

Women's **Policy Group NI**

Women's Policy Group (WPG) NI Summary
Report for the United Nations Special
Rapporteur on Violence against Women and
Girls for her Visit to the United Kingdom of
Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

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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.

This report provides a summary of evidence regarding violence against women and girls in Northern Ireland and the government's progress on various aspects of the Istanbul Convention. The purpose of this report is to further inform the Special Rapporteur during her visit to the United Kingdom in February 2024. This submission draws significantly on evidence provided by [Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland](#), the lead voluntary organisation in Northern Ireland addressing domestic abuse and providing services for women and children, with additional key evidence by [HEReNI](#), the organisation for lesbian and bisexual women, [Northern Ireland Women's Rural Network](#) and [Women's Support Network](#), which supports a network of grassroots women's centres.

The women's sector in Northern Ireland takes a rights based approach to all of its activities and celebrates the right of everyone to determine their own identity. This submission is therefore inclusive of all those who identify as women or girls, or as non-binary.

2. Relevant documents and submissions

The WPG, and its associated member organisations, have published a wide range of evidence through various evidence submissions, public consultation responses and specific briefings on issues relating to violence against women and girls in Northern Ireland. Reports and briefings published by the WPG, and some of our members, in relation to these issues include:

- Women's Policy Group (April 2022). [Violence Against Women and Girls in Northern Ireland: NI Women's Policy Group Research Findings](#)
- Women's Policy Group (December 2023) After Violence: Attitudes and Reporting VAWG in Northern Ireland. Available [here](#).

- Women’s Policy Group (September 2023) [After Violence: Attitudes and Reporting VAWG: Key findings report](#)
- Women’s Policy Group (2023) Joint response to TEO and DoJ/ DoH Consultation on Draft Strategies for ending Domestic and Sexual Abuse and Violence Against Women and Girls. Available [here](#).
- WPG (2021) ‘Response to DoJ Protection from Stalking Bill.’ Available [here](#).

3. The Northern Ireland Context

Until 3rd February 2024, Northern Ireland had been without a government for almost two years. This political vacuum has had a significant impact on the women’s sector’s ability to make progress on all human rights and equality issues, including gender equality. Prior to the Executive collapse in 2022, several important Strategies and policies were in development that would have brought material benefits to many marginalised groups in Northern Ireland, including women, such as:

- The Social Inclusion Strategies (including the Gender Equality Strategy)
- The Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy,
- The Early Learning and Childcare Strategy.

Without any Ministers in place, progress on the implementation of these Strategies could not be made. Although it is positive that the parties have now returned to government, there is a significant backlog of work that must be urgently prioritised if we are to make progress on gender equality and other human rights issues.

Northern Ireland was still recovering from the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic when the Cost of Living Crisis began to unfold between 2022 and 2023. In the past four years, we have faced a global pandemic, the U.K.’s exit from the European Union, the impacts of the Ukraine war and now the ongoing Cost of Living Crisis. Even before 2020, Northern Ireland was suffering economically from a decade of austerity policies following the 2008 financial crash. The cumulative impacts of these events has been exacerbated by the lack of government in Northern Ireland, which has meant that there have not been adequate measures put in place to support people through these difficult financial times.

Even during times of stable governance, gender equality has not been a priority for the Northern Ireland Executive. For decades, the women’s sector has been extremely concerned about the low priority given to tackling gender inequality and violence against women and girls, which was highlighted in successive shadow reports to CEDAW¹, and evidenced through gaps in legal protection from

¹ See eg. Northern Ireland Women’s European Platform (2013); Northern Ireland Women’s European Platform (2019); Northern Ireland Women’s European Platform (2021) Northern Ireland shadow interim report to CEDAW

violence against women and girls.² As of February 2024, Northern Ireland still has no women's health strategy³ and there has been limited action on persistent gender gaps in employment and pay⁴, in addition to lack of progress on a Gender Equality Strategy (GES)⁵, and continued differences with Great Britain in equality law⁶. With a new Executive now in place, it is important that progress is urgently made on these issues.

