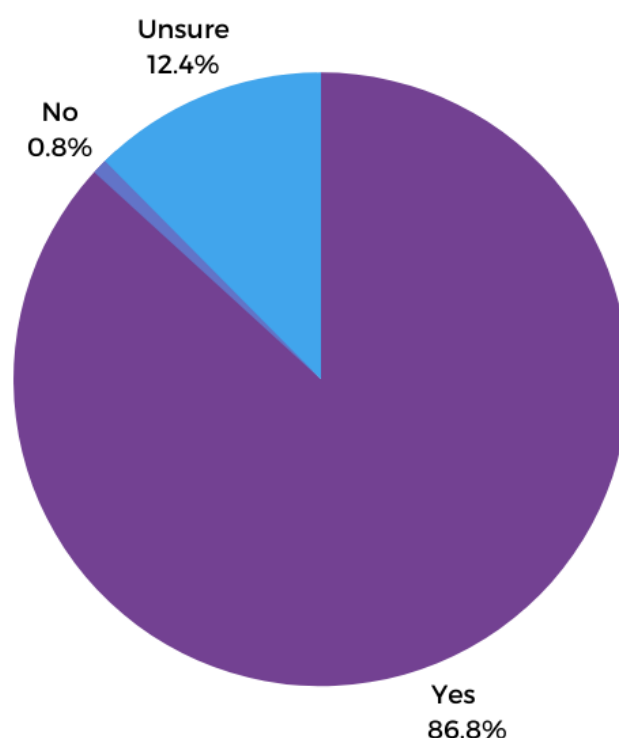
Question 24: Do you think there needs to be a review of how the justice system treats victims and survivors of men's violence against women and girls?

Total responses: 1065

'Yes' responses: 86.8%

'No' responses: 0.8%

'Unsure' responses: 12.4%



Question 25: If you answered yes to Q24, what sort of changes would you like to see within the justice system in relation to men's violence against women and girls?

Total responses: 675

The most common responses to this question included:

- End victim blaming in court
- More support for victims
- Harsher punishment for perpetrators
- No references to women's sexual history in court
- Higher prosecution rates
- Address retraumatisation of victims
- Protect anonymity of victims
- Address myths about the prevalence of false accusations
- More representation of women



Other examples of responses:

"Men being held to account for their actions, less victim blaming in court, protection in the courtroom. Not being questioned by the abuser."

*"Guarantee anonymity. Don't put the women on trial if they press charges. **No turning a blind eye** to cops w/no compassion or understanding."*

"Higher prosecution of rape cases, better victim support, faster systems, less victim blaming / shaming, laws that actually tackle the issues."

"Make it easier for women to come forward to actually convict men."

*"So difficult to "prove" historical abuse, women need support when they are giving details of assaults etc. And ongoing support after women have testified, given evidence. **Ensuring women are safe** after testifying against perpetrators."*

*"System is weighted against women and girls and results in retraumatising victims and victim shaming. **Needs a root and branch review** that respects the rights of complainants as well as alleged perpetrators. Weighted towards the rights of [women]."*

*Yes absolutely. As stated before I took my abuser to court. It was like the knife was twisted even deeper. It was the most painful and drawn out system. It took 5 years as he was allowed to use every trick in the book to delay and delay the court. He was on legal aid and it cost tax payers thousands. I found it really hard to continue working and moving on with my life. I was constantly re traumatised all the time. It's a very very unfair system. The brave lady it takes to come out and speak up should be wrapped in cotton wool and protected at all costs. No questions asked. The fear I lived through remains with me to this day. **I spoke up to get justice and protect other women.** Future women should be protected, encouraged to speak up and protected against their perpetrators.*

PSNI believing women and investigating fully, also understanding why women choose to stay in abusive relationships and that they still deserve support.

Guaranteed anonymity for the women and girls while proceedings are carried out.

More awareness of the trauma experienced by women and girls who enter the criminal justice system for theft, addiction issues as this can be a direct response to the trauma experienced from abuse and during abuse, **more women centred approaches**, a zero tolerance in the courts of highlighting what a woman was wearing or her past sexual encounters during prosecution, particularly in the case of women who experienced abuse as a child.

Better victim support. Zero tolerance legislation that is clearly defined for police to act upon. Clear definitions for fair trials but **an overhaul in how barristers question female victims**, use of language, questioning of sexual history should be scrutinised for relevance to the case before it goes before a jury. Jury made up of diverse people.

My experience of family court was horrific. My children were made to have contact with their father despite his violent nature to both myself and them. If a man displays violence the **justice system should be protecting children from further trauma** not placing them in their unsupervised care.

Better understanding of trauma and changes to how the court system works. Victims brave enough to face down their perpetrator must be protected and supported.

"State violence such as institutional abuse or denying women healthcare such as abortion or perinatal mental health support which can lead to their deaths needs to be included."

"Addressing somehow the intense culture of shame created here by past and ongoing state violence as well as the past and ongoing influence of the church on communities."

"A believe a stand alone policy/ investigation into State violence against women and girls is required."

"Denying women abortion is in itself violence against women/transgender people therefore they need to roll out access to this instead of continuing to push it off. The state is leading the example here and should stop blurring the lines between state and religion as it is creating more problems."

State Violence

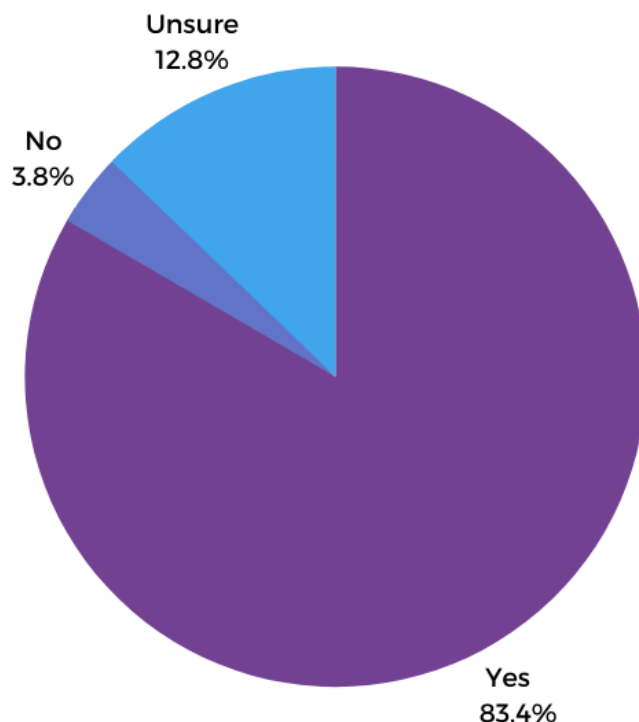
Question 26: Do you believe that state violence against women and girls (for example, the mother and baby institutions, denying access to reproductive healthcare or diminishing women's human rights) should be included within this strategy?

Total responses: 1065

'Yes' responses: 83.4%

'No' responses: 3.8%

'Unsure' responses: 12.8%



In this section we would also like to highlight some of the qualitative responses we received to various survey questions relating to state violence and the importance of addressing it as a form of violence against women and girls. In particular, we received a high volume of responses relating to state violence that specifically cited denying access to abortion and the mother and baby institutions as forms of violence against women and girls. For example:

"Institutions should not be allowed to investigate themselves. A properly trained police force should be responsible for all allegations, social media should be held accountable for content, gender stereotypes begin with fairy stories, educate our females so they realise their own worth, teach self-defence to all girls and young women as part of PE curriculum, **educate boys and young men with a proper sex education programme.** Porn distorts reality of relationships. I actually despair that we can undo the propensity for violence."

"A believe a stand-alone policy/ investigation into State violence against women and girls is required."

"Denial of abortion care, unacceptable waiting lists for contraception and **lack of comprehensive RSE are systemic acts of violence against women** that must be addressed and tackled immediately."

In response to Question 27 of our survey, which asked respondents if there was anything else they would like to see included within the Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy, we received the following detailed response, relating to state violence.

State violence is the most harmful... leading the way for all other violence which seems acceptable by comparison. From my experience I suffered endometriosis from age 16 and every doctor at every appointment minimised my pain, ignored me, told me I wouldn't be treated unless I was planning pregnancy, told me to get pregnant to remove symptoms, told me essentially my early death is not as important as the potential for my womb to reproduce. I was repeatedly given birth control that I told them made me suicidal to tackle my pain when it didn't work. **I was refused the surgery to identify and treat the endo because I wasn't actively trying for a baby.** My school reported my agonising symptoms of vomiting, passing out from pain etc to my parents as 'Drug abuse'. My doctor at age 16 made inappropriate and creepy comments about my body when I went for an implant birth control (which was supposed to help the pain but made everything worse, 16 year old girls shouldn't be given such a high dose of hormones especially when PCOS and ENDO affect the hormonal system). My mental health problems were ignored then misdiagnosed for a decade until I took out a loan to get a private assessment and was able to access support for ADHD and Autism and correctly identify depression, anxiety and PTSD and prescribe effective medication. I had waited on NHS waiting list for 1 year prior to this to access mental health support and after one year waiting and one 20 minute phone call where I had to recall a huge amount of trauma, I was told no support available..... and was left on my own... again. And of course the fact women in NI STILL CANNOT ACCESS FREE SAFE ABORTION CARE.



"I believe a stand-alone policy/ investigation into State violence against women and girls is required."

"Implementation of UN resolution 1325."

"Police and others need to have the power to help these women."

"Easier access to abortion and harsher penalties for those who stand outside institutions giving abuse."

"Proper funding for those agencies that deal with VAWG - be it women's aid or the police service. There needs to be significant resource devoted to the issues."

"I think the key to this strategy will be to not make it reactive. Because if we're only focusing on justice, we're focusing only on responding to violence, not preventing it. Real cultural change needs to happen, and it's this VAWG strategy that needs to be the driver behind that."

Content of VAWG Strategy

Question 27: Finally, is there anything else that you would like to share that you think the WPG should be calling for within the Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy?

Total responses: 409

*Ongoing support, but most of all, do not simply write a strategy and then not fully implement that strategy. review that strategy regularly, monitor the strategy, evaluate and most of all make changes, **it should be a living strategy**, not set in stone for time in memorial but most importantly, implement, act and stop talking and of course it goes without saying, ensure ongoing reliable sustained funding.*

The most common responses to this question included:

- More education to address patriarchal culture,
- Address state violence against women and girls,
- Focus on preventative rather than reactive measures,
- Accessible abortion provision is needed,
- Address inter-related forms of violence,
- Stronger punishment for perpetrators,
- Stronger equality legislation is needed,
- Reform school curriculums,
- Funding is needed for women's support services,
- Ensure Strategy is fully resourced and actionable.

Some other interesting observations about the responses to this question include the high levels of those working in education (school principals and teachers) that expressed support for the introduction of education measures on VAWG, RSE and wanting to be involved in seeing these introduced in their schools. For example:

"As a school principal, I would be happy to roll out a program addressing the ideology of male superiority and of inequality."

I think a key element is ensuring that boys engage with the topic from a young age. There should be space on primary school curriculum to allow children to explore gender relations, how it may affect them growing up and how beliefs/action can both enable and disable this. **If they are old enough to experience it, they are old enough to learn about it** in an age appropriate way. This should continue throughout their education.

There needs to be a complete overhaul of the judicial system here in Northern Ireland. Perps simply have to be held accountable regarding their offences against women children and should have to face the full force of the law!!

Social media needs to have a focus on it as the amount of **online abuse is getting worse**. There need to be consequences for it.

Specific recommendations for what universities can do to end gender based violence. Universities represent thousands of women in NI. Student areas such as the Holylands see high levels of street harassment and sexual assault, many students also live on very low income meaning they **don't have disposable income to be able to leave violent homes** etc. University culture means young women within these spaces are regularly victim to sexual harassment etc. The institution does nothing, and will continue to do nothing until forced to by the assembly through a strategy.

Educate, educate, educate! From as early an age as possible. I see huge barriers in the form of the dominance of organised religion in NI politics and education - particularly those who would be referred to as 'fundamentalist Christians' in other parts of the world. This includes Catholics as well as Protestants - NI will find it difficult to get beyond the narrow view of women (and the belief in a woman's subservient place in the family and in society) which has been put forward by organised religions for thousands of years! NI is a particularly strong hold-out for those views it would seem. **It will take another generation at least to overcome these.**

Equality for women in the workforce.

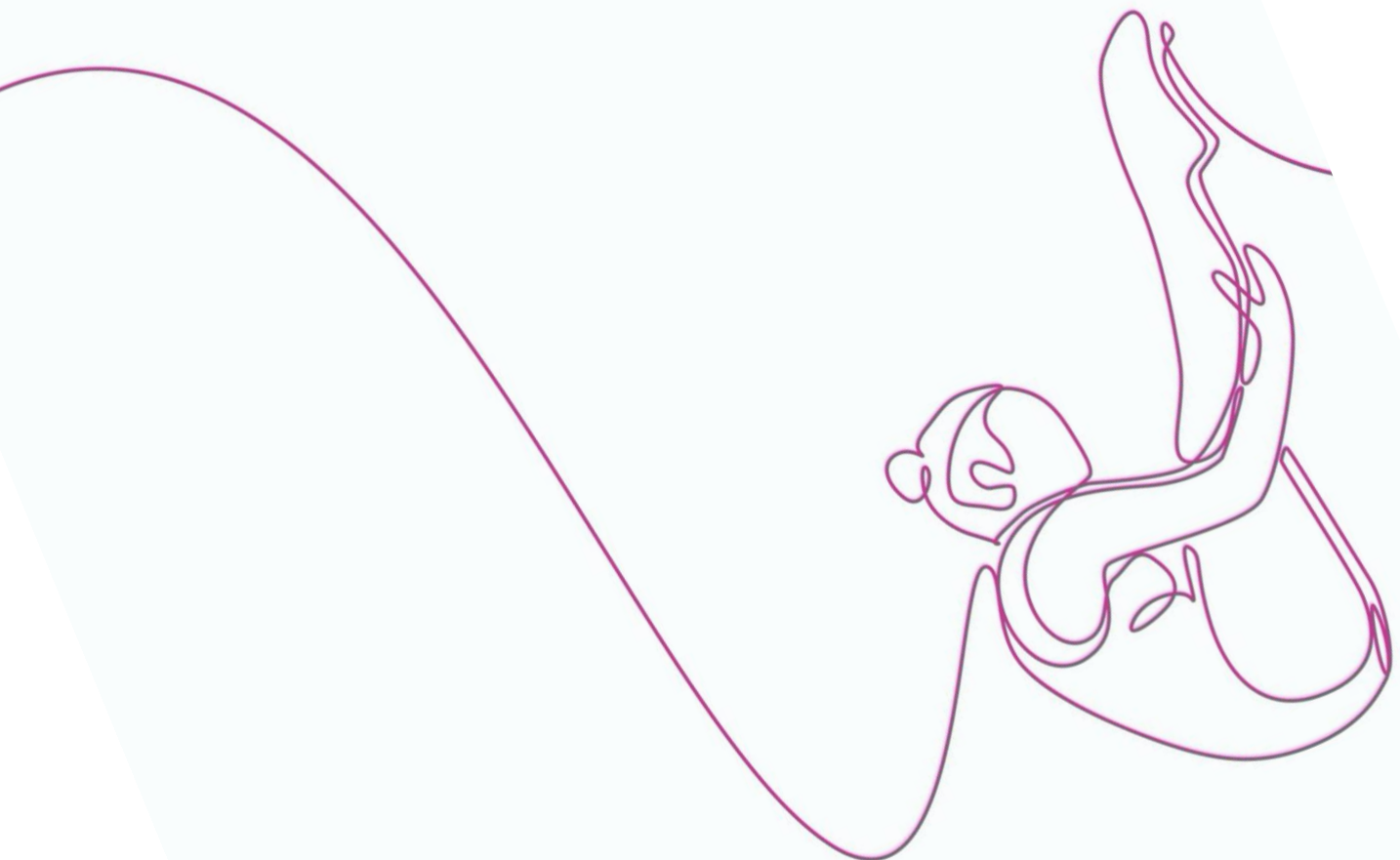
Summary

It is clear from the findings of this research that Northern Ireland has a significant problem with men's violence against women and girls. This research by the Women's Policy Group shows that **91.2%** of women think that Northern Ireland has a problem with men's violence against women and girls and **97.2%** think that Northern Ireland should have a strategy to tackle men's violence against women and girls. Through an analysis of our survey data, the following three key themes emerged:

1. The importance of education,
2. Our justice system is failing victims,
3. Men's violence must be directly addressed.

Through this research, we heard from over 1000 women in Northern Ireland and the picture that emerges from their testimonies is clear: targeted action must be urgently taken to eradicate men's violence and make Northern Ireland a safer place for women and girls. Currently, our legal system and justice system are failing women and girls, the vast majority of whom have been impacted by men's violence but never reported this to the police.

It is the responsibility of our elected officials, legislators, public officials and those working in the justice system to put legislation, policy and other necessary measures in place to tackle the increasing levels of violence against women and girls and meaningfully engage with the women's sector in doing so.



Conclusion

The Women's Policy Group have been campaigning on issues relating to men's violence against women and girls for decades. However, until now, we have not had a robust data base to comprehensively illustrate the scope, scale and prevalence of violence against women and girls in Northern Ireland. This research report has compiled the findings from pioneering research conducted by the NI Women's Policy Group into the current state of affairs regarding this violence. These findings should be used to inform policy and legislative decision-making by all public authorities, including the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly, local councils, the police service of Northern Ireland and human rights and equality public bodies.

This research report was compiled and written by an Independent Research Contractor, Aoife Mallon, contracted by the Women's Resource and Development Agency. If you would like any further information on this report, please contact:

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