



Response in relation to:

Development of a Sexual Orientation Strategy and Action Plan

Office of the First and Deputy First Minister

6 June 2014

Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland

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24 Hour Domestic & Sexual Violence Helpline

Call: 0808 802 1414

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Text **support** to 07797 805 839

Freephone from all landlines and mobiles. Translation service available.

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Response

- Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland welcomes the publication of the consultation on *Development of a Sexual Orientation Strategy and Action Plan*, and the opportunity to provide input on behalf of our local groups. We wish to provide a targeted response to this strategy document and focus our comments primarily on issues relating to domestic and sexual violence and abuse.
- We echo expert organisations Rainbow Project and HEReNI in welcoming the sentiment of the Strategy, but also calling for the proposed language to be stronger in actively promoting and ensuring equality and diversity and grounding the Strategy in a robust human rights context.
- We largely agree with the objectives of the Strategy but would support the Rainbow Project's call for further development of objectives to ensure their effective implementation. We suggest that this could be strengthened by including specific outcomes within the document to ensure accountability and measurability of the strategy.
- We are disappointed that there is no specific mention of domestic and sexual violence and abuse within the document, and urge that this is rectified. Domestic and sexual violence and abuse are not only experienced by heterosexual couples – LGBT women and men can also be victims and perpetrators of abuse.
- LGBT victims of domestic and sexual abuse face the same issues as heterosexual victims which impact upon their health, wellbeing and safety, but also face additional barriers as a consequence of being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transsexual. Being LGBT may compound the isolation felt by victims of abuse further, and the wider inequality and discrimination against LGBT people can be used as a means for perpetrators to further isolate and control their victim. People who have used our services have reported that their abuse included threats to 'out' them if they did not submit to their perpetrator's control, preventing them from being able to freely express their sexuality, or blame / shaming over their sexual orientation. Such abuse and control, combined with the stress caused by the discriminatory treatment of LGBT people in our society, results in them suffering multiple discrimination and increases their vulnerability and marginalisation.
- It is also the case that victims may regard mainstream services, either for victims of abuse or for health or justice provision, as not being for them. They may be reluctant to access those services due to very real fears of prejudice or discrimination from service providers. Women's Aid and the 24 Hour Domestic & Sexual Violence Helpline work with organisations such as the Rainbow Project and HEReNI to make our services as accessible and needs-focused for LGBT

victims as possible. However we recognise that there is still much to do in Northern Ireland across statutory and non-statutory providers to ensure equal and equitable access to services to support LGBT victims of domestic and sexual violence. This Strategy should provide the cornerstone for improvement of such access by tackling the inequality and discrimination that underpins current shortcomings, and ensure that LGBT victims and the specific issues that affect them as LGBT victims are not overlooked in service provision planning.

- We urge that domestic and sexual violence and abuse are included as a separate theme within the strategy and that this includes an outcome to provide accessible support services to all LGBT victims of sexual violence and abuse. We would also support the Rainbow Project's recommendation for research into domestic and sexual violence in same-sex relationships.
- Finally we note that transgender/ transsexual people have not been included within this strategy, on the basis that being trans is a matter of gender identity as opposed to sexual orientation. We look forward to equality for trans people being dealt with in a robust manner within the new Gender Equality Strategy, and would take this opportunity to point out that trans men and women are some of the most marginalised people in Northern Ireland, and that urgent action must be taken to redress this marginalisation and improve equality outcomes for trans people.

Contact Details

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