4. Specific issues relating to VAWG in Northern Ireland

4.1. The impact of paramilitarism on women

In February 2024, the U.K. Northern Ireland Affairs Committee published a report summarising the findings of their inquiry into the effect of paramilitary activity and organised crime on people in Northern Ireland⁷. In this report, the Committee acknowledged that women are uniquely and disproportionately impacted by paramilitarism and organised crime, and highlighted the explicitly gendered impacts of paramilitarism in Northern Ireland. The report stated that:

The gatekeeping of funding and other activity by paramilitary groups which has increasingly excluded women and the community and voluntary sector since the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. This has implications for the construction of a post-conflict society in Northern Ireland.

This Northern Ireland Affairs Committee report also acknowledged that women are more likely to be targeted by paramilitaries who engage in loan-sharking and illegal lending, due to being more likely to be single parents and experience poverty. The report stated that:

The high cost of living in Northern Ireland has contributed to a 'cruel storm' which paramilitary groups are exploiting to target vulnerable

² A strategy on violence against women and girls opened for consultation in July 2023, but with limited commitments (The Executive Office (July 2023) [Ending Violence against Women and Girls Strategic Framework and Action Plan](#)). The draft strategy on domestic and sexual abuse is gender neutral with no concrete commitments to action (Department of Justice (February 2023) [Draft domestic and sexual abuse strategy](#)). Non fatal strangulation only became an offence in June 2023 through the [Justice \(Sexual Offences and Trafficking Victims\) Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2022](#).

³ See Hughes, S (2021) [Women's gynaecological health in Northern Ireland](#)

Belfast: Northern Ireland Assembly Research Matters for an overview of gynaecological health inequalities in Northern Ireland. In May 2023, the Department of Health in Northern Ireland confirmed that it had asked for a rapid review of gynaecology services provided by Health and Social Care Trusts, due to the 'appalling' waiting times for services, which typically are at least 110 weeks for a first appointment (BBC news 31 May 2023 '[Waiting lists: 'Appalling' gynaecology wait times under review'](#))

⁴ Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (March 2022) [Women in Northern Ireland 2020/2021](#)

⁵ A gender equality strategy is currently in development, but on hold in the absence of an Executive and with no explicit action on addressing the stereotype of women as mothers. The strategy was developed with a co design group of civil society experts which made recommendations for action, significantly relating to access to care to enable women to make independent choices about balancing caring and labour market participation. An overview of the process is available on the Department for Communities [website](#), last accessed 8 August 2023.

⁶ These include the absence of protection against discrimination and harassment by public bodies on grounds of sex when carrying out their public functions. Other legislative gaps potentially impact on women; for example, there is no protection on the ground of age beyond the workplace

⁷ Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (2024) 'The effect of paramilitary activity and organised crime on society in Northern Ireland: Second Report of Session 2023–24' Available [here](#).

individuals. Single mothers in precarious financial situations are being targeted by paramilitary groups engaging in illegal money lending practices. The structure of universal credit, the lack of a childcare strategy, and expense of childcare in Northern Ireland all contribute to the precarious financial situation in which some families find themselves.

The report also highlighted the impact of low prosecution rates on reporting rates, as this acts as deterrent for people when deciding whether or not to report crimes:

Low prosecution rates for those who commit violent crime can act as a barrier to reporting the crimes of paramilitary groups and serve to perpetuate the impunity with which these groups act.

4.2. Summary of research findings

The WPG NI have carried out a number of research projects in the past three years that relate specifically to the prevalence, scope and aftermath of VAWG in Northern Ireland. These include:

- Violence Against Women & Girls in Northern Ireland: Women's Policy Group NI Research Findings⁸, April 2022
- After Violence: Attitudes & Reporting VAWG⁹, September 2023
- WPG Protection from Stalking Bill written evidence submission and oral evidence presentation¹⁰ April 2021

The purpose of this research was both to ensure that recommendations that we make are informed by the lived experience of women we work with and for, and also to ensure that the experience of women in Northern Ireland, which has a different legislative landscape as well as a different social landscape, scarred by decades of conflict, is heard in Westminster.

