

Women's Policy Group NI

WPG NI Response to the Department of Justice
(DoJ)/ Department of Health (DoH) Draft
Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy

May 2023

Contact:
Elaine Crory
Women's Sector Lobbyist
elaine.cory@wrda.net

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.croory@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
- Danielle Roberts - HERe NI
- Caoimhe McNeill - UNISON NI
- Jonna Monaghan - Women's Platform
- Siobhán Harding - Women's Support Network

Please note that this response also includes evidence from other WPG work, compiled by a range of WPG members, and not all member organisations have specific policy positions on all the areas covered in this response.

1.1 Endorsements

The WPG would like to endorse the response submitted to this call for evidence by Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland and the Women's Regional Consortium.

2. Past Consultations Responses, Evidence Submissions and Briefings:

Several members of the Women's Policy Group have been campaigning on matters relating to domestic abuse for many years. The WPG has published a wide range of evidence through various

evidence submissions, public consultation responses and specific briefings relating to this issue, including:

- WPG NI [Response to Call for Views](#): New Strategies: Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy (DOJ, DOH) Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy (TEO) (March 2022)
- WPG NI [Primary Research Findings](#) on Violence Against Women and Girls in Northern Ireland (March 2022)
- Women's Policy Group [Response to call for evidence](#) on: Abuse of Position of Trust Offences: Extension of the Law (December 2022)
- WPG NI [Response to PPS Policy](#) on Prosecuting Cases of Domestic Abuse Consultation (February 2023)
- WPG NI [Response to Domestic Abuse: Prohibitions for Cross-examination](#) in Family Proceedings (April 2023)
- Women's Policy Group NI [Response to Domestic Abuse \(Safe Leave\)](#) Bill Survey (December 2021)

2.1. Content from previous WPG Response

In our previous response to the Call for Views on the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy in 2022, we made several key recommendations that we would like to reiterate in this response. These included:

- Domestic Violence leave of 15-20 days available as a day one right
 - Such leave should be paid as at the relevant daily pay, as per New Zealand. Not paying such leave runs the risk of excluding vulnerable and low paid workers as they may be financially unable to take up the scheme.
 - Leave should be available to be taken as a block or flexibly with minimum administration
 - Applicants should not have to 'prove' their eligibility
 - Such leave should cover taking time off to care for a child/dependent who has been the victim of domestic abuse
 - Should be accompanied by a right to request short term flexible working
 - Should be accompanied by protection against dismissal for victims of domestic violence, as appropriate, except on grounds unrelated to domestic violence and its consequences
 - Should require employers to have a DV policy negotiated with trade unions
 - Should require employers to provide training to their staff, developed with specialist VAWG services and trade union representatives, to ensure their first

response to survivor employees is safe and appropriate. Enhanced training should be provided for line managers and HR professionals.

- Harm caused by domestic violence and abuse which causes absence of +3 days from work, should be reportable under the RIDDOR regulations.
- The Health and Safety Executive should produce guidance on how to mitigate the risks posed to workers by domestic and sexual violence.
- Workplace risk assessments should include an assessment of the risks posed by domestic violence.
- Improved workplace training in safeguarding, recognising the signs of domestic and sexual abuse and how to act upon this. The Strategy should have a specific action on the development of a domestic abuse workplace policy.
- Standardised training to adequately equip workers in recognising signs of domestic and sexual abuse. This training should be inclusive, created in collaboration with service users and providers and be trauma informed
- Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK without a funded support service specific to migrant women in Northern Ireland. Given the additional barriers migrant women face in escaping abuse, it is crucial that this support is put in place.
- Full funding for positions to support women from LGBTQI+, disabled, migrant, rural and working-class background and to support women from these groups in reporting domestic and sexual abuse. This would also involve cultural competency and awareness training for groups such as the PSNI, PPS and courts to ensure they are aware of the unique barriers women from these backgrounds face.
- Appoint an Independent Domestic Abuse Commissioner who could provide important scrutiny and act as an essential mechanism for accountability on the new domestic abuse Strategy and legislation
- The wording of any legislation recognises the multitude of relationships domestic abuse can occur in, including LGBTQ+ relationships.
- Fund specialist support organisations and education programmes on cultural competency and awareness raising of the experiences of marginalised communities with domestic abuse
- Further work to expedite the discovery process to reduce the rates of attrition and speed up the process for the PPS and the court system
- Training for Judges and other legal professionals addressing rape myths, victim blaming tropes, and the impact of retraumatising survivors
- DAPOs and DAPNs, consulted on in 2020-2021, need to be made available, widely used and actively used as efficiently as possible;
- The proposed pilot for DAPOs and DAPNs is adapted quickly and rolled out to all of NI as soon as possible

- Make available additional funding for police to allow the expeditious use of these Orders/Notices without suffering financial loss
- Legal aid must be available for all applicants who need the Orders/Notices
- Make available appropriate housing to any and all people fleeing domestic abuse, without placing them in inappropriate settings and without separating people from their children if applicable
- A review of the DVADS scheme to account for its patchy application and ensure a rigorous standard is applied
- Prioritise true partnership in the implementation of this Strategy, working in collaboration with other sectors including the voluntary and community sector which has done significant work in this area

We would also like to reiterate the point we made in our previous consultation response that it is not possible to deal with Domestic and Sexual Abuse without recognising its inherently gendered nature, and it is not possible to address broader VAWG without incorporating Domestic and Sexual Abuse. Although the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy and the Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy are being led by different Departments, it is crucial that there are linkages between the two and that they work closely and complimentary alongside one another, to avoid duplication of work and wastage of resources.

2.2 Lived Experiences

In 2022, the WPG conducted primary research with 1066 women in Northern Ireland regarding their experiences of violence. This included asking specific questions about domestic abuse. Findings from this research that are relevant to this consultation have been highlighted below.

Testimonies from WPG Primary Research:

“Suffered domestic abuse both physical and verbal for several years from I was 19 yrs old and changed me dramatically as a person, not for the better. It made me anxious, aggressive, afraid, nervous and angry. I probably continue to suffer from PTSD, however, the services just are not available for me to address my issues.”

“I experienced domestic abuse from an ex partner in my early 20s. It took years for me to realise that what happened was abuse. I was also raped in my early 30s (he removed condom without my consent). I was hurt and angry for a long time and still struggle to deal with what happened to me in a healthy way.”

“At 16 years old I was the victim of Domestic Abuse where he tried to isolate me from friends and would break my phone or take any money I had. Also pushed me around when I got pregnant.”

“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.”

“Women are abused by women too and we cannot excuse that. Some lesbian and bi women face sexual and all elements of domestic abuse from their partners. Trans women face abuse from so many areas they must be protected. It is grotesque. BAMER women need to have wide ranging protection provided in ways that are culturally competent and easily accessible.”

