



Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Northern Ireland

Call for Evidence: Respondent Information Form for Organisations

Please Note this form **must** be returned with your response to ensure that we handle your response appropriately.

1. Name of Organisation

Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland

2. Name of Person completing Submission

Title Mr Ms Mrs Miss Dr Other (Please specify) _____

Surname

Kennedy

Forename

Louise

3. Position within the Organisation

Regional Policy & Information Coordinator

4. Postal Address

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Permissions - I am responding on behalf of an organisation

The name and address of your organisation may be made available to the public on the CSE Inquiry website.

Are you content for your response to be made available?

Please tick as appropriate:

Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>

If "No", please state why: _____

We will share your response internally with relevant Inquiry personnel who will consider the issues you have identified. They may wish to contact you again in the future, but will require your permission to do so.

Are you content for the Inquiry to contact you again in relation to your response?

Please tick as appropriate:

Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>

Some organisations may be called upon to give oral evidence to the Inquiry.

Please indicate whether your organisation would be willing to give oral evidence. All oral evidence will be given in private.

Are you willing to give oral evidence, if approached?

Please tick as appropriate:

Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>

If "No", please state why: _____

INQUIRY INTO CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

EVIDENCE FROM ORGANISATIONS

Please structure your evidence along the following lines if possible:

1. Please describe work undertaken by your organisation that is relevant to CSE, even if it is not the main focus of your work. This should include structures, procedures and processes currently in place.

Women's Aid is the lead voluntary organisation in Northern Ireland addressing domestic and sexual violence and providing services for women and children. Women's Aid seeks to challenge attitudes and beliefs that perpetuate domestic violence and, through our work, promote healthy and non-abusive relationships.

The work we do which is relevant to CSE includes the following:

- Providing refuge accommodation to women and their children suffering mental, physical or sexual abuse within the home. This includes children who are witnesses of domestic violence or are sexually abused by family members/carers in the home. It also includes young women who are in abusive relationships themselves.
- The 24 Hour Domestic & Sexual Violence Helpline. The Helpline is open to all women and men affected by domestic or sexual violence. This includes those who suffered sexual violence or exploitation as children and young people but who are now adults.
- Providing a range of support services to enable women who are affected by domestic and/or sexual violence to rebuild their lives and the lives of their children.
- Providing a range of support services to children and young people who have experienced domestic violence, including sexual violence. This would include one to one support sessions with children and young people, young women's support groups, group work on keeping safe online and programmes which help children talk about safety and abuse such as Helping Hands (see below). Support is given to young women who may not have disclosed abuse but who are very likely to have been victims of CSE.
- Preventative education programmes in school, community and refuge settings. Our *Helping Hands* programme, developed by Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland, is aimed at primary school aged children at key stage two and three. The overall aim of the programme is to increase children's understanding of feeling safe and to explore and promote behaviours which will contribute to a safe environment, and the programme seeks to develop children's levels of self-esteem and confidence, enable children to explore and express feelings, and Increase children's understanding of feeling safe and to explore and promote behaviours which will contribute to a safe environment.
- Our *Heading 4 Healthy Relationships* programme is a post-primary preventative education programme, which aims to explore the concepts of healthy and unhealthy

relationships and what constitutes abuse. It is aimed at young people who are entering into intimate relationships to educate and inform them on making safe choices in their relationships. It is delivered in schools, FE colleges and other youth settings.

- To work in partnership with all relevant agencies to ensure a joined up response to domestic and sexual violence and abuse – MARAC, work with the Rowan SARC, Domestic Violence Partnerships, Children & Young People’s Strategic Partnership, Regional Strategic Group of the government’s domestic and sexual violence strategy.

Women’s Aid recognises that many of the children and young people we work with are vulnerable to sexual exploitation. This happens because of the nature of domestic violence, involving targeted abuse and causing family dysfunction and lack of safety and stability. However we are also aware that, although vulnerability caused by domestic violence can lead to vulnerability to CSE, this is not always the case.

Women’s Aid Federation Northern Ireland and all Women’s Aid local groups adhere to up to date child protection policies grounded in best practice, and our staff are trained in child protection.

2. Reflecting on the current definition of CSE, can you indicate whether this definition enables your organisation to identify appropriately and capture information about CSE.

Many of our Women’s Aid staff have attended CSE training and are equipped to recognise the signs and identify suspected CSE cases.

