

# Women's Policy Group NI

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## WPG NI Response to Westminster Northern Ireland Affairs Committee Call for Evidence: The Effect of Paramilitaries on Society in Northern Ireland

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Contact:

Rachel Powell, Women's Sector Lobbyist, [rachel.powell@wrda.net](mailto:rachel.powell@wrda.net) /

Aoife Mallon, Women's Sector Lobbyist Policy Assistant, [aoife.mallon@wrda.net](mailto:aoife.mallon@wrda.net) /

Elaine Crory, Advocacy & Project Coordinator, [elaine.crory@wrda.net](mailto:elaine.crory@wrda.net)

# **Women's Policy Group NI Response to Westminster Northern Ireland Affairs Committee Call for Evidence: The Effect of Paramilitaries on Society in Northern Ireland (May 2022)**

## Summary Briefing

This response will specifically examine the effect of paramilitaries on women in Northern Ireland by highlighting their lived experiences as captured by WPG primary research. In addition, this submission will include responses from women to WPG surveys, who have consistently highlighted the problem of paramilitaries in relation to violence against women and girls in Northern Ireland.

### **Key topics covered:**

- Paramilitarism, Gate Keeping and Control of Funding
- Race hate crime and paramilitarism
- Paramilitarism during the pandemic
- The need for UK application of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace and Security to Northern Ireland
- Honour-based Abuse (and its links to paramilitarism)
- Concerns relating to New Decade, New Approach Agreement
- Online abuse and threats against women when discussing paramilitaries

### **Findings from WPG Primary Research:**

- The WPG Feminist Recovery Plan Primary Research Project,<sup>1</sup>
- The WPG Protection from Stalking Bill Primary Research Project<sup>2</sup> and,
- The WPG Violence Against Women and Girls Primary Research Project<sup>3</sup>.

In total, the WPG has engaged with over 1200 women in Northern Ireland through this research. Although we did not directly ask women about their experiences with paramilitarism in this research, women repeatedly raised issues relating to paramilitarism and anonymously provided us with personal stories, which we have included in this response.

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<sup>1</sup> Women's Policy Group (2021) WPG COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan Supplementary Research Report: [Putting Women's Voices at the Core](#)

<sup>2</sup> Women's Policy Group (2021) Joint Evidence Submission to Justice Committee on the Protection From Stalking Bill: [WPG Joint Submission on Stalking Bill](#)

<sup>3</sup> Women's Policy Group (2022) 'Just a Fact of Life: Violence Against Women and Girls in Northern Ireland' [WPG Primary Research Findings](#).

## **Summary of Recommendations:**

### ***Paramilitarism, Gate Keeping and Control of Funding:***

- Practical guidance and assistance for those in poverty, integrated with and informed by the Anti-Poverty Strategy, that will divert vulnerable people from accessing loans from loan sharks by providing practical short-term and long-term routes out of poverty.
- A scoping exercise into the practicalities of adopting a policy position that advocates for the decriminalisation and regulation of drugs, so that this powerful method of community control and financial reward is taken out of the hands of paramilitaries.
- Advocate for the application of UNSCR 1325 in Northern Ireland.
- Introduce an urgent reappraisal of the process for awarding of public funds for community work, in order to ensure that these funds reach those most in need and do not perpetuate the issues that the work is designed to address.

### ***Honour-based Abuse (and its links to paramilitarism):***

- Work with community leaders and the voluntary and community sector to raise public awareness on the issue and challenge dominant societal attitudes towards women,
- Ensure funding is attributed to specialist organisations working on both HBA and Domestic Abuse to ensure support organisations can avail of specialist training,
- Update legislation and policy within Northern Ireland to ensure children or adults at risk of HBA are given a safeguarding response to ensure the HBA has been recognised for what it is,
- Develop a strategy for early intervention and consistent intervention/aftercare with those at risk and ensure any upcoming VAWG strategy includes HBA.
- Increase awareness of various forms of HBA across the justice system in Northern Ireland, including Spiritual Abuse and Coercive Control<sup>4</sup> through work with community groups supporting survivors of HBA.

