

# Women's Policy Group NI

WPG NI Response to TEO Ending VAWG:  
Experiences and Attitudes of 16-year-olds in  
Northern Ireland report - Readership Survey

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## 1. Introduction:

The Women's Policy Group (WPG) is a group of policy experts and practitioners who advocate collectively for women and girls by promoting gender equality through an intersectional feminist lens. We challenge systemic injustice and discrimination affecting women and girls by informing society and influencing policy and law. Our work is informed by women and girls' lived experiences and rooted in international human rights law.

The WPG 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. 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 coalition of expert voices that advocates for women in Northern Ireland on a policy level.

If you have any questions or queries about this response, or would like to discuss this evidence further with the WPG, please contact Elaine Crory, Women's Sector Lobbyist at [elaine.crory@wrda.net](mailto:elaine.crory@wrda.net)

This response was prepared by the following WPG members:

- Elaine Crory – Women's Resource and Development Agency
- Aoife Mallon - Women's Resource and Development Agency
- Karen Devlin - Women's Aid Federation NI
- Danielle Roberts HERe NI
- Aisling Playford - The Rainbow Project

Please note that not all member organisations have specific policy positions on all the areas covered in this response.

## 2. Past Consultations Responses, Evidence Submissions and Briefings:

Several members of the Women's Policy Group have been campaigning on matters relating to Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) for many years and has published a wide range of evidence including various evidence submissions, public consultation responses and specific briefings on this issue. These include:

- Original WPG COVID-19 [Feminist Recovery Plan \(2020\)](#)
- Relunched WPG COVID-19 [Feminist Recovery Plan \(2021\)](#)
- WPG Primary Research into [impact of pandemic on women \(2021\)](#)
- WPG Primary Research into [violence against women and girls in Northern Ireland \(2022\)](#)

## 2.1. WPG primary research findings on VAWG

We would like to take this opportunity to highlight some of the key findings from our recent primary research into men's violence against women and girls. The full research report can be accessed [here](#).

- 91% of women think that Northern Ireland has a problem with men's violence against women and girls.
- 97% 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
- 77% of women who reported men's violence to the police did not find it useful.
- 82% of women first experienced men's violence before the age of 20.
- 90% of women believe Northern Ireland has a problem with attitudes of sexism and misogyny.
- 81% of women believe Northern Ireland has a problem with rape myths and rape culture
- 87% of women believe Northern Ireland has a problem with victim-blaming
- 81% of women believe there is stigma surrounding issues of violence against women and girls.
- 92% of women think that there are barriers to reporting men's violence against women and girls.
- 95% of women think that reducing levels of violence against women and girls requires focusing on changing men and boys' behaviours and actions.

### **3. General Comments on the TEO EVAWG Readership Survey**

Before responding to the Readership Survey questions, we would like to raise our concerns regarding this research report, produced in partnership between The Executive Office (TEO) and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA).

The Women's Policy Group have engaged consistently with TEO EVAWG Strategy Team throughout the design of this important Strategy and are heavily invested in its success. We have committed to working constructively with the Team to ensure the full and effective implementation of this Strategy. For this reason, we feel it is important to highlight the significant issues that exist with this research report, as we understand that this research will help to inform the development and implementation of the EVAWG Strategy.

### **3.1 Issue 1: Gender Neutral Approach to Research**

For years, the WPG has reiterated the same argument to policy makers and elected officials: Gender-neutral policy-making does not have neutral outcomes. Taking a gender-neutral approach can be better understood as a gender-blind approach. Gender equality can not be achieved by simply treating men and women the same. If we are to tackle gender inequality, we must recognise that women and men do not experience the world in the same way and that women face significant disadvantage because they are women. For example, domestic violence against trans women can take specific forms and trans women are particularly uniquely vulnerable to this abuse. Trans women experience transmisogyny, which is the intersection between transphobia and misogyny. They are currently living in a society where UK Newspapers and media position transgender subjects to alternatively legitimize or “other” transgender identities. Trans women are written about in negative forms and many of narratives in the media focusing on a trans person’s transition.

It is highly disappointing to see that TEO took a gender neutral approach to this research, particularly given that the EVAWG Strategy is clearly a gender-specific Strategy with gender-specific aims and objectives. While we recognise that it is important and valuable to get the views of both girls and boys regarding violence against women and girls, we are concerned that questions about experiences of violence were asked equally to boys and girls, as if these acts of violence are experienced in the same way regardless of gender.