Research findings relating to domestic abuse and sexual abuse:

- 68% of respondents were aware of domestic abuse as a form of violence against women and girls,
- 67.4% of respondents were aware of sexual abuse as a form of violence against women and girls.
- 95.8% of respondents thought that a Strategy on violence against women and girls should address all of the following forms of violence:
 - Domestic abuse
 - 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 an individual's style and appearances
- Systemic violence by the state
- 54.3% of women were aware of all of the above forms of violence against women and girls, including various forms of domestic abuse such as honour-based abuse, economic abuse, coercive control, emotional abuse and forced isolation from family and friends.
- 83% of respondents have experienced or been impacted by men's violence against women and girls
- 82% of those who had experienced or been impacted by men's violence against women and girls first experienced this before the age of 20
- The following percentages of respondents thought that the Strategy should tackle violence against women and girls in the following places:
 - Domestic settings - 97.8%
 - Public spaces - 98%
 - Workplaces - 96.6%
 - Education institutions - 97.5%
 - Religious settings - 93.3%
 - Sports and leisure spaces - 93.4%
 - Community settings - 93.8%
 - Media/ Social Media/ Online - 97.4%

3. General Comments on the Draft Strategy

Before beginning work on our response to this Strategy, the WPG and colleagues across the sector struggled with concerns that this may not be a useful way to spend our limited time and resources. We put an enormous amount of work into the original Call for Views response, and these recommendations do not seem to have been reflected or acknowledged in any way in this Draft Strategy. In response to the consultation being published, members of the WPG drafted a letter to the Permanent Secretaries of the Department of Justice and Department of Health summarising these sentiments. The content of the letter was as follows:

Dear Mr. May and Mr. Pengelly,

The Women's Policy Group NI (WPG) is deeply concerned at the weakness of the Draft Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy. We have serious concerns that this document may

be the template for both the Department of Health and Department of Justice in regards these serious issues for the next seven years.

This Strategy is too vague, with unmeasurable outcomes, targets that are so open as to be meaningless, and a lack of clarity as to who will be responsible. There are no timelines and worst of all no resourcing at all. There are no detailed actions and a number of priorities, specifically relating to intersectionality, are not mentioned.

We are acutely aware of the current financial constraints. We are also aware of the fact that there has not been an Executive in place since February 2022, and that it is unclear when or if that will be remedied. We are mindful that Permanent Secretaries should not be expected to act as though they were Ministers. Our concerns are nonetheless urgent. Domestic and Sexual Abuse are an epidemic that contribute to or directly cause the death, maiming and serious harm of thousands of our citizens and if the Strategy cannot take this seriously and commit to measurable actions because of the political climate, this should be acknowledged and the process should be paused until commitments can be made.

In parallel to this Strategy development process, many of us have been part of the Co-Design Group on the development of the EVAWG Strategy. This has been so wholly different in terms of the scope of its ambition, its willingness to put aside the current circumstances and to make the commitments that need to be made. It is difficult to accept this Strategy as a serious attempt to deal with Domestic and Sexual Abuse in Northern Ireland compared to our experience of the EVAWG Strategy.

We urge a reconsideration of this Strategy while it is still in draft form. We suggest that time is taken to amend the Strategy so that it is sufficient for the task at hand, taking an approach similar to the work undertaken by TEO on the EVAWG Strategy.

Kind regards,

*Elaine Crory, Women's Sector Lobbyist
On behalf of the Women's Policy Group NI*

The Women's Policy Group have identified several significant concerns with this Draft Strategy which we have highlighted throughout this response. In general, the over-arching issue with the approach taken in this Draft Strategy is that it is impossible to gauge the depth of the work proposed, impossible to accurately measure outcomes, there are no identifiable targets, no

allocated budget, and should there be issues with the workstream, nobody is assigned responsibility for it - and so nobody is answerable for any failures. This is simply not good enough.

This Strategy has to be seen in the context of epidemic-level rates of domestic abuse, slow progress through courts and inconsistent sentencing, overcrowded shelters and stretched outreach services, spiralling rates of sexual violence against dismal rates of prosecution, and repeat offenders of these kinds of crimes reoffending again and again. We are in a crisis and more of the same will not suffice.

Comparing this Strategy and the co-design process behind it with the work ongoing on the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls (EVAWG) Strategy, the difference is stark. The co-design process on that Strategy was one informed both by true principles of co-design and by a deep sense of responsibility for the outcome; an understanding that this was an opportunity to take seriously an enduring scourge in our society that is killing, maiming and harming our population at astonishing rates. Next to that, this feels weak, by rote, and knowingly so - hence the lack of any measurable outcomes that would demonstrate the lack of positive progress.

We understand the financial pressures that the Executive is currently experiencing and will more acutely experience when the Executive returns. That is not an excuse for the approach taken in this Draft Strategy. This Strategy will last seven years and to commit no resources to this very serious issue is offensive to victims and survivors, as well as the organisations in the Community and Voluntary Sector who presently pick up the pieces and rely on funding from charities to do their vital work.

We would also like to raise specific concerns regarding the nature of this consultation on the Draft Strategy. By asking a limited number of questions on definitions and pillars, the consultation is harmfully narrow in scope which limits the potential for meaningful critique. It is our view that consultees have not been given a meaningful opportunity to comment on the substance of the Strategy because of these narrow questions.

3.1. International human rights context

The United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) should be recognised as an international obligation of the UK¹ that provides the framework for these strategies. In short, CEDAW requires States Parties to implement a rights based agenda that ensures legislation, policies and programmes are non discriminatory and focus on progressive realisation of equal rights for all. The Concluding Observations provide a roadmap for progressing gender equality, and the most recent set of recommendations emphasises access to

¹ Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979), articles 1 and 2. The UK signed the Convention in 1981 and ratified in 1986.

justice and support for victims and survivors, as well as increasing action on prevention and culture change. Importantly, this covers action on abuse and violence in same sex relationships, violence against trans and non binary people and action to support Black and ethnic minority women, including refugee, asylum seeking and undocumented women, who often face specific barriers associated with immigration status and no recourse to public funds (NDPF), in addition to cultural and language barriers as well as previous traumatic experiences creating mistrust in authorities.

Recognising CEDAW would also create effective links to the Gender Equality Strategy and indeed the suite of social inclusion strategies, which helpfully can act as a mechanism for creating cross Departmental links and enabling all Departments to contribute to delivering a Northern Ireland where women and girls are safe, feel safe, and where gender based violence is no longer socially acceptable. This, in turn, is vital, as the critical message of this response is that gender based violence is a result and expression of gender inequality and patriarchal norms, and cannot be sustainably addressed in isolation.

3.2 Building on international guidelines

The international law framework, including the Istanbul Convention as well as CEDAW, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) and the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD), provides a clear mandate for these strategies to be put in place. It is particularly vital that the strategies are in line with the Istanbul Convention, as shortfalls in Northern Ireland have in part prevented the UK from ratifying the Convention; this is a major concern for the women's sector UK wide, as it creates disparities between the UK and other European countries.