### ***New Decade, New Approach Agreement:***

- Urgent action must be taken to implement all commitments outlined in the NDNA agreement, and these should be embedded into the Programme for Government.

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<sup>4</sup> For more information on spiritual abuse, see: University of Chester, (2021), 'Spiritual Abuse: Coercive Control in Religion', <https://bit.ly/3gZTfM1>; Church Times (2018), 'Understanding Spiritual Times' <https://bit.ly/3zVbv26>; Faith and Violence Against Women and Girls Coalition, (2021), 'Keeping the Faith: What Survivors From Faith Communities Want Us To Know', <https://bit.ly/3zL8uRP>

**Issues relating to paramilitarism for women summary:**

- Loan-sharking and illegal lending,
- Honour-based abuse,
- Control of communities and online abuse,
- Gender-based violence and reporting.

## **1. Introduction**

The [Women's Policy Group Northern Ireland](#) (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, LGBTQ+ organisations, migrant groups, support service providers, NGOs, human rights and equality organisations and individuals.

The WPG is endorsed as a group that advocates for 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.

WRDA is the secretariat of the Women's Policy Group and this submission was developed on behalf of the WPG. WRDA is a feminist membership organisation that was established in 1983 and our work covers lobbying, policy, Good Relations, health promotion and training.

### **1.1 Endorsements**

The WPG would like to endorse the response submitted to this consultation by the Northern Ireland Women's Regional Consortium (WRC), which is a coalition of women's organisations (with several as members of the WPG) that acts as the established link and strategic partner between government and statutory agencies and women in disadvantaged and rural areas in Northern Ireland.

## **2. General Comments - The impact of paramilitaries on women in Northern Ireland**

This response will specifically examine the effects of paramilitaries on women in Northern Ireland by highlighting their lived experiences, as captured by WPG primary research. Through this research, we have heard from women across Northern Ireland who have consistently highlighted the problem of paramilitaries, in relation to violence against women and girls..

Before detailing this evidence, we would like to share some of the experiences of women's sector colleagues which relate to the impact of paramilitarism on women in

Northern Ireland, and the barriers women face in participating in public life and peacebuilding. Further information regarding women in politics, public life, peacebuilding and decision-making in Northern Ireland can be found under the Social Justice Pillar of the full relaunched WPG Feminist Recovery Plan which is available [here](#).

### ***Online abuse and threats against women when discussing paramilitaries***

Advocating for gender equality in Northern Ireland often requires those working in the Women's Sector to have public-facing roles. For example, colleagues regularly present evidence to government bodies, Departments and Committees. The systemic and institutionalised misogyny in society means that women in public-facing roles are particularly vulnerable to abuse and harassment as a result of their work.

Members of the Women's Policy Group and colleagues in the wider Women's Sector regularly face intimidation, online abuse and defamation following public appearances, particularly if they discuss paramilitarism in our society. For example, after giving oral evidence to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee last summer, Women's Sector colleagues received threats and a significant amount of online abuse after discussing the impact of paramilitarism on women in Northern Ireland.

This kind of behaviour is difficult to challenge because its source is opaque, especially when it is by anonymous online accounts. However, quite often, this abuse is instigated by public figures in Northern Ireland with a large platform and links to credible political leaders. Comments made online are often deleted or removed, but the ideas and misconceptions they spread remain in the public realm.

### ***Recommendation:***

- A commitment from political leaders and media outlets not to amplify or give cover to people who engage in this behaviour is vital to allow women to speak about these issues without fear for their own safety.