Violence against women and girls is a gender-specific phenomena. Acts of violence towards boys and girls may appear on the surface to be the same, for example, both may be shouted at while walking down the street, but these acts are inherently different because of the social and cultural context in which they occur. These acts are also different because of the difference of intention between the two. Outward manifestations of male violence are informed and fuelled by gender stereotypes and harmful attitudes towards women and girls.

What is missing from this research is an accurate and workable definition of gender-based violence. Questions were asked in this survey that suggest that girls and boys experience the same acts of violence for the same reasons, which is not the case. Gender-based violence is about controlling and belittling women and girls, reminding them of their ‘place’ in society. In contrast to female violence against boys and men, male violence often threatens women’s actual or perceived sense of safety.

Referring to the earlier example provided, girls and boys may both be shouted at on the street, but what makes cat-calling a gender-specific phenomena is that it often leaves girls feeling unsafe, belittled and surveilled. This is because of the social and

cultural context in which it takes place. This is often exacerbated where there are intersecting identities such as being disabled, transgender or from an ethnic minority. It is important that TEO understand the gendered realities of violence and commit to using this lens throughout the continued development and implementation of the EAWG Strategy.

### **3.2 Issue 2: Research Methods and Skewed Data**

As previously mentioned, there is no accurate and workable definition of gender-based violence in this research. This is particularly problematic given that the survey respondents are 16 year-olds who may be unfamiliar with this topic. Without a clear definition, survey respondents are not able to respond in an informed way, which raises issues for the credibility and integrity of the research data.

For reference, the following blurb was included in the survey:

*“The next few questions are about your understanding of gender-based violence, especially, but not only, violence against women and girls. By ‘acts of violence’ we mean any criminal offences or any words or behaviours which hurt or cause fear or anxiety to a victim or which humiliate or belittle them”*

As stated above, the survey questions are supposedly about young people’s understanding of gender-based violence, and yet, the only terminology defined is ‘acts of violence’ which is completely gender neutral. Gender neutral terminology is unhelpful when the aim of the research was supposedly to gather the views of young people regarding violence against women and girls, in order to inform the EAWG Strategy. This issue relates to the previous concerns raised regarding taking gender neutral approaches to clearly gendered issues.

The research should also be clearer as to which sphere it is focusing on. There is only one mention of family life which is regarding coercive control, it is important to acknowledge that sexual and physical violence does not end behind closed doors but also to take into consideration that when addressing matters such as intimate photos being taken without consent, being shown intimate photos or videos without consent and the touching of a person can also happen within the household, not only in public.

The Women’s Policy group also wish to highlight the safeguarding and re-traumatisation concerns of asking 16-year-olds to recall violence they may have experienced, especially if the testimony is being recorded for data purposes, without the appropriate support structures in place when a disclosure has been made.

The young person might not have told a parent/guardian/ safeguarding adult what has occurred to them, so to ask them to talk about the very specific violence they experienced, without a full risk assessment and proactive safety planning, is not safeguarding the wellbeing of that young person, especially if it's via an online survey for example. For reference, UK Women's Aid Federations published a document in 2021 about research integrity framework when researching domestic abuse that can be accessed [here](#). On page 6, regarding children & young people, it is noted that:

*“Any research involving children and young people must include a risk assessment and safety plan. It is important to recognise children as social actors with choice and agency; risk assessments should be co-developed with the child/young person, with input from the mother/non-abusing parent and preferably with support from key worker/s. 4 Care is needed in this process to avoid creating any additional barriers frustrating children's right to participate in decisions about their own lives...”*

*Research focusing on issues relating to or including children/young people should include a child safeguarding plan, written in consultation with a child safeguarding officer, including where permission from non-abusive parents is needed. Participants should always be fully informed about what the research involves, including trigger warnings and where confidentiality may be breached. Participants should be asked for their informed consent/permission by any researchers planning to information from the study.”*

### **3.3 Language: Gender and Sexual Orientation**

Firstly, it is concerning that TEO did not ask a stand-alone question on sexual orientation and decided to group it in with gender. Secondly, the way that sexual orientation was asked about was extremely problematic.

The WPG is extremely concerned at how sexual orientations were grouped in this research and the language used to describe different sexual orientations. In this report, categories of sexual orientation were merged as follows:

- Heterosexual (this included only the Heterosexual category)
- Other sexual orientation (this included Heterosexual-leaning bisexual, Bisexual, Homosexual-leaning bisexual, Homosexual, Asexual, Non-binary, Other)

Framing sexual orientation as heterosexual or 'other' reinforces heteronormativity and promotes the erasure of minority sexual identities. The report notes that these

eight sub-categories were grouped this way because the numbers in each category were too small. It is not clear why TEO chose these eight sub-categories at all, given that many of them are not considered official categories of sexual orientation and are not informed by best practice in research. For example, 'non-binary' is not a sexual orientation, it is a gender. This conflating of gender and sexual identity is highly problematic.