The Istanbul Convention holds that all state actors are obliged to conform to the requirements of the Convention. Key among these are requirements to implement effective legislation to protect women and girls from violence, ensure adequate resourcing for action, and implement gender sensitive policies. Importantly, the Convention emphasises data collection as the basis of action, and stresses the role on meaningful data in prevention. It also mandates work with men and boys to change cultures, attitudes and behaviours, and provides detailed guidance on development of judicial systems and responses². The Council of Europe has also recently published guidance on education for prevention under the Istanbul Convention, which emphasises gender equality and non violent approaches, and provides examples of good practice from a number of countries as well as a checklist for developing national good practice³.

² Council of Europe (2011). [Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence](#)

³ Council of Europe (March 2022) [Preventing violence against women through formal and informal education: Article 14 of the Istanbul Convention](#)

CEDAW General Recommendation 35⁴ specifically focuses on gender based violence, and provides guidance on interpretation and implementation of CEDAW in this regard. The CEDAW Committee holds that ‘Women’s right to a life free from gender-based violence is indivisible from and interdependent on other human rights, including the rights to life, health, liberty and security of the person, equality and equal protection within the family, freedom from torture, cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment, and freedom of expression, movement, participation, assembly and association’⁵. The Recommendation explicitly includes psychological, sexual, economic and physical harm as well as threats of such acts, harassment, coercion and arbitrary deprivation of liberty in its scope of gender based violence.

The Recommendation clarifies the CEDAW provisions and states that laws prohibiting gender based violence should include sanctions for perpetrators and reparations for victims.⁶ It further notes that ‘all legal procedures in cases involving allegations of gender-based violence against women are impartial, fair and unaffected by gender stereotypes or the discriminatory interpretation of legal provisions, including international law’, and that capacity building is required to ensure that women’s right to equality is not affected by the application of preconceived and stereotyped notions of what gender based violence is, how women do and should react and the standard of proof required in proceedings⁷.

4. Response to Consultation Questions

This section of our response will provide a response to the consultation questions.

SECTION 1: ABOUT YOU

Question (a):

I am responding as... (Please tick one option only)

A member of the public (Do not provide your name or email address)

On behalf of an organisation – Women’s Policy Group Northern Ireland

SECTION 2: RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS ON A DOMESTIC AND SEXUAL ABUSE STRATEGY

⁴ CEDAW Committee (67th session, 2017) General Recommendation 35 on gender based violence against women

⁵ Ibidem, p. 6

⁶ Ibidem, p. 10.

⁷ Ibidem, p.11.

Question 1: Is the vision of the draft strategy reflective of what we want to achieve?

Draft vision: “Domestic and sexual abuse is unacceptable within our homes and across all of society so that everyone can live without fear.”

- Agree
- Disagree
- Don't Know

Please add any comments you wish to make in the box below:

Put simply, this vision is not ambitious enough to bring about the changes that are required in our society if we are to meaningfully tackle domestic and sexual abuse.

Abuse should not just be made ‘unacceptable’ but eradicated completely. The goal of this Strategy must include changing the cultural attitudes to domestic and sexual abuse that have existed for too long, but also must include clear and identifiable actions both to achieve this cultural shift and to end domestic and sexual abuse entirely. Making it ‘unacceptable’ won’t make everyone in society able to ‘live without fear;’ eradicating it will.

In our response to the previous DoJ and DoH Call for Views on the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy, the WPG was clear about what the nature and content of this Strategy should be. It is clear from this Draft Strategy that our advice, and the advice of the voluntary and community sector more broadly, was not taken into account. This Strategy should be informed by expert voices and the voices of those who directly experience and work with those who directly experience domestic and sexual abuse. The fact that this Draft Strategy runs contrary to the advice given by these groups is extremely concerning, and does not bode well for the success of its implementation.

The bigger issue is that the strategy outlined does not match even this unambitious vision. A vision in such a Strategy is meaningless unless the ensuing plan lays out exactly how this is to be achieved, what specific actions will be taken, by whom, and on what timescale. As outlined above, the WPG is disappointed in this Strategy, and we join colleagues in Women’s Aid and more in expressing frustration both at the content of the Strategy and at the framing of the consultation questions, which offers a relatively limited scope to critique the Strategy.

This Strategy has to be seen in the context of epidemic-level rates of domestic abuse, slow progress through courts and inconsistent sentencing, overcrowded shelters and stretched outreach services, spiralling rates of sexual violence against dismal rates of prosecution, and

repeat offenders of these kinds of crimes reoffending again and again. We are in a crisis and more of the same will not suffice.

Comparing this Strategy and the co-design process behind it with the work ongoing on the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls (EVAWG) Strategy, the difference is stark. The co-design process on that Strategy was one informed both by true principles of co-design and by a deep sense of responsibility for the outcome; an understanding that this was an opportunity to take seriously an enduring scourge in our society that is killing, maiming and harming our population at astonishing rates. Next to that, this feels weak, by rote, and knowingly so - hence the lack of any measurable outcomes that would demonstrate the lack of positive progress.

We understand the financial pressures that the Executive is currently experiencing - or more accurately will experience when the Executive returns. That is not an excuse for the approach taken here; this Strategy will last seven years and to commit no resources to this very serious issue is offensive to victims and survivors, as well as the organisations in the Community and Voluntary Sector who presently pick up the pieces on scraps and rely on charity - literally - to do their vital work.

The issue with this approach, repeated in the detail of all the pillars, is that it is impossible to gauge the depth of the work proposed, impossible to accurately measure outcomes, there are no identifiable targets, and should there be issues with the workstream, nobody is assigned responsibility for it - and so nobody is answerable for any failures. This is simply not good enough.

Question 2: Does the definition of domestic abuse, as outlined in the draft strategy, reflect what you understand this to mean?

Definition: Domestic abuse is defined as threatening, controlling, coercive behaviour, violence or abuse (psychological, virtual, physical, verbal, sexual, financial or emotional) inflicted on anyone (irrespective of age, ethnicity, religion, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation or any form of disability) by a current or former intimate partner or family member.

Agree

Disagree

Don't Know

Please add any comments you wish to make in the box below:

In our response to the previous DoJ and DoH call for views on the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy, the WPG was clear about what the nature and content of this Strategy should be. It is

clear from this Draft Strategy that our advice, and the advice of the voluntary and community sector more broadly, was not taken into account. This Strategy should be informed by expert voices and the voices of those who directly experience and work with those who directly experience domestic and sexual abuse. The fact that this Draft Strategy runs contrary to the advice given by these groups is extremely concerning, and does not bode well for the success of its implementation.

The consultation document sets out a clear basic definition of domestic abuse, which is helpful as a basis for developing action. However, it is fundamental to understand gender inequality as a function of power based gender relationships, which are deeply embedded in our culture and view the male perspective as primary and dominant, rendering women - as well as LGBTQIA+ groups and gender non conforming people - 'the other', inferior and powerless, expected to be submissive.

This is a basic dynamic of domestic abuse, which can no longer be covered up through passive language; perpetrators choose to behave violently due to specific power relations. Including these fundamental dynamics is vital and would significantly enable addressing gender based violence and gender inequality at the systemic and societal levels, at the root causes of violence.

It should be noted that the concept of patriarchy also incorporates stratification of power and privilege among men and boys; wealthier, older, and white men hold more status and more power than low income, younger and non white men. Therefore, understanding inequality through the lens of power also allows meaningful analysis of domestic and sexual abuse experienced by men and boys, LGBTQIA+ groups and gender non conforming people.

Women's Platform would also refer to the definition of domestic abuse and gender based violence set out in the Istanbul Convention, which was ratified by the UK in July 2022, and in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which is binding on the UK as a state party to CEDAW. Clarification on this definition is provided in CEDAW General Recommendation 35, and Women's Platform would urge for this definition to be referenced as the basis for the strategy.

Question 3: Does the definition of sexual abuse, as outlined in the draft strategy, reflect what you understand this to mean?

Definition: Sexual abuse is defined as any behaviour (physical, psychological, verbal, virtual/online) perceived to be of a sexual nature which is controlling, coercive, exploitative, harmful, or unwanted that is inflicted on anyone (irrespective of age, ethnicity, religion, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation or any form of disability).

Agree

Disagree

Don't Know

Please add any comments you wish to make in the box below:

We wish to raise again our concerns about the use of the term “sexual abuse” rather than sexual violence, as outlined in our response to the Call for Views:

“This has also caused confusion for members of the public with whom we have run focus groups, also, not least because the use of the term “sexual abuse” rather than something broader such as “sexual violence” denotes to many people something systematic, something closer to child sexual abuse or abuse within domestic or romantic relationships. It is rarely understood as describing an encounter between strangers or acquaintances that may or may not meet the criminal bar for an offence like rape or sexual assault. If these are not sexual abuse, do they belong in the VAWG Strategy? Or do all sexual crimes belong in the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy? Where is the line? We regret that many things will be missing from many people’s responses to these calls for views, because they do not have an obvious “home”. Terminology is important for this practical reason alone.

Further, using the term “sexual abuse” in fact perpetuates the long-standing notion that only the most serious, violent and extreme forms of sexual violence matter enough to be subject to a Strategy like this one, the rest are just unimportant or inevitable. In preparing for this Call for Views, the WPG discussed this issue at length, and ultimately we chose to highlight this issue in our response, and also to not feel bound by the proviso that the content of one Strategy should not encroach on the other. They do; both in terms of the confusing terms set by TEO and in the lives of women and girls.”⁸

Sexual violence is highly gendered in nature, with women and girls making up 78% of victims and survivors. This ought to be acknowledged in the text of the definition and in the Strategy as a whole. In addition, the majority of cases of sexual abuse involve victims under the age of 18, which ought to be acknowledged. A particular workstream relating to the needs of children who survive this abuse is also necessary and appropriate. These are important concerns because it is absolutely necessary that the workstreams flow from agreed facts about the nature of the

⁸ Women’s Policy Group, 2022, Response to Call for Views; New Strategies Domestic and Sexual Abuse and VAWG. Available online at: <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/WPG-Response-to-Call-for-Views-New-Strategies-Domestic-and-Sexual-Abuse-and-VAWG-Mar-22.pdf> p.146

problem. Failure to do so will lead inevitably to inadequate work in the areas needed. Alongside this, resources are needed and these must be directed to those most evidently in need.

Question 4: Do you agree with the use of the four pillars in the draft strategy (Partnership, Prevention, Support and Justice) as levers for change?

- Agree
- Disagree
- Don't Know

Please add any comments you wish to make in the box below:

In our response to the previous DoJ and DoH call for views on the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy, the WPG was clear about what the nature and content of this Strategy should be. It is clear from this Draft Strategy that our advice, and the advice of the voluntary and community sector more broadly, was not taken into account. This Strategy should be informed by expert voices and the voices of those who directly experience and work with those who directly experience domestic and sexual abuse. The fact that this Draft Strategy runs contrary to the advice given by these groups is extremely concerning, and does not bode well for the success of its implementation.

During the Call for Views we proposed a fifth pillar (or workstream) to take account of the needs of different groups of victims. Having taken on board the input and views of a wide range of stakeholders, we have concluded that the needs of different groups should not be a stand-alone or separate agenda but rather it should be a fundamental part of all of the work that we do under each pillar: Partnership, Prevention, Support and Justice. Regarding our earlier suggestion of a fifth pillar which we have reconsidered, these issues are still not fully addressed by the Strategy as it stands because the needs of marginalised groups are not well considered or addressed by the actions listed. The EQIA and RNIA are woefully inadequate and it is difficult to understand how a good faith process could have concluded that this issue and the Strategy have no equality impacts for women, for LGBTQIA people, and for rural communities. Because of the weakness of this approach

Overall, the idea of four pillars, and the naming of them, is acceptable. The concerns that we have are much deeper than that; they stem from the frequently vague actions listed under each pillar, the lack of measurable target outcomes, measurable goals, timelines of any kind or identifiable leadership in terms of driving the work, and bearing responsibility for its success or failure.

Question 5: Do you agree with the outcome and key priority areas identified under Pillar 1 (Partnership) and how we will know we are making a difference?

In our response to the previous DoJ and DoH call for views on the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy, the WPG was clear about what the nature and content of this Strategy should be. It is clear from this Draft Strategy that our advice, and the advice of the voluntary and community sector more broadly, was not taken into account. This Strategy should be informed by expert voices and the voices of those who directly experience and work with those who directly experience domestic and sexual abuse. The fact that this Draft Strategy runs contrary to the advice given by these groups is extremely concerning, and does not bode well for the success of its implementation.

	Agree	Disagree	Don't Know
Outcome: A coordinated response to domestic and sexual abuse informed by victims' voices and community engagement	x		
Key Priority area: Working collaboratively across all government Departments and with statutory, voluntary and community and faith organisations to tackle domestic and sexual abuse	x		
Key Priority area: Having effective governance structures underpinning the strategy's delivery with a performance framework to monitor outcomes and impact	x		
Key Priority area: Informing policy, legislation and service development with better quality data, research and shared learning	x		

Key Priority area: Having increased opportunities for victims' voices to be heard and ensuring the strategy's delivery is underpinned by intersectionality recognising that many people have multiple needs and face multiple barriers	x		
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How will we know we are making a difference?

	Agree	Disagree	Don't Know
Listening to views of victims, including children			x
Ensuring joined up working on cross cutting projects			x
Engaging regularly with key stakeholders at both a regional and local level			x
Data from key stakeholders is shared, ensuring that as a system we understand and can respond to trends and emerging issues			x
Review of action plans and performance indicators on a regular basis by all partners to ensure progress is made			x

The issue with the framing of this question makes it difficult to answer accurately. There is nothing wrong with the actions listed, we agree that they are all important. However, what is missing is a coherent plan as to how these will be rolled out and a timeframe for this, as well as a list of measurable actions. Listening to the voices of victims and survivors is absolutely vital and should form part of the workstream, but only if there are meaningful actions that flow from that listening exercise.

For a seven year Strategy to have no measurable outcomes and ways to “know we are making a difference” that are so vague is unacceptable.