However, it would be useful for our organisation if the definition went further to clarify what constitutes CSE, given that exploitation is possible in the context of intimate relationships between young people. Our workers have noted an increase of, for example, young girls being exploited by young boys also under 18, particularly in terms of being coerced or convinced to share sexually explicit photos of themselves. This may or may not be for a reward or gain (although the ‘reward’ in many cases is the perpetrator continuing to be in a relationship with the girl), but may in fact be on the premise of the photos being private but then used as leverage to manipulate and control that girl within the relationship with the threat of publicly sharing the photos. Such a scenario would not fall under an adult exploiting a child, but it is nonetheless exploitative and abusive. It would be helpful to clarify whether such a situation would fall under the definition of CSE.

3. From the information held by your organisation, can you provide an indication of the nature and extent of CSE in NI for both genders?

As Women’s Aid is a support organisation for women who have suffered domestic violence, our experience is primarily confined to female and male children & young people who access our

services as a consequence of their mother's use of our services, young women under the age of 18 who present as victims of domestic violence, or adult women who were victims of CSE as children.

Women's Aid does not officially collect statistics about the prevalence of CSE among those who use our services, however we have identified it anecdotally across our services. Our refuge and support workers have noted that CSE is occurring across Northern Ireland and takes a number of forms.

Across Northern Ireland, our refuge workers note that they accommodate young girls in refuges, who have been removed from the care of both parents as a consequence of domestic violence, as an alternative to placing them in care homes where they would be vulnerable to CSE. They also identified girls leaving the care system as vulnerable to CSE. In some areas, local Women's Aid groups work with social services to support girls who are leaving the care system and are being exploited by a perpetrator. The majority of these girls are pregnant and are offered refuge accommodation and support as an alternative to having their children removed from their care once born. It is also a means of reaching these young women, who may not themselves perceive their exploitation as exploitative.

Our refuge and outreach support workers have also identified instances of CSE in schools between peers. This is usually in the form of pressure to perform sexual acts either in return for the reward of having a boyfriend or on threat of being publicly humiliated / bullied etc if they refuse. The vast majority of this form of exploitation is perpetrated by male pupils against female pupils. However we have identified a case of CSE of a male child in a school setting. This includes instances of children being exploited via social media, for example coercion to take sexually explicit photos of themselves which are then shared with others or used as a tool to manipulate or threaten a child into carrying out other acts.

In the course of our work we have also identified a strong link between domestic violence and abuse, sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation. This includes:

- Children who have witnessed domestic and sexual abuse of their mother by their father.
- Children who have suffered physical and / or sexual abuse themselves at the hands of a domestic violence perpetrator who is also abusing their mother.

These children display overtly sexualised behaviour at a very young age (as young as 3 or 4 years old), and are vulnerable to future CSE as a result of this premature sexualisation. In over 30 years of working with women, we have supported women who have been exploited into prostitution, women targeted by perpetrators for the purposes of CSE under the guise of a relationship, victims of human trafficking, women whose domestic violence perpetrator coerces them into prostitution and acts as their pimp, and women who have been targeted by domestic violence perpetrators because their young age makes them vulnerable. In a number of cases, these victims were victims or witnesses of sexual abuse as children and were prematurely sexualised as a consequence, making them vulnerable to the CSE that they went on to suffer either as children or as adults.

4. What measures are required to improve the arrangements for preventing and tackling CSE in NI?

Women's Aid supports the implementation of learning from the NWG Network and the Barnardos report on CSE.

We also believe that it is crucial that young people are fully informed and educated about child sexual exploitation and the dangers to their safety, in an age-appropriate format which also appeals to them (for example, young adults may be more likely to listen to someone who speaks their language, is not much older than them, and who demonstrates a proper understanding of what life is like for people of their age). We strongly believe that preventative education should be compulsory in all schools at all key stages. Programmes like our Helping Hands programme for primary age children and Heading 4 Healthy Relationships (H4HR) for post-primary age children are effective means of delivering messages of safety, respect, and self-esteem, while also identifying clear pathways to report and disclose for children who are suffering CSE. Children need to know about unhealthy and abusive relationships from a young age so that they may identify that behaviour and understand that it is not acceptable or normal. They, and their parents / guardians / teachers, should also be taught about staying safe online and on social media.

Widespread training to make more people who work or are in contact with children social guardians would also assist in identifying cases of potential or actual CSE and enable a swift response to protect that child and bring the perpetrators to justice.

There must be clear pathways for how agencies and those working with children can report and tackle CSE, and clear guidance of what constitutes CSE.