Despite widely available statistics on crime and domestic abuse, there are no official figures on the prevalence of crime among those identifying as LGBTQIA+ as victims. In Northern Ireland, we have a very limited picture of the experience of crime or domestic abuse issues in the LGBTQIA+ community. The reasons include but are not limited to - obtaining accurate data is problematic, the police and other stakeholders are not appropriately recording sexual orientation or gender identity at the time of reporting. According to The Rainbow Project research approximately 68% of respondents who experienced domestic or sexual violence did not report it to the Police or any other support services.

LGBTQIA+ people's experiences are based on their sexual orientation or gender identity/expression which deviates from that which is perceived to be the gender norm but we need to see that affects individuals across all cultures, sexual orientations, gender identities, income groups, ages, and religions.

Making sure that data is collected and analysed is fundamental to improving access to and quality of care for LGBTQIA+ people. Most healthcare organizations and statutory bodies have not implemented a system to collect sexual orientation or gender identity data. This leads to the invisibility of LGBTQIA+ people, which leads to further gaps in providing patient/victim/survivor-centred care for them. Most LGBTQIA+ clients understand the importance of discussing sexual orientation or gender identity with providers and are willing to answer sexual orientation or gender identity questions.

Furthermore, using language such as 'heterosexual-leaning-bisexual' and 'bisexual-leaning-heterosexual' is highly offensive and insensitive to those who identify as bisexual. The use of 'leaning' language denigrates bisexuality as a sexual orientation, and misunderstands the spectrum of orientations under the Bi+ umbrella. The 1990 Bisexual Manifesto (digitised here <https://bimanifesto.carrd.co/>) summarises this as follows:

'Bisexuality is a whole, fluid identity. Do not assume that bisexuality is binary or duogamous in nature: that we have "two" sides or that we *must* be involved simultaneously with both genders to be fulfilled human beings. In fact, don't assume that there are only two genders. Do not mistake our fluidity for confusion, irresponsibility, or an inability to commit. Do not equate promiscuity, infidelity, or

unsafe sexual behavior with bisexuality. Those are human traits that cross *all* sexual orientations. Nothing should be assumed about anyone's sexuality, including your own.'

This report justifies the use of this 'leaning' language by noting that 'sexual orientation is a complex issue and is likely to be still developing at the age of 16.' However, regardless of age, if someone identifies as 'bisexual' they should be taken at their word.

We are aware of measures such as the Kinsey Scale, first published in 1948, which may be more appropriate in ascertaining the multiplicities of sexual orientation. However it is unclear why this would be more relevant to this research than simply 'bisexual'.

Definitions of sexual orientation and gender identity, with a clear question on both characteristics, would be a better approach, especially for a survey with younger people who may not be familiar with this language due to failings in Relationship and Sexuality Education.

We believe that this report is condescending towards young people as it suggests that they may not know their sexual orientation or gender identity. However, repeated studies have shown that most LGBTQIA+ people know around their teenage years. The Rainbow Project research in 2021 has shown that people self-identify that they are members of the LGBTQIA+ community around the average age of 14. This was lower for males at 13 than females at 15. However there is a gap in between knowing themselves and telling someone else, average ages was 19, (19 for men and 20 for women). We recognise the separation around sexual orientation and gender identity, this can be somewhat fluid during this period, but we found the commentary that this might be just a phase minimising of young people's experiences around gender identity and sexual orientation.

The WPG would also like to raise concerns about the way TEO asked about respondents' gender in this survey, particularly in relation to transgender status. Gender is a complex and often sensitive issue, particularly for those who identify as transgender or non-binary. Survey questions regarding gender must be asked in a way that is alert to these sensitivities, for example, by asking them in a gender-informed way and only asking for information that is crucial to the study, with an appropriate level of detail.

In this research report, survey respondents were asked if they were 'male to female transgender' or 'female to male transgender.' Using 'before and after' language can be highly offensive and hurtful to trans people, given the complexity and sensitivity of gender identity. Whether in an intended or unintended way, the use of this language forces transgender individuals to partially identify with their previous gender, which can be triggering and have the effect of re-traumatising trans people.