This Strategy should outline clearly what will be done with the information gathered from listening to survivors, when, and by whom. It should then lay out what workstreams are cross-cutting, how the approach to this work will be joined up, what the markers of successful joined up working will be, and who is responsible for co-ordinating this work. This approach should be taken with all the areas of work identified. Additionally, all of this should be planned against a timeline.

The issue with this approach, repeated in the detail of all the pillars, is that it is impossible to gauge the depth of the work proposed, impossible to accurately measure outcomes, there are no identifiable targets, and should there be issues with the workstream, nobody is assigned responsibility for it - and so nobody is answerable for any failures. This is simply not good enough.

Question 6: Do you agree with the outcomes and key priority areas identified under Pillar 2 (Prevention) and how we will know we are making a difference?

In our response to the previous DoJ and DoH call for views on the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy, the WPG was clear about what the nature and content of this Strategy should be. It is clear from this Draft Strategy that our advice, and the advice of the voluntary and community sector more broadly, was not taken into account. This Strategy should be informed by expert voices and the voices of those who directly experience and work with those who directly experience domestic and sexual abuse. The fact that this Draft Strategy runs contrary to the advice given by these groups is extremely concerning, and does not bode well for the success of its implementation.

	Agree	Disagree	Don't Know
Outcome: The public is informed about the different types of domestic and sexual abuse and its impact on victims including children	x		
Key Priority area: Raising awareness, so that those experiencing, or at risk of experiencing domestic and sexual abuse, recognise it and know that help is available	x		

Key Priority area: Empowering people to safely challenge attitudes, beliefs and behaviours that foster domestic and sexual abuse	x		
Outcome: An increase in the knowledge and skills of children, young people and adults about forming healthy relationships	x		
Key Priority area: Supporting the education sector to build capacity, knowledge and skills to promote understanding about consent and healthy relationships and to teach about sensitive subjects such as domestic and sexual abuse, in an age appropriate and inclusive way, across schools and other youth settings, training facilities, Further Education Colleges and Universities	x		
Outcome: Domestic and sexual abuse is identified and responded to earlier	x		
Key Priority area: Enabling people working in frontline and public-facing roles to identify and respond effectively to domestic and sexual abuse at the earliest opportunity	x		
Key Priority area: Supporting employers in the public, private and other sectors to make workplaces safer by raising awareness of domestic and sexual abuse and promoting workplace policies with effective measures to support staff	x		

How will we know we are making a difference?

	Agree	Disagree	Don't Know
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Public awareness of domestic and sexual abuse			x
Increased reporting of domestic and sexual abuse			x
Prevention initiatives supporting individuals to develop healthy relationships			x
Referrals from a wider range of agencies to MARAC and domestic and sexual abuse services			x
Domestic abuse is recognised as a workplace issue			x

The content of the actions listed are not objectionable, as such. The issue here is that in almost all cases, there is no way to measure if these have been achieved, and no reason to believe that, for example, increased awareness of domestic abuse is in any way helpful to tackle the issue on its own.

Several of these recommendations include vague ideas like “increased awareness” and recognition “as a workplace issue”. The only way to achieve these would be with a measurement of current awareness levels, followed by a dedicated public awareness programme to increase those awareness levels, and then another measurement at the end of the Strategy’s life. How will this be achieved, how will we know it has been achieved, who will do it, and what supports will be in place to help victims and survivors when this awareness is achieved? None of this detail is present in this document.

On a more positive note, this pillar includes “prevention initiatives supporting individuals to develop healthy relationships”. This is welcome, but more detail is needed. To whom will these be available? In what settings and circumstances? The detail available seems to suggest that it is targeted at young people in formal education, which is welcome, but ultimately may require reform of the Education (Minimum Content) Order 2007 - another excellent module in the RSE Hub that goes unused for political reasons is woefully insufficient.

Further, education on healthy relationships is needed beyond formal education, and this part of the Strategy would ideally devote resources to promoting and making available the work of organisations who deliver that kind of training already, usually within community settings and on

an ad hoc basis to the private sector. If the Strategy was serious about promoting healthy relationships, it would ensure this kind of training was available to all.

The issue with this approach, repeated in the detail of all the pillars, is that it is impossible to gauge the depth of the work proposed, impossible to accurately measure outcomes, there are no identifiable targets, and should there be issues with the workstream, nobody is assigned responsibility for it - and so nobody is answerable for any failures. This is simply not good enough.

Question 7: Do you agree with the outcomes and key priority areas identified under Pillar 3 (Support) and how we will know we are making a difference?

In our response to the previous DoJ and DoH call for views on the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy, the WPG was clear about what the nature and content of this Strategy should be. It is clear from this Draft Strategy that our advice, and the advice of the voluntary and community sector more broadly, was not taken into account. This Strategy should be informed by expert voices and the voices of those who directly experience and work with those who directly experience domestic and sexual abuse. The fact that this Draft Strategy runs contrary to the advice given by these groups is extremely concerning, and does not bode well for the success of its implementation.

	Agree	Disagree	Don't Know
Outcome: Victims including children are supported and feel safe regardless of diversity of need	x		
Key Priority area: Providing support for victims, including children, as well as wider family, to reduce the risk and impact of abuse; recover from trauma and improve their health and well-being; and engage in the justice system in a way that ensures they feel protected and safe	x		
Key Priority area: Ensuring there is a focus on tackling sexual abuse, including the sexual abuse of children and young people, and providing specialist support for victims	x		

Key Priority area: Enabling services to better understand intersectional needs of individuals to ensure victims get the responses and support they need	x		
Outcome: All victims of domestic abuse including children can access safe accommodation-based services	x		
Key Priority area: Ensuring all victims and their children can access accommodation that is safe and appropriate to their needs and circumstances	x		
Key Priority area: Supporting victims of domestic abuse to remain safely in their home if they want to and it is safe to do so	x		

How will we know we are making a difference?

	Agree	Disagree	Don't Know
Victims of domestic and sexual abuse access support			x
Learning from the experience of victims to inform best practice			x
Provision of services			x
Fewer victims of domestic and sexual abuse withdraw from the criminal justice process			x

Once again, these are outcomes that are difficult to disagree with. Unfortunately, though, the Strategy is once again vague or silent on how these outcomes will be or can be achieved.

In this particular pillar, the obviously important element that is not mentioned at all is resources. Resourcing is absolutely essential to ensure that the support services that currently exist can continue to run - given the present cost of living crisis - and in fact cope with greater demand flowing from increased awareness and increased reporting identified as an outcome from Pillar 2. In addition, these support services are currently endeavouring to support people for whom they receive no help; people with no recourse to public funds, people with particular access needs, people in rural settings, LBT women, men, and people with disabilities.

It is borderline offensive to seek to increase awareness of the issue, to encourage more people to seek support, and then to fail to acknowledge what this will mean for service provision. These services are already stretched. They need to be supported to provide more care for more people, and for longer. Without that support, services will start to buckle under pressure.

Another outcome listed in this pillar is that fewer people will withdraw from the criminal justice process. As with previous pillars, this is too vague on what this means; is one fewer person sufficient? Is there any ambition beyond that minimal amount? Is there a plan to address the reasons people withdraw, such as the length of the process, the trauma associated with the court process, the prospect of hearing their abuser's "good character references" in the courtroom, the apparently arbitrary denial of special measures which forces them to face their abuser? It is difficult to imagine how this is simply not considered; in seven years, the lifetime of the Strategy, major legislative changes and process changes are more than possible. The lack of ambition in this Strategy is extremely disappointing.

The issue with this approach, repeated in the detail of all the pillars, is that it is impossible to gauge the depth of the work proposed, impossible to accurately measure outcomes, there are no identifiable targets, and should there be issues with the workstream, nobody is assigned responsibility for it - and so nobody is answerable for any failures. This is simply not good enough.

There is no clear commitment to meeting the specific, intersectional needs of LGBTQIA+ groups and gender non conforming people or migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. This is a major omission, as these groups are among the least likely to report abuse, and face specific barriers to seeking support, relating to concern about prejudice, poor previous experiences with authorities and fear relating to their personal status and information. Specifically, people with insecure immigration status fear detention and deportation and this is often used against them; this is a major issue and the strategy would significantly assist in building confidence by clarifying that everyone can seek help without these fears.

It would also be very helpful to clarify the support available to people with no recourse to public funds; it is recognised this decision is not within the competence of devolved Departments, but in line with the strategy vision, action to ensure everyone in Northern Ireland can be safe is

possible. Training for all elements of the judicial system, as well as public sector providers, on appropriate support for LGBTQIA+ groups and gender non conforming people is also vital to deal with fears related to discrimination, further victimisation and potential 'outing' of people against their will.

Question 8: Do you agree with the outcomes and key priority areas identified under Pillar 4 (Justice) and how we will know we are making a difference?

In our response to the previous DoJ and DoH call for views on the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy, the WPG was clear about what the nature and content of this Strategy should be. It is clear from this Draft Strategy that our advice, and the advice of the voluntary and community sector more broadly, was not taken into account. This Strategy should be informed by expert voices and the voices of those who directly experience and work with those who directly experience domestic and sexual abuse. The fact that this Draft Strategy runs contrary to the advice given by these groups is extremely concerning, and does not bode well for the success of its implementation.

ADDRESSING ABUSIVE BEHAVIOURS

	Agree	Disagree	Don't Know
Outcome: Individuals are responsible for their abusive behaviour, are held to account and supported to change, with the risk of harm reduced and victim safety enhanced	x		
Key Priority area: Supporting individuals to address and manage their abusive behaviours and sustain positive change	x		
Key Priority area: Encouraging individuals to change their abusive behaviour by removing barriers to participation	x		
Key Priority area: Working collaboratively to target the most prolific offenders, improving risk assessment and management	x		

Key Priority area: Providing integrated safety and support structures for victims where programmes to address abusive behaviours are undertaken	x		
Key Priority area: Improving protections for those at risk of abuse	x		

JUSTICE SYSTEM

	Agree	Disagree	Don't Know
Outcome: Victims feel confident to report domestic and sexual abuse, barriers to participating in the justice system are reduced and justice responses are effective	x		
Key Priority area: Understanding better the factors contributing to high attrition levels (drop out of cases) and under-reporting in domestic and sexual abuse cases in order to improve these	x		
Key Priority area: Providing victims of domestic and sexual abuse with information and services to support them through the criminal justice process	x		
Key Priority area: Improving the efficiency of the justice system and how domestic and sexual abuse cases are dealt with in criminal, civil and family courts	x		

Key Priority area: Strengthening the police and criminal justice response to domestic and sexual abuse	x		
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How will we know we are making a difference?

	Agree	Disagree	Don't Know
A reduction in repeat incidents of domestic and sexual abuse			x
Increase in levels of convictions for domestic and sexual abuse offences			x
Engagement in behavioural change programmes and associated reoffending levels			x
Increase in protection orders granted and reduction in associated breaches			x
Increased reporting of domestic and sexual abuse			x
Fewer victims of domestic and sexual abuse withdraw from the criminal justice process			x
Time taken for domestic and sexual abuse cases to be completed			x
Satisfaction with criminal justice system support			x

In many respects, this is the most disappointing of the four pillars in this Strategy. Once again, the outcomes include repeated listing of “reductions” and “increases” without qualifying in any way what would be sufficient to qualify as success against these outcomes. Leaving the target outcomes so loose makes them effectively meaningless; it is almost impossible for the Strategy to be measured as a success or a failure when target outcomes are so imprecise and so open to interpretation.

Some are actually verging on the incomprehensible, for instance “Time taken for domestic and sexual abuse cases to be completed” listed at Outcome 8. From context we can guess that this means that the time taken should be less, but less in comparison with what? How much less? This is immediately followed with “Satisfaction with criminal justice system support”. What support is this referring to? Does this mean support services such as Victim Support? Does it mean the communication from the PPS and other parts of the criminal justice system?

When the actual meaning of the measures is difficult to discern by policy workers in the field, it is going to be entirely impossible to measure the success or failure of these outcomes even with the best of intentions. The same issues arise that dog the other Pillars; this approach, repeated in the detail of all the pillars, is that it is impossible to gauge the depth of the work proposed, impossible to accurately measure outcomes, there are no identifiable targets, and should there be issues with the workstream, nobody is assigned responsibility for it - and so nobody is answerable for any failures. This is simply not good enough.

Question 9: Do you have any further comments that you wish to make about the draft Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy? If so, it would be helpful if you reference which part of the document you are commenting on.

In our response to the previous DoJ and DoH call for views on the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy, the WPG was clear about what the nature and content of this Strategy should be. It is clear from this Draft Strategy that our advice, and the advice of the voluntary and community sector more broadly, was not taken into account. This Strategy should be informed by expert voices and the voices of those who directly experience and work with those who directly experience domestic and sexual abuse. The fact that this Draft Strategy runs contrary to the advice given by these groups is extremely concerning, and does not bode well for the success of its implementation.

It is confusing and highly frustrating to see the Department recognise the fact that some groups will be particularly impacted by this Strategy and yet refuse to show how this heightened risk will be addressed and integrated into the Plan by committing to taking targeted actions. By highlighting these specific barriers and then doing nothing to mitigate against them, the

Department is, in essence, endorsing their existence and complicit in facilitating their persistence. This issue is particularly clear when analysing the EQIA and RNIA documents published alongside this consultation, which we have provided further comments on under Question 10.

There is an entirely inadequate recognition of domestic and sexual abuse as a workplace issue throughout this draft strategy. It is estimated that 21% of women who are victims of domestic abuse will take time off work as a direct result of the abuse they are experiencing.⁹ Research carried out by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions found that:

- 40% of respondents who had experienced domestic abuse said it had impacted on their ability to get to work
- 70.2% of these respondents experienced threats
- 66.5% were unable to attend work due to physical injury or restraint
- 28.7% experienced their perpetrator refusing or failing to show up for childcare
- 21.6% were unable to leave because their perpetrator hid or stole their car keys and/or transportation money.¹⁰

This is just a snapshot of the extensive research that has been carried out that demonstrates how serious an issue this is in the workplace and the various ways that workplaces and, consequently, the economy are impacted by domestic and sexual abuse.

Sexual Abuse is also a workplace issue that must be dealt with as a stand alone issue. While domestic abuse in the workplace can take of the form of sexual abuse and indeed domestic abuse that impacts the workplace can take the form of sexual abuse, there is also the prevalent issue that is workplace based sexual abuse. Not only do employers have a duty to support workers and employees who experience sexual abuse outside of the workplace, but they also have an obligation to safeguard their staff and protect them from sexual abuse in the workplace.

Workplace policies must be implemented by all employers as a statutory obligation with robust reporting systems in place to tackle the significant underreporting of workplace sexual abuse. Four out of five workers who experience sexual abuse at work do not report the incident to their employer and only one in four of the minority of workers who do report their sexual abuse feel that it is dealt with properly.¹¹ The duty of an employer to prevent workplace sexual harassment must be addressed within this strategy.

⁹ <http://nomsintranet.org.uk/roh/official-documents/HomeOfficeResearchStudy276.pdf>

¹⁰ https://www.ictuni.org/sites/default/files/publications/final_ictu_domestic_violencesurveyresults.pdf

¹¹ <https://www.ictu.ie/news/ictu-survey-reveals-shockingly-high-levels-under-reporting-sexual-harassment-work>

The primary research that we carried out in response to the call for views for this strategy, found that 63.8% of women experience workplace harassment in Northern Ireland and 96.6% of respondents believed that any strategies must tackle abuse in the workplace.¹² We are therefore disappointed that the draft strategy does not give any detail on how workplace based domestic and sexual abuse will be tackled, or how it will address the impact that domestic and sexual abuse has on workplaces, workers, employers and the economy

It is our view that there must be genuine partnership with trade unions throughout the delivery of this, and any future, strategy, particularly in relation to the creation and execution of any workplace policies. It is trade union members with extensive experience in working with victims and survivors of domestic and sexual abuse, and in working with perpetrators. Their experience and input is invaluable and so a partnership which values collaboration with trade unions is a key part of this strategy.

Question 10: Do you agree with the outcome of the Rural Impact Assessment and Equality Impact Assessment?

We have several concerns about the EQIA and Rural Needs Impact Assessment for this Draft Strategy.

In both Assessments, contradictory claims and assertions are made that make it unclear as to whether the Department is aware of differential impacts on different groups and how the Department will act on these accordingly.

In regards to the EQIA, it is noted that “The draft strategy is likely to have an overall positive impact and is not expected to have any differential impact based on gender.” This is despite acknowledging elsewhere that “women are more likely than men to experience domestic and sexual abuse.” If women are more likely than men to experience domestic and sexual abuse, the Strategy should account for these differing needs by taking targeted action towards particularly vulnerable groups. The WPG would like to see an acknowledgement that differential impacts are required for differential needs, and in this case, women should be differently impacted, in a positive way, by the outworkings of this Strategy.

The EQIA also states that “the draft strategy is likely to have an overall positive impact and is not expected to have any differential impact based on sexual orientation.” This is despite it being acknowledged elsewhere the distinct and compounded barriers LGBTQI+ people face in regards to domestic and sexual abuse.

¹² <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/WPG-VAWG-Research-Report.pdf>

Research in England has found that underreporting of domestic abuse in the LGBT+ community is between 60 and 80%, similar to overall national underreporting of domestic abuse of 79%¹³. Stonewall reports that ‘One in four of all lesbian and bisexual women have experienced domestic violence in a relationship. Two thirds of those say the perpetrator was a woman and a third a man. One in four of the general population of women has experienced domestic violence.’¹⁴ In 2017, Greater Manchester Police began recording LGBT+ domestic abuse figures, and in the first year recorded nearly 800 instances. They note this is 2% of all reports they received and that the issue of LGBT+ domestic abuse in particular is still under reported.¹⁵

Northern Ireland has had little or no specific research carried out in regards to the experiences of LGBTQIA people around domestic or sexual abuse. The Rainbow Project carried out research in 2021, in which they received over 1130 responses. This has shown that LGBTQIA community is experiencing a high level of abuse with over 42% of respondents to the DVSA questions stating that they had been in a relationship that they have been in a relationship that was harmful or hurtful, either verbally, physically or sexually.

International research found that;

*‘According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s latest National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (Black et al., 2011), Walters et al.,¹⁶ (2013) breaks down domestic violence figures by sexual orientation. This study reveals that 43.8% of lesbians reported to have been physically victimised, stalked, or raped by an intimate partner in their lifetime, compared to 35.0% of heterosexual women, 29.0% of heterosexual men, and 26.0% of gay men. Bisexual women experienced the highest rates with 61.1% (Hamel, 2014)’.*¹⁷

Even when LGBT+ people do report domestic violence, there is a lack of adequate recording, often making the LGBT+ community a hidden population in this area. We recommend that all section 75 groups should be monitored inclusive of sexual orientation and gender identity. Currently the PSNI do not record sexual orientation around domestic or sexual violence cases. If monitoring sexual orientation and gender identity is standard procedure, this will remove the onus on the individual to ‘come out’ in an environment they are not sure will be welcoming.

¹³ KSS CRC. 2020. *Research: Domestic Abuse In LGBT Communities - KSS CRC*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.ksscrc.co.uk/2020/04/30/research-domestic-abuse-in-lgbt-communities/>> [Accessed 3 June 2020].

¹⁴ (Stonewall.org.uk. 2008. *Prescription For Change*. [online] Available at: <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/system/files/Prescription_for_Change__2008_.pdf> [Accessed 3 June 2020]

¹⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/apr/10/manchester-police-record-nearly-800-cases-of-lgbt-domestic-abuse>

¹⁶ Black, M. C., Basile, K. C., Breiding, M. J., Smith, S. G., Walters, M. L., Merrick, M. T., Stevens, M. R. (2011). *National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey: 2010*

¹⁷ Hamel, J. (2014). *Gender inclusive treatment of intimate partner abuse: Evidence-based approaches* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Springer Publishing

Everyone has a sexual orientation and gender identity and we need to stop othering those who are not heterosexual and/or cis gender.

While some domestic abuse experience in same sex relationships is similar to experiences in heterosexual relationships, Stonewall research indicates that there are also particular experiences specific to the LGBT+ community. Stonewall research indicates that

'Lesbian and bisexual women had experienced domestic abuse from another woman said that the abuse was emotional and physical. One in five of all lesbian and bisexual women said that they had been repeatedly belittled and "made to feel worthless", and the same number said that they had been stopped from seeing friends and relatives. One in five have also been pushed or slapped by another woman and kicked and bitten. Over half of those who have experienced domestic abuse from a female partner had experienced some form of physical violence. One in fourteen say they had been forced to have unwanted sex'.¹⁸

LGBT+ victims may also experience unique forms of coercive control targeted at their sexual orientation or gender identity. For instance, the threat of 'outing' members of the LGBT+ community around their sexual orientation or gender identity. Further research by Stonewall found that over half (51%) of transgender people who had experienced domestic abuse in the last year reported that their partner had ridiculed their gender identity.¹⁹¹⁰

There are also intersecting ways particular LGBT+ people may experience domestic abuse, for example threatening to report an individual to the Home Office if they are an asylum seeker based on sexual orientation, with an aim to damage their application, or threats to jeopardise custody of children where someone is an LGBT+ parent. Elsewhere in the UK there is an LGBT Action Plan which includes provisions for specific support for LGBT+ victims of domestic violence. We would like to see similar in NI.²⁰

In several countries, including the UK, the US and Canada, studies have shown that bisexual women are the most vulnerable to rape, sexual assault, domestic violence and stalking.²¹ A 2010-2012 study in the U.S. found that bisexual women experienced stalking at higher levels than any

¹⁸ <https://www.reducingtherisk.org.uk/cms/content/lgbt>

¹⁹ Stonewall.org.uk. 2008. *Prescription For Change*. [online] Available at: <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/system/files/Prescription_for_Change__2008_.pdf> [Accessed 3 June 2020].

²⁰ Government Equalities Office LGBT Action

Plan:https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/721367/GEO-LGBT-Action-Plan.pdf

²¹ <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/bisexual-lgbt-pride-sexual-assault-violence-invisible-minority-survivors-a8435226.html>

other group²², and a more recent study from 2019 found that disproportionately high levels of bisexual women experienced stalking or other crime carried out by an intimate partner ‘Over their lifetimes, 61% of bisexual women reported being raped, assaulted or stalked by an intimate partner, compared to 44% of lesbian women and 35% of heterosexual women.’²³

We refer to recent research conducted by the Welsh Government which highlights a number of barriers in detail²⁴. These include a lack of LGBTQ+ specific services, and a lack of understanding by professionals that Domestic and Sexual Abuse can occur between LGBTQ+ people.

Access to LGBTQ+ specific support is very limited. It is rare to find specific support for issues like Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence in the LGBTQ+ sector and where there have been supports in place previously, the organisations were funded by grant making organisations for between one and three years. This is not sustainable, and indeed these services are currently unavailable. Sustainable long-term funding needs to be put in place to ensure the best possible support for minority groups.

In regards to the Rural Needs Impact Assessment, the Department notes that:

“The Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy is a regional strategy. The expected outcomes will apply to anyone affected by domestic and sexual abuse regardless of whether they are living in a rural or urban area. We anticipate that the outcomes will have a positive impact for people in rural areas. We do not consider that they will impact on people in rural areas differently from people in urban areas.”

This claim is made despite the fact that the Department acknowledges later in the report that “there are distinct challenges faced by victims of domestic abuse in rural areas.” Furthermore, when asked ‘Please explain why the Policy, Strategy, Plan or Public Service is NOT likely to impact on people in rural areas,’ the Department failed to provide a response and simply noted ‘N/A.’ This is despite the earlier assertion that the Strategy will not impact people in rural areas differently to those in urban areas.

The RNIA also notes that there was a public stakeholder engagement meeting held during the last consultation process with several rural businesses and organisations yet the Northern Ireland

²² Chen J, Walters ML, Gilbert LK, Patel N. Sexual Violence, Stalking, and Intimate Partner Violence by Sexual Orientation, United States. *Psychol Violence*. 2020 Jan;10(1):110-119.

²³ Addington, L (2019) <https://genderpolicyreport.umn.edu/bisexual-women-and-intimate-partner-violence/>

²⁴ <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2019-07/140604-barriers-faced-lgbt-accessing-domestic-abuse-services-en.pdf> Barriers Faced by Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People in Accessing Domestic Abuse, Stalking and Harassment, and Sexual Violence Services

Rural Women's Network were not listed as one of the organisations in attendance. This suggests that the voices of rural women were not taken into account during this consultation process.

Evidence shows that rural women experience domestic abuse at disproportionate rates and in different ways than those not living rurally. The Women's Policy Group conducted primary research into the scope, scale and prevalence of violence against women and girls in 2022 and found that rural women were more likely than women in urban areas to experience violence²⁵. Further, in research conducted by the National Rural Crime Network in 2019²⁶ found that:

- Abuse lasts, on average, 25% longer in the most rural areas
- The policing response is largely inadequate
- The more rural the setting, the higher the risk of harm
- Rurality and isolation are deliberately used as weapons by abusers
- Close-knit rural communities can facilitate abuse
- Traditional, patriarchal communities often control and subjugate women
- Support services are scarce – less available, less visible and less effective
- Retreating rural resources make help and escape harder - a lack of funding for rural areas as a whole impacts all areas of rural life
- The short-term, often hand-to-mouth funding model has created competing and fragmented service provision
- An endemic data bias against rural communities leads to serious gaps in response and support

We would urge the Department of Justice to look at the recommendations within the report to further inform their work within the rural communities. It is also important to liaise with the local rural community here in Northern Ireland, particularly the Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN) as they have their own specific needs as well as their own voices and priorities, and have done primary research to support this.

The RNIA does not adequately consider the social and economic needs of people living in rural areas and the barriers that they face in accessing support services, the justice system, the health service and overall barriers to engaging with wider society. These barriers include:

- No/limited access to private transport
- The impact of living in poverty and on a low income in a rural community
- The lack of information or communication of information due to internet availability/quality and

²⁵ <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/WPG-VAWG-Research-Report.pdf>

²⁶ <https://www.nationalruralcrimenetwork.net/news/captivecontrolled/>

- Certain groups including elderly, young people, disabled people may experience difficulties in accessing public transport.

All of these barriers will impact how this strategy is implemented and must be meaningfully addressed.

5. Concluding Remarks

The Women's Policy Group NI (WPG) is deeply concerned at the weakness of the Draft Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy. We have serious concerns that this document may be the template for both the Department of Health and Department of Justice in regards these serious issues for the next seven years.

This Strategy is too vague, with unmeasurable outcomes, targets that are so open as to be meaningless, and a lack of clarity as to who will be responsible. There are no timelines and worst of all no resourcing at all. There are no detailed actions and a number of priorities, specifically relating to intersectionality, are not mentioned.

We are acutely aware of the current financial constraints. We are also aware of the fact that there has not been an Executive in place since February 2022, and that it is unclear when or if that will be remedied. We are mindful that Permanent Secretaries should not be expected to act as though they were Ministers. Our concerns are nonetheless urgent.

Domestic and Sexual Abuse are an epidemic that contribute to or directly cause the death, maiming and serious harm of thousands of our citizens and if the Strategy cannot take this seriously and commit to measurable actions because of the political climate, this should be acknowledged and the process should be paused until commitments can be made.

ENDS

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

- Elaine Crory, Women's Sector Lobbyist at WRDA: elaine.croxy@wrda.net or
- Aoife Mallon, Policy Assistant at WRDA: aoife.mallon@wrda.net