



Response in relation to:

**Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and
Abuse in Northern Ireland
2013-2020**

11 April 2014

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Contents

Section		Page
1	Executive Summary	3
2.	Section 2 - Definitions	7
3.	Section 3 – Strategic Vision	20
4.	Section 4 – Key Delivery Strands	22
5.	Section 5 – Strategic Outcomes / Priorities	23
6.	Section 6 – Governance & Accountability	47
7.	Section 7 – Equality and Human Rights Questions	48
8.	Additional Commentary	48
9.	Contact Details	52

Section 1- Executive Summary

- 1.1 Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland welcomes the publication of the draft combined Domestic and Sexual Violence Strategy for Northern Ireland 2013-2020, and the opportunity to comment on it on behalf of our local Women's Aid groups. We welcome the commitment demonstrated from Government, through the document, to addressing and responding to domestic and sexual violence in Northern Ireland. Domestic and sexual violence are clearly interlinked and we support the production of a combined strategy which presents an overarching vision for addressing both. We would also like to take this opportunity to emphasise our ongoing support and commitment to this process.
- 1.2 We welcome the positive changes to the document since pre-consultation draft, and the demonstrated commitment from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and Department of Justice to produce a robust and progressive document.
- 1.3 We appreciated the opportunity to have met with the Departments and air some of our concerns in pre-consultation stage. However some of the main issues that we highlighted have not been adequately addressed and we have felt that we should re-state them in this response.

Main issues – Summary

- 1.4 Resourcing the Strategy** – Women's Aid has serious concerns that there is no solid commitment of resources to deliver the strategy throughout this period, including resources to fund existing vital services like Women's Aid refuges, outreach services and the 24 Hour Domestic & Sexual Violence Helpline. There is a need for a stand-alone resources section within this strategy, which clearly outlines the strategic process which will be utilised to ensure a needs and priorities-based investment approach across all five strands of the strategy. This would ensure transparency in relation to how costs are allocated. We urge that the strategy makes a firm commitment to maintain existing services for victims of domestic and sexual violence. We would also draw attention to the government investment in other jurisdictions in the UK. In Scotland, the Scottish government provided resources in the region of £40 million for domestic and sexual violence services and initiatives between 2012 – 2015.

A firm commitment to provide resources to deliver this Strategy is all the more important given the impact of the economic downturn and pending Welfare Reform. The economic climate has already exacerbated the impact of domestic and sexual violence on victims, with many unable or unwilling to leave abusive relationships due to economic hardship. The Welfare Reform Bill may impact further upon these victims in a number of ways. If Universal Credit is paid to one member of a household or a victim of domestic violence must disclose abuse to obtain split payments, this will remove the financial means for many victims to flee abusive relationships, and potentially put them in danger if they are forced to disclose abuse while still living with a perpetrator. Furthermore, the Bedroom Tax will leave victims with fewer options. When faced with the reality of leaving an abusive relationship but taking a step into poverty, or having to pay for a bedroom that they cannot afford, many victims may be discouraged from leaving and may remain with abusive partners. Those women who do leave and are supported in Women's Aid refuges may be unable or hesitant to move out of refuges due to the Bedroom Tax, and this will in turn put a strain on our services. It is essential that this strategy recognises the economic realities of victims of domestic violence and abuse and makes a strong commitment to resource the measures outlined. As options for victims lessen, it is imperative that a well-resourced and victim needs-focused support network is in place for them.

1.5 The Toxic Three model and perpetuation of myths about domestic violence –

Women's Aid is extremely concerned at the inclusion of the *Toxic Three* model in the strategy. The use of the model in its current form implies that alcohol & substance abuse and mental health issues can be causes of domestic violence. This is untrue and in fact perpetrates unhelpful myths about domestic violence which hinder progress in tackling domestic violence and providing appropriate support for victims. Domestic violence and abuse are caused by a combination of a motivated perpetrator, a vulnerable victim and an absence of social guardians. While we recognise that alcohol / substance use and mental health issues can be a factor in many cases of domestic violence, either exacerbating the degree of violence or increasing the vulnerability of a victim, our concern is that the nature of the link between them is not sufficiently explained in the strategy, and that the toxic three is highlighted over other contributing factors that are equally important. There is a wealth of research that highlights that domestic and sexual violence are deeply grounded in culture, gender identity and the abuse of power and control. The Toxic Three model may apply causally in the field of Child Protection, but this model cannot simply be inverted to become an explanation for why domestic violence occurs.