For reference, survey respondents were asked “What is your gender identity?” and the response options were: Male, Female, Male to female transgender, Female to male transgender, Non-binary, Other. We would suggest that these options should have read: Man, Woman, Non-binary and Other, as these categories include trans people. For example, the category of ‘woman’ includes trans women, and the category of ‘man’ includes trans men. Transgender is not a gender in and of itself, it is an umbrella term used to describe people who have transitioned genders.

We are concerned that non-binary in the classification of sexual orientation is wrong. Being a non-binary person is not a sexual orientation, this is a minority gender identity and internal sense of self. Non-Binary people may identify with various sexual orientations. It is again up to the person how they choose to identify their sexual orientation or gender identity.

The Rainbow Project State of the Community research (2021), has shown that the majority of respondents identified as a man (45%) or woman (43%). A further 7.1% identified as non-binary while 1.42% identified as gender-fluid. Our research also reflects 14% of those under 18yrs identifying as non-binary, so it is disappointing that figures for trans or non-binary were low in this piece of research. This could be because there were no clear specific questions on either sexual orientation or confusion around questions on gender identity.

This alternative approach would have been particularly helpful to TEO in addressing the issue of sub-categories of gender being too small. For reference, in this research report, it is noted that ‘the numbers in the remaining response categories were too small to enable production of meaningful statistics (even if combined) and they were therefore excluded from the analyses that focused on gender.’

Domestic abuse, in particular violence against women and girls, is something that we need to tackle. However, any strategy or research must include recognition of the specific forms of abuse and violence against LGBTQIA+ people and this must include specific questions about their sexual orientation or gender identity. To make the research more beneficial would be to ask respondents what their sexual orientation and gender identity, rather than trying to infer it from responses.

LGBTQIA+ or Women Sector organisations in Northern Ireland were not contacted before the publication of this research. If this engagement had been sought ahead of time we would have been able to point out some of our key concerns with wording and format.

#### **4. Response to Survey Questions**

**Q1. Have you read or do you use the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls: Experiences and Attitudes of 16 year olds in Northern Ireland Report?**

Yes - X  
No

**Q2. Please complete the following statement: I am primarily interested in these statistics as a member of :**

NI Central Government  
NI Local Government  
Other Public Sector  
Community/Voluntary Sector - X  
Academia  
Media  
Other Private Sector  
General Public  
Other

If you selected 'Other', please specify in box below:

**Q3. What do you mainly use the publication for?**

Briefing (e.g. to minister/colleagues)  
Policy development/review - X  
Research  
Media use  
Commercial purposes  
General information or personal use  
Other

If you selected 'Other', please specify in the box below:

**Q4. To what extent does each component of the publication meet your needs?**

	Fully meets my needs	Mostly meets my needs	Partly meets my needs	Does not meet my needs	I haven't used this component
Key Findings				X	
Background				X	

Methods	X	
Personal experience of violent acts and behaviours	X	
Perceived acceptability of violent acts and behaviours	X	
Personally knowing someone who has done violent acts and behaviours	X	
Technical notes		X

**Q5. How satisfied are you with each of the following aspects of the publication?**

	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
Content (i.e. topics covered)				X	
Presentation of data (i.e. tables and charts)				X	
Commentary (i.e. sufficient detail to aid				X	

analysis and interpretation)	
Timeliness (i.e. how up to date the statistics are)	X
Ease of accessing the report	X
Accessibility within the report	X
Technical Notes	X

**Q6. Do you have any suggestions as to how we could improve our statistics to better meet your needs?**

This research is poorly constructed in a number of ways, such that the data is effectively unusable to us, which is a missed opportunity. The Women's Policy Group has written to TEO about this and will be following up with a meeting in the future.

WPG recommendations for improving future TEO research

1. Improved understanding of sexual orientation; some of the categories included are not recognised categories of sexual orientation, and some eg non-binary are not sexual orientation at all.
2. Improved understanding of gender identity, including transgender identities - some of the terms used are not recognised as the correct terms for people who are transgender.
3. Understand violence of this kind as gender-specific and provide definitions of all key terms at the beginning of research, so that respondents know what you mean when asked if they have experienced it or witnessed it. This will provide more accurate data.
4. Conduct research specifically on violence against women and girls - not a gender neutral approach that lumps all kinds of violence together with violence that happens to women and girls specifically because of their gender.

5. Take a trauma-informed approach to conducting research on potentially upsetting topics, including adequate warning as to content and proper signposting.
6. Knowing that some groups are small, conduct the research in such a way that these groups are not therefore excluded as statistically insignificant or grouped together in a way that places anything other than cisgender heterosexuality as the norm.

*ENDS*

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

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