There is also a wider issue that must be redressed, that of the premature sexualisation of young girls. This is pervasive in media messaging, in sexualised clothing for young girls, and in the 'rape culture' that exists within our society. There must be a strong focus on calling out all forms of objectification of women as being sexist and damaging to how children perceive sexual relations in order to tackle the normalisation of rape culture and the sexual exploitation which this can foster.

5. What barriers exist in preventing, identifying, disrupting or prosecuting child sexual exploitation (CSE) perpetrators? How might these be overcome?

Women's Aid supports the findings of the NWG Network on the barriers that exist.

The barriers relating to CSE are similar to those for other forms of violence against women and girls – the hidden and secretive nature of such crimes, the fact that perpetrators are skilled at manipulating and coercing into exploitation and convincing a victim that the abuse or exploitation is either normal or the victim's own fault, and the ability of perpetrators to isolate and instil fear in

their victims. The skilled, manipulative and motivated nature of perpetrators is also a barrier as they are usually well-versed in the legal and social care support structures available to victims and are highly skilled at circumnavigating them to avoid detection.

We would also identify the lack of a compulsory, mainstreamed preventative education strategy across all primary and post-primary schools across Northern Ireland as a barrier to disrupting CSE perpetrators by equipping children and young people with the knowledge and information to be safe and an effective avenue to dealing with issues arising over current or past abuse.

Lack of Social Guardians in all arenas where children and young people exist is similarly a barrier. Adults must be trained to recognise signs of exploitation and have clear pathways to report and tackle exploitation. Criminal Justice staff and judges must be effectively trained about CSE, its causes and effects in order to ensure that victims get justice and are offered special measures in the course of criminal proceedings. As it stands, the criminal justice system and how it operates is a barrier to the identification and disruption of CSE.

Similarly, social services staff must be trained to recognise CSE and ensure that they are treating the rights and safety of children as paramount. This is often not the case in practice – in many cases where domestic violence exists within a family, the perceived human rights of a perpetrator to have access to their children trump the right of the child to safety and protection against dangerous abusive behaviour.

Women's Aid is of the view that the absence of social guardians to protect against CSE is firmly rooted in a complete lack of understanding of nature of abuse & sexualisation of children, a lack of understanding of the nature of a perpetrator, and a lack of understanding of how early exposure to sexual exploitation can affect a child in later (adult) life.

To hold perpetrators to account, legislation which criminalises the act of coercive control should be implemented in Northern Ireland, in combination with more robust and appropriate sentencing of all domestic and sexual violence perpetrators. Legislation which holds those who purchase sexual services to account, in the form of Clause 6 of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Further Provisions for Northern Ireland) Bill, would also strengthen the response to child sexual exploitation in the form of coercion or grooming into prostitution, given that a significant number of women enter prostitution as children under the age of 18.

Finally, there must be better pathways for reporting suspected CSE, which lays out a joined up multi-agency approach which links both statutory and voluntary organisations, which could be delivered within existing child safeguarding structures and bench-marked by a multi-agency action plan along the lines of those that exist for the *Stopping Domestic & Sexual Violence and Abuse* strategy. This should be combined with transparency so that if a person reports suspected CSE they know how that disclosure is followed up. At present, if a Women's Aid worker, teacher, or someone working directly with a child, reports suspected CSE to social services, this is the end of the information exchange. There is no reportage as to how that disclosure is dealt with, if at all, or transparency as to the process which follows. This wall of silence does not encourage those who are concerned for a child's wellbeing to report suspected CSE in the first place, or even assure those reporting that they are being believed when they report suspected CSE. This lack of clarity about what someone should do if they come across a suspected case of CSE, and lack of expertise

and training of many people who are in positions where they may come across it, is a significant barrier and can lead to reluctance on behalf of a professional to act. In cases where the CSE is within an institutional context, there must be better culture and protections for whistle-blowers and a clear reassurance that reporting suspected CSE will not be detrimental to that whistle-blower's job.

6. Please provide any examples of local initiatives which have been taken in relation to preventing and tackling CSE.

In addition to the work highlighted under Question 1, there are a number of specific initiatives which Women's Aid local groups have been involved in. These include awareness-raising event in Omagh on 6th March 2014 targeted at night time economy establishments, door staff, taxi drivers and hoteliers, and initiatives between Armagh-Down Women's Aid and local social services to work with young women exiting the care system who have been identified as victims of CSE. In Belfast & Lisburn, Women's Aid have been running a programme for young people on keeping safe on the internet and have a young women's project for women aged 18 – 25, some of which have been victims of CSE when under 18.

7. Please add anything else you wish to say that is relevant to the work of the Inquiry.