1.6 Failure to acknowledge the gendered nature of domestic & sexual violence – While Women’s Aid Federation Northern Ireland agrees it is important to acknowledge the experiences of males in relation to domestic and sexual violence, we have serious concerns about how this is presented in the strategy. While striving to be inclusive, the document sends out a potential message that such violence can be perpetrated by males and females in equal proportion. This is extremely misleading and fails to highlight the fact, clearly documented in research¹ and international law, that in the majority of cases of domestic and sexual abuse, the perpetrator is male and the victim is female. It also fails to recognise the impact of gender inequality, high levels of violence against women and girls, traditional ideologies of male entitlement and ingrained notions of a woman’s place in society on domestic and sexual violence.

The reality of domestic and sexual violence is gendered. Therefore a gendered approach within the strategy would both include both women and men within the strategy and accurately reflect the gendered experiences of women and men. In failing to make such a distinction, the strategy in its current form does not provide an accurate picture of domestic and sexual violence in Northern Ireland. In doing so, it does a disservice to all victims of domestic and sexual violence, both female and male. Research consistently suggests that women and men experience violence and abuse differently – these differences are key to formulating a response to all domestic and sexual violence based on the needs of female and male victims.

1.7 Lack of context or recognition of existing work and services within strategy –

Women’s Aid is disappointed that there is no recognition of existing work being done to tackle domestic and sexual violence and provide vital support to victims. We are concerned that if a person suffering abuse picked up this strategy, they would gain the impression that little has been done to support people in their situation, nor would they gain an accurate picture of where they can go for support. This is particularly the case for the many victims who seek support but are unwilling to seek help from the police or other statutory agencies for whatever reason.

¹ World Health Organisation: <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs239/en/>; CEDAW General Recommendation 19 <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/recommendations/recomm.htm>; Beijing Platform for Action <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/>; UN Committee on the Status of Women 57 Agreed Conclusions http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/csw57/CSW57_agreed_conclusions_advance_unedited_version_18_March_2013.pdf; The Global Burden of Disease, Harvard University, 1996 states “Globally, men’s violence against women causes more deaths and disability among females aged 15-44 than Cancer, Malaria, Traffic Accidents or War.”;

We are also concerned that this strategy fails to use the best, most up to date and accurate information available to scope the nature and extent of domestic and sexual violence in Northern Ireland. Many voluntary organisations that specialise in support for victims of domestic and sexual violence, including Women's Aid and the 24 Hour Domestic & Sexual Violence Helpline, collect robust statistics on an annual basis. These statistics provide an accurate picture of the prevalence of domestic & sexual violence in Northern Ireland, including those who seek support but are unwilling to report to the PSNI. We believe that the inclusion of such information would enhance the PSNI statistics already included in the document. We also feel that it is important that this strategy points out that 2012/13 saw a large increase in reportage of domestic incidents to police.

1.8 Gaps in outlining victim engagement with courts – For many domestic violence victims, criminal courts will never be used as a means of seeking protection and justice. Instead, many victims primarily utilise the civil and family courts to protect themselves and remove themselves and their children from abusive and violent relationships. However, the strategy in its current form does not sufficiently recognise this reality, or include in its priorities the improvements and developments necessary to make the civil and family court systems more amenable to victims of domestic violence. In particular, women who have used our services report that they have been re-victimised in the civil and family court setting, as they have no recourse to special measures to protect them from harassment, manipulation and intimidation by their perpetrator.