### **3. WPG Feminist Recovery Plan**

The WPG NI COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan, originally launched in 2020<sup>5</sup> and relaunched in 2021<sup>6</sup>, highlights the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women and makes several recommendations for addressing this impact. The Plan covers a wide range of topics, including violence against women, health inequalities and the impact of paramilitarism on women and the marginalisation of women in peacebuilding measures and institutions.

A summary of recommendations from the Relaunched WPG Feminist Recovery Plan can be accessed [here](#). The WPG would like to highlight some of our evidence and recommendations from the plan relating to the effects of paramilitarism on women in Northern Ireland.

#### **3.1 Relevant content from the WPG Feminist Recovery Plan**

##### **3.1.1 Paramilitarism, Gate Keeping and Control of Funding**

Paramilitarism is a reality in Northern Ireland and continues to persist 20+ years after the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement. Paramilitary organisations continue to exist, despite, in most cases, ceasefires being in place and the conflict being behind us. Further, many of those who are involved in paramilitary activity are not the same actors that were involved during the conflict and the activities that continue to come under the umbrella name of “paramilitary activity” are not the same as those carried out during the conflict.

Paramilitaries are known to be involved in loan sharking and this particularly impacts upon those with limited incomes, especially women, as shown in research carried out by the Women’s Regional Consortium<sup>7</sup>. This fact increases their control over vulnerable communities while also demonstrating the fact that they are a malign influence.

Race hate crime in Northern Ireland is often linked to paramilitarism. It is a reductive approach to say that a racist hate crime (i.e. intimidation with the intent of forcing

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<sup>5</sup> Women’s Policy Group (2020) ‘WPG NI COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan’ Available here: <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/WPG-NI-Feminist-Recovery-Plan-2020-.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Women’s Policy Group (2020) ‘WPG NI COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan: Relaunch – One Year On’ Available here: <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/WPG-COVID-19-Feminist-Recovery-Plan-Relaunch-One-Year-On.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Making Ends Meet: Women’s Perspectives on Access to Lending, Women’s Regional Consortium, February 2020  
[Making-Ends-Meet-Womens-Perspectives-on-Access-to-Lending.pdf](https://womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/Making-Ends-Meet-Womens-Perspectives-on-Access-to-Lending.pdf)  
([womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk](https://womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk))

someone from their home) committed by a paramilitary member or on the orders of a paramilitary group is a matter of race alone. In communities which have endured and suffered under paramilitary community control for decades, paramilitaries are incentivised to target perceived “newcomer” communities, on the pretext of racism and xenophobia, to justify their grip and coercive control over the community as a whole.

Lockdown may have further entrenched the influence of these groups in local communities, based on the increased levels of unrest and violence in recent months. Evidently, paramilitary organisations continue to recruit new members, and to engage in activities that would ordinarily be categorised as common criminality; loan-sharking, protection rackets, and drug dealing.

Paramilitary-run organisations continue to act as community organisations within vulnerable communities and many are in receipt of public money. These same organisations can act as gatekeepers within their communities, choosing favoured organisations to work alongside and choking off support to groups that may challenge or question paramilitary influence. These organisations are often highly male-dominated, leading to the silencing of women’s voices within the local community, while reinforcing gender divisions.

This problem has been further exacerbated by the UK’s refusal to apply the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 to the Northern Ireland conflict, a situation which must be corrected in order to ensure peace, particularly at this sensitive juncture in our history. We also see the repercussions of this in the relative lack of women’s involvement in politics and public life more generally.

Recent research by the Independent Reporting Commission, compiled by Monica McWilliams, confirms that paramilitary activity remains an issue in Northern Ireland, and laments that civil society has apparently learned to live with it. She describes the situation as one of “coercive control” of entire communities<sup>8</sup>. In addition, paramilitary affiliation, or alleged affiliation, is used to enact coercive control within domestic relationships and after they end. More robust action against these organisations would free up money to be invested in the communities that are currently being harmed by this coercive control, many of which have some of the worst levels of deprivation in the UK and Europe.

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<sup>8</sup> See Independent Reporting Commission: <https://bit.ly/3vTMpNA>



## **Recommendations:**

- Practical guidance and assistance for those in poverty, integrated with and informed by the Anti-Poverty Strategy, that will divert vulnerable people from accessing loans from loan sharks by providing practical short-term and long-term routes out of poverty.
- A scoping exercise into the practicalities of adopting a policy position that advocates for the decriminalisation and regulation of drugs, so that this powerful method of community control and financial reward is taken out of the hands of paramilitaries.
- Advocate for the application of UNSCR 1325 in Northern Ireland.
- Introduce an urgent reappraisal of the process for awarding of public funds for community work, in order to ensure that these funds reach those most in need and do not perpetuate the issues that the work is designed to address.

### **3.1.2 Honour-based Abuse (and its links to paramilitarism)<sup>9</sup>**

Honour-based abuse (HBA) is a prevalent issue that is often misunderstood in Northern Ireland. While gender-based violence is usually described as violence that is directed at a woman because she is a woman or violence that affects women disproportionately<sup>10</sup>, HBA is often described as the violence predominantly inflicted on women who are thought to have brought shame and dishonour to their family through actual or perceived immoral behaviour<sup>11</sup>.

The Crown Prosecution Services describe HBA as relating to a collection of practices which are used to control behaviour within families or other social groups to protect

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<sup>9</sup> Please Note: This section, taken from the Feminist Recovery Plan, is informed by the research of Coumilah Manjoo on Honour-Based Abuse in Northern Ireland compared to the rest of the United Kingdom. This research relates to how Inter-Faith, Inter-Racial and Cross-Cultural Marriages can provide additional challenges, including disapproval from families and communities, associations of shame, and the potential for honour-based abuse or violence (HBA/HBV). HBA/HBV is not an attribute to any specific culture, faith or religion -

Manjoo, C. (2018) "'Shame" and "Honour": Comparison of the Prevalence of "Honour"-Based Abuse/Violence in Northern Ireland and the Rest of the United Kingdom', Queen's University Belfast.

<sup>10</sup> The Committee on the elimination of discrimination against women, 'General Recommendations Adopted by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women' (OHCHR 1992) <https://bit.ly/3d6U8S0>

<sup>11</sup> HASP – Honour Ambassadors against Shame Practices, 'Honour Related Violence in the United Kingdom' (HASP – Honour Ambassadors against Shame Practices 2017) 2-90.

perceived cultural and religious beliefs and/or honour<sup>12</sup>. Such behaviour can occur when perpetrators perceive that a relative has shamed the family and/or community by breaking their honour code.

HBA can take place in many forms such as (but not limited to): threatening behaviour, assault, rape, kidnap, abduction, forced abortion, forced marriage, threats to kill and false imprisonment. Worryingly, the UK is considered one of the worst areas within Europe with almost 3000 'honour' attacks per year and 12 'honour' killings per year<sup>13</sup>.

Awareness for HBA is low in Northern Ireland compared to the rest of the UK. It could be argued that it was deprioritised due to ongoing issues relating to the aftermath of the conflict. However, rather than dismissing HBA as an issue that isn't as prevalent in Northern Ireland, an understanding of the unique manifestations of HBA within Northern Ireland must be developed, particularly in how cultural and religious beliefs and the prevalence of paramilitaries can also contribute to HBA.

A 2016 report on 'Intimate Partner Violence in Conflict and Post Conflict Societies,<sup>14</sup>' in collaboration with Women's Aid, highlights **several examples of domestic violence and abuse being perpetuated due to links with paramilitarism and their values, community attitudes and traditional religious belief.**

The lack of understanding or discussion of the 'honour' element of this form of domestic violence will enable this form of abuse to continue as root causes and societal attitudes are not addressed. Further, failing to recognise the 'honour' element of abuse can further prevent victims from speaking up about the abuse they have endured<sup>15</sup>.

### ***Recommendations:***

- Work with community leaders and the voluntary and community sector to raise public awareness on the issue and challenge dominant societal attitudes towards women,

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, n362.

<sup>13</sup> European Parliament, 'Briefing European Parliamentary Research Service' (European Parliament 2015) 4.

<sup>14</sup> Jessica Leigh Doyle and Monica McWilliams, 'Intimate Partner Violence In Conflict And Post-Conflict Societies' (Political Settlements Research Programme (PSRP) 2018) 1-120.

<sup>15</sup> See more in relation to a case involving an elderly woman who spent her life in a mother and baby institution and the impact this had on her long-term: Patsy McGarry, 'Magdalene Laundries: 'I Often Wondered Why Were They So Cruel'' Irish Times (2018)  
<https://bit.ly/3d7phom>

- Ensure funding is attributed to specialist organisations working on both HBA and Domestic Abuse to ensure support organisations can avail of specialist training,
- Update legislation and policy within Northern Ireland to ensure children or adults at risk of HBA are given a safeguarding response to ensure the HBA has been recognised for what it is,
- Develop a strategy for early intervention and consistent intervention/aftercare with those at risk and ensure any upcoming VAWG strategy includes HBA.
- Increase awareness of various forms of HBA across the justice system in Northern Ireland, including Spiritual Abuse and Coercive Control<sup>16</sup> through work with community groups supporting survivors of HBA.

### **3.1.3 New Decade, New Approach Agreement**

The Women's Policy Group has several concerns relating to the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) Agreement. The NDNA made no reference to women and little progress has been made on many of the commitments from this Agreement, despite it being more than two years since it was signed. This includes commitments to work that the women's sector has been heavily involved in, such as the suite of social inclusion strategies, an Executive Childcare Strategy, Climate Change Act, implementation of the Racial Equality Strategy, addressing inadequate access to IVF and other fertility treatments, an Irish Language Act, creating greater transparency within government decision making and more.

Given the unstable political climate in Northern Ireland and the blocking of many pieces of human rights and equality legislation over the last two decades by the Executive, the commitments within the NDNA agreement should be embedded into a programme for government as soon as possible. This could help to prevent the further abuse of the St. Andrew's Veto, particularly in relation to issues affecting women, minority rights and LGBTQ+ people.

#### **Recommendation:**

- Urgent action must be taken to implement all commitments outlined in the NDNA agreement, and these should be embedded into the Programme for Government.

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<sup>16</sup> For more information on spiritual abuse, see: University of Chester, (2021), 'Spiritual Abuse: Coercive Control in Religion', <https://bit.ly/3gZTfM1>; Church Times (2018), 'Understanding Spiritual Times' <https://bit.ly/3zVbv26>; Faith and Violence Against Women and Girls Coalition, (2021), 'Keeping the Faith: What Survivors From Faith Communities Want Us To Know', <https://bit.ly/3zL8uRP>

#### 4. Findings from WPG Primary Research

As previously mentioned, the Women's Policy Group has conducted several pieces of primary research into the experiences of women with a range of issues relating to gender inequality and violence against women and girls. These research projects have included:

- The WPG Feminist Recovery Plan Primary Research Project,<sup>17</sup>
- The WPG Protection from Stalking Bill Primary Research Project<sup>18</sup> and,
- The WPG Violence Against Women and Girls Primary Research Project<sup>19</sup>.

In total, the WPG has engaged with over 1200 women in Northern Ireland through this research. **Although we did not directly ask women about their experiences with paramilitarism in this research, women repeatedly raised issues relating to paramilitarism** and anonymously provided us with personal stories, which we have included below.

Please refer to the full reports (referenced above) for information on methodologies, research methods and signposting/support for victims and survivors.

##### A) Protection from Stalking Bill Primary Research Content:

###### - Paramilitary Involvement in Stalking and VAWG:

*"An abusive ex-fiancé sent me letters, and also his friend, to try to ascertain if I would take him back. This was scary for me as he was emotionally, financially and sexually violent and had drugged me when we were together. **He was also in the paramilitaries.** A man I met in a chippy followed me home and sat outside my house in his car and kept coming back. I gave him my number in the chippy, and he scared me because he said he was watching my house, and my cats. **He also said he was ex PSNI and had done traces on me.** The police didn't really take me seriously because I was on antidepressants at the time... They did find out who he really was but advised against me pursuing charges*

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<sup>17</sup> Women's Policy Group (2021) WPG COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan Supplementary Research Report: [Putting Women's Voices at the Core](#)

<sup>18</sup> Women's Policy Group (2021) Joint Evidence Submission to Justice Committee on the Protection From Stalking Bill: [WPG Joint Submission on Stalking Bill](#)

<sup>19</sup> Women's Policy Group (2022) 'Just a Fact of Life: Violence Against Women and Girls in Northern Ireland' [WPG Primary Research Findings](#).

*because the stalker would only get a rap on the knuckles, at best. And my health would suffer.”*

- Primary Research Respondent

Twenty-three years after the Good Friday / Belfast Agreement, paramilitary activity still exists. We see the public-facing side of this activity quite often, but much is hidden behind closed doors. In the 2018 report Intimate Partner Violence in Conflict and Post-Conflict Societies, referring to 2016 research, Professor Monica McWilliams<sup>20</sup>:

*“The continuation of paramilitary control on women experiencing IPV remains a concern although it is two decades since the cessation of formal paramilitary hostilities. In the 2016 study, 11 of 53 participants (21%) raised the impact of paramilitarism on their lives when asked about the impact and legacy of the conflict in Northern Ireland, making it a relevant issue. The impact of paramilitarism was evident in two main respects: on the one hand, affiliation to paramilitary groups provided a source of power to perpetrators of IPV; while, on the other hand, the armed groups represented an alternative and more rapid response to IPV for victims.”*

She notes also that coercive control was maintained within the home by claims by the perpetrator that they were connected with paramilitary groups.

Paramilitary involvement by the perpetrator - or the suggestion thereof - may make reporting to the PSNI difficult or impossible. It may also mean that surveillance of victims can continue even if a perpetrator is imprisoned, as their affiliations may mean that the victim will still be monitored and controlled.

## **B) Men’s Violence Against Women and Girls Call for Views Primary Research Responses:**

**We received the following responses to the question ‘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?’**

*“Revenge porn, involvement in organised crime eg prostitution, trafficking into domestic labour, **paramilitary or gang violence or threats of to women** - the gender specific nature of that eg threat of*

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<sup>20</sup> [https://www.politicalsettlements.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/2018\\_PSRP-Violence-ReportNI.pdf](https://www.politicalsettlements.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/2018_PSRP-Violence-ReportNI.pdf) pp.57-58

sexual violence, degradation or coerced sexual activity with male gang members to “initiate” into groups.”

**“Paramilitary, educational.”**

**“Sectarian abuse.”**

**We received the following responses to the question ‘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?’**

*“...Friend was held at knife point for two days by a group of three men who brutalised her body, tortured her with cigarette burns and hundreds of knife cuts and repeatedly raped her because she was lesbian. **The men were paramilitary and lived on her street. She never reported it because the police and paramilitaries were on the same side.** Her family left Belfast.”*

*“Raped between ages 4-8, again aged 16, 25, 35. All of my relationships have been abusive, emotionally, physically, financially with coercive behaviour. **My ex got his uvf paramilitary friends to burn me out of my Belfast home with our 2 babies** in 2018, I had to flee to start over in Derry. The court process indulged his abuse, put the babies at risk, allowed him access to our children as a violent drug addict. He has no contact now, we are safe, but he refuses to pay maintenance despite working cash in hand.”*

**We received the following responses to the question ‘What do you think are the root causes of sexism, misogyny, victim-blaming, rape myths and rape culture?’**

*“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."**

**"Toxic masculinity especially that which is caused by the legacy of the troubles.** Lack of proper integrated sex education in schools especially Catholic schools. General attitudes towards women and girls in terms of their place in society and what they can and cannot achieve/what they are good for. We have a real issue with "bro culture" with our young men and boys believing violence against women is funny or something that women ask for especially by dressing or acting in a certain way."

**We received the following responses to the question 'What do you think the barriers are to victims in reporting?'**

**"Paramilitaries,** threat from family members bringing **shame** on the family name."

"In Northern Ireland there are **too many people connected to or pretend to be connected to or involved with paramilitaries.** Also being threatened by their abuser. And loving the abuser. There's no financial support at all if the victim works. Even on a low income. I have seen that with my former colleague and also my friend when she and her dog got beaten up by her ex-partner."

**We received the following response to the question 'What sort of measures do you think are necessary to change men and boy's actions?'**

"Peace education from Primary school up. **The militarization/paramilitarisation of our society stunts boy's emotional growth and promotes harmful ideas** of what it means to be a man. Consent education. Getting them to understand what sexism looks/feels like."

**We received the following responses to the question 'Could you please expand on what additional factors need to be considered or what additional action needs to be taken to support these women?'**

"Women who are disabled are more vulnerable to many types of abuse particularly financial abuse and coercive control. Rural women are at

increased risk of physical violence, easy to cover up signs of domestic abuse when you live on a farm. I know a woman whose husband tried to crush her with a round bale wrapper, she thought to herself that if he succeeded he would be able to claim it was a farm accident. **Loyalist women are less likely to report due to lack of trust in the police and a reluctance to be seen to be bringing the police into the area, paramilitarisation and the pressure that it will be used to make the community look bad, play into the 'thug' narrative.**"

"Cultural norms can vary in different groups, meaning certain women are more at risk. **Loyalist macho culture** should also be listed here."

**We received the following responses to the question 'What sort of changes would you like to see within the justice system in relation to men's violence against women and girls?'**

"Review of rape allegations and trails. Greater recognition that some women offenders are or have been exploited. I think there's a particular need for work around **paramilitary-style groups** and VAW."

**We received the following responses to the question '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?'**

"A focus on Primary Prevention, through Education in all schools. Emotional literacy, rights and responsibilities, relationship education, power, consent, social media, sexual harassment. All children need to be educated and empowered to choose different paths than those modelled in our society. **Violence towards women and girls is a cornerstone of oppression and all forms of violence in Northern Ireland.** Challenging it and changing it will support anti-sectarianism."

"Also need to look at the **linkages with the troubles** - talk to victims and survivors - I would expect a large proportion of women and girls already impacted by the troubles have also been impacted by violence - other strategies need to link in."



## 5. Concluding Remarks

Paramilitarism remains a serious issue in Northern Ireland and continues to impact the lives of those who live here on a daily basis. Paramilitarism has unique impacts on women, which are often overlooked but which must be taken into consideration in any attempts to tackle paramilitarism in Northern Ireland. These include but are not limited to:

- Loan-sharking and illegal lending,
- Honour-based abuse,
- Control of communities,
- Gender-based violence and reporting,
- Online abuse and threats.

*ENDS*<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> For any questions or queries relating to this submission, please contact:

- Rachel Powell, Women's Sector Lobbyist, Women's Resource and Development Agency - [rachel.powell@wrda.net](mailto:rachel.powell@wrda.net),
- Aoife Mallon, Women's Sector Lobbyist Policy Assistant, Women's Resource and Development Agency - [aoife.mallon@wrda.net](mailto:aoife.mallon@wrda.net),
- Elaine Crory, Advocacy and Project Coordinator, Women's Resource and Development Agency - [elaine.croory@wrda.net](mailto:elaine.croory@wrda.net)