Northern Ireland occupies an unenviable position in comparison with our nearest neighbours and across Europe with regards to femicide; PSNI statistics show 8 women were murdered with a domestic abuse motivation in the period July 2021-June 2023¹¹; Women's Aid's data indicates that 39 women have died violently in Northern Ireland since 2017¹², with evidence indicating that Northern Ireland has one of the highest femicide rates in Europe¹³. In addition, reported domestic abuse

⁸ Women's Policy Group NI, Violence Against Women & Girls Research Findings (2022) Available at: <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/WPG-VAWG-Research-Report.pdf>

⁹ Women's Policy Group NI, After Violence: Attitudes and Reporting VAWG, Key Findings briefing (2023) Available at: <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/AfterViolenceWPGPrimaryResearch.pdf>

¹⁰ WPG Joint Submission to Protection from Stalking Bill (2021): <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/WPG-Joint-Submission-Protection-from-Stalking-Bill-16-04-2021.pdf>

¹¹ Police Service of Northern Ireland (July 2023) [Police Recorded Crime Bulletin](#)

¹² BBC Northern Ireland 14 June 2023 'Claire Hanna: MP highlights 'devastating impact' of attacks on women'

¹³ Factcheck NI (November 2019) [Does Northern Ireland have the highest femicide rate in Western Europe?](#)

incidents and crimes continues to rise, as does reported sexual offences including rape.

VAWG rests on an unequal, skewed social order that keeps inequality alive and deepens it across generations. The state is and has been a major contributor to that inequality, and as such the WPG's earlier research into VAWG included State Violence as a category of gender-based violence¹⁴. This encompasses a range of behaviours, ranging from the denial of rights, for example reproductive rights, to explicit violence such as Mother and Baby Homes, and to fiscal violence, that keeps women at a permanent financial disadvantage, enabling the violence of individuals.

4.2.1 WPG Research on the Scale and Prevalence of VAWG

In 2022, the WPG conducted research into the scope, scale and prevalence of Violence Against Women and Girls in Northern Ireland¹⁵. In response, 1,065 women told us their experiences and perceptions of the issue, including the response they received from the police when they reported. The following are some key findings:

- **91.2%** of women think that Northern Ireland has a problem with men's violence against women and girls.
- **97.2%** of women think that Northern Ireland should have a strategy to tackle men's violence against women and girls.
- **83%** of women have been impacted by men's violence against women and girls but only **21.4%** reported this to the police
- **77.4%** 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.
- **89.7%** of women believe Northern Ireland has a problem with attitudes of sexism and misogyny.
- **80.8%** of women believe Northern Ireland has a problem with rape myths and rape culture
- **87.4%** of women believe Northern Ireland has a problem with victim-blaming

¹⁴ Women's Policy Group NI, VAWG Research Report, 2022, p.62-63 Available at: <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/WPG-VAWG-Research-Report.pdf>

¹⁵ Ibid.

- **81.2%** of women believe there is stigma surrounding issues of violence against women and girls.
- **92.3%** of women think that there are barriers to reporting men’s violence against women and girls.
- **95.2%** of women think that reducing levels of violence against women and girls requires focusing on changing men and boys’ behaviours and actions.
- **78.6%** of women think that additional action needs to be taken in this strategy to address men’s violence against marginalised groups of women.
- **86.8%** of women think that there needs to be a review of how the justice system treats victims and survivors of men’s violence against women and girls.
- **83.4%** of women believe that state violence against women and girls should be included within this Strategy.

4.2.2 WPG Research on the State’s Response to VAWG

In 2023, the WPG carried out further research on VAWG, titled ‘After Violence: Attitudes and Reporting VAWG¹⁶’ which specifically looked at the experiences of victims with the police and justice system after experiencing VAWG.

Experiences of violence

- 87% of women have experienced VAWG
- 80% of women disclosed their experience of VAWG to someone
- 60% of disclosures of VAWG were made to a friend or family member

Police Reporting

- Only 27% of disclosures of VAWG were to the police
- 46% of women know how to report an incident of VAWG to the police
- Only 22% of women feel comfortable reporting VAWG to the police
- 85% of women think there should be a specific mechanism for reporting VAWG to the police

¹⁶ WPG (2023) ‘After Violence: Attitudes and Reporting Violence Against Women and Girls’ Available [here](#).

Court system

- Only 9% of women think that courts in NI take VAWG seriously
- 31.5% of women who have experienced VAWG engaged with the court system
- 54.5% of women who engaged with the courts were not satisfied with the outcome Alternative forms of justice
- 77% of women think convicted offenders of VAWG should take part in a rehabilitation program
- 61% of women were unsure if mediation and other forms of alternative justice are working

Domestic Abuse

- 65% of respondents have experienced domestic abuse
- 67% of women who have experienced domestic abuse did not report it to the police or take legal action
- 63% of domestic abuse victims who reported it to the police or took legal action said that this was a negative experience

4.2.3 WPG Research on Stalking

In the WPG's 2021 Research¹⁷, to inform our response to the Protection from Stalking Bill, women spoke about their experiences of reporting stalking behaviours before adequate laws existed to prosecute the crime, including attitudes from police, and the impact on their wellbeing. The following are some key findings:

- When asked: If you wish to, please detail your stalking experience(s) In response to this question, the vast majority of respondents disclosed their relationship to their stalker(s).
 - Throughout these responses, 79% of respondents identified their stalker as either an ex-partner or someone they had previously dated. A further 23.7% referenced being stalked by an acquaintance or a "friend of a friend" and 10.5% also referenced being stalked at school, or by someone they knew from school several years previously. 18.4% of respondents also referenced being stalked by a stranger or random person; 2.6% referenced being stalked by an employer and 2.6% referenced being stalked by a colleague.

¹⁷ WPG (2021) Primary Research into Stalking in Northern Ireland. Available [here](#).

- In addition to this, 52.6% of respondents referenced being stalked at their home; 31.6% being stalked at their workplace; and 10.5% referenced being stalked at school or university. A worrying 47.4% of respondents referenced being physically followed by their stalker, with 23.7% being followed by a car.
- Several respondents also experienced unwanted phone calls, texts and emails (47.4%); online harassment (21.1%) and unwanted gifts (7.9%). Worryingly, 10.5% of respondents also mentioned concerns over the unstable mental health of their stalkers, with references to ex partners threatening suicide also.
- The most universal theme in these experiences was the reported serious long term impacts on survivors:
 - 100% of respondents listed long term impacts on their mental health because of their experiences, from those cases where the harassment was ongoing to those where it had ended decades before.
 - Three respondents specifically mentioned living with PTSD as a result.
 - Some feared for their physical safety, others suffered damage to their career.

Other key themes include:

- The coexistence of in-person and digital stalking
- The prevalence of individuals experiencing stalking by more than one perpetrator
- The rise of Image Based Sexual Abuse (IBSA) also known as “revenge porn”
- The connection between perpetrators perceived “sense of entitlement” and their behaviour, and how gaps in the law enable this
- Confusion over how best to deal with the issue
- A wide variety of responses from institutions including the police, justice system, educational establishments and workplaces

When asked: Did you report any stalking incident you experienced?

- 52.63% of respondents said - Yes
- 47.37% of respondents said - No

When asked: If you reported this, who did you report it to (for example, police, employer, teacher etc.)? Out of the respondents that did report the stalking:

- 42.1% reported it to the PSNI,
- 7.89% reported this to their friends, family or neighbours,

- 7.89% reported to their employers,
- 5.26% of respondents referenced reporting it and receiving support from Women's Aid,
- 5.26% reported it to their GP,
- 5.26% reported it to a solicitor,
- 2.63% reported it to their university and,
- 2.63% went as far as reporting it to the perpetrators' family.

Some of the other key themes that emerged in response to this question included:

- Reports to agencies coming quite late into the pattern of behaviour, because of a mixture of fear of disbelief, embarrassment, a hope it would "all go away", and taking some time to realise what was happening,
- Employers putting practical supports in place at a higher rate than Universities or Schools,
- Family members being forced to provide practical help where police did not,
- Reports happening only when necessity has forced them.

5. Concluding remarks

The WPG NI welcomes this opportunity to engage with the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women and Girls and looks forward to meeting her during her visit to Northern Ireland in February 2024, where we hope to further discuss the issues raised in this summary report.

For any questions or queries relating to this submission, please contact Elaine Crory, Women's Sector Lobbyist at WRDA: elaine.croly@wrda.net.