1.9 The international and European human rights context – We are disappointed that the international and human rights context for domestic and sexual violence isn't sufficiently explained or referenced properly. The UK government, and consequently the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly, have specific obligations to protect people (and in particular women) from domestic violence and abuse. Some of these obligations are legally binding. We recommend that the international and legal context for domestic and sexual violence is incorporated into this document in a manner that accurately reflects these obligations and acknowledges that domestic and sexual violence are a violation of the rights and freedoms of victims.

2. Section 2 – Definitions

Question 2 (a): Do you agree with the definition of Domestic Violence and Abuse as outlined in the Strategy?

- 2.a.1 Women’s Aid welcomes the definition of domestic violence and abuse as outlined in the Strategy. We particularly welcome the inclusion of “threatening, controlling, coercive behaviour” within the definition. However we have some reservations about the supporting text within Section 2.
- 2.a.2 We disagree with the statement at section 2.47 (p 23) that “domestic violence and abuse can be a single incident”. This is untrue – domestic violence is by definition a pattern of behaviour. Though a particular case may involve an isolated incident of physical violence, this does not equate to one incident of domestic violence, as domestic violence includes psychological, emotional, financial and sexual abuse. Domestic violence invariably involves a pattern of psychological abuse and manipulation and is defined by a power imbalance within a relationship, with one person (the perpetrator) holding the balance of power and manipulating and controlling the other (the victim²). At the same time, domestic violence does not entail a perpetrator being constantly violent and abusive to their victim. In fact, domestic abuse is cyclical in nature³, with ‘honeymoon periods’ where the perpetrator is on their ‘best behaviour’. This ‘good behaviour’ is nonetheless a means of manipulating and controlling a victim, and of convincing them to remain in the relationship. We feel it is important to include an understanding of the nature of domestic violence within this paragraph, so that anyone suffering domestic violence will be able to recognise this pattern of behaviour in their relationship and understand what is happening to them.
- 2.a.3 In section 2.48 (p24), we recommend the inclusion of the phrase “relationships between young people under the age of 18”.
- 2.a.4 We note in section 2.49 that a list of examples of abusive behaviour is included. We welcome this, but would recommend that all recognised categories of domestic violence and abuse are bullet pointed within this paragraph, in order to avoid a perceived hierarchy of abuse and to ensure that there is no ambiguity as to what

² Evan Stark defines coercive control as “Strategies designed to retain privileges and establish domination in a partner’s personal life based on fear, dependence and deprivation of basic rights and liberties.”; *Why does he do that?*, Lundy Bancroft states “Abuse grows from attitudes and values, not feelings. The roots are ownership, the trunk is entitlement and the branches are control.”; In *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman states “The methods of establishing control over another are grounded on the systematic, repetitive infliction of psychological training. These methods of psychological control are intended to instil fear and a sense of helplessness and to lower women’s sense of self”

³ See Dr. Lenore Walker’s “Cycle of Violence” (1979)

constitutes abuse. To that end, we recommend that the 4 main bullet points are “physical abuse”, “emotional, psychological and controlling behaviour”, “sexual violence” and “financial abuse”. In particular, we recommend the replacement of section 2.51 with the bullet pointed list, as it looks as though this strategy views sexual violence in the context of domestic violence as an afterthought in its current format. This approach will also allow for examples of sexual violence and financial abuse to be included, which is vital to aid in the understanding of how these types of abuse manifest.

2.a.5 Under the bullet point “sexual violence”, we suggest that examples could include:

- Rape
- Unwanted touching
- Coerced sexual activities, including those that may involve violence or pain
- Forcing someone to watch or participate in pornography
- Posting sexual images of someone online without informed consent
- Stalking
- Grooming
- Using substances such as drugs or alcohol to render someone vulnerable in order to have sex with them

2.a.6 Under the bullet point financial abuse, we suggest that examples could include:

- Withholding household money or benefits
- Appropriating or stealing money
- Coercing someone to give up work; or preventing them from making a living or keeping a job due to the impact of abuse
- Deliberately spending money recklessly as a means to keep a victim impoverished, indebted and isolated
- Constantly demanding justification for everything a victim spends money on
- Using a victim’s spending patterns as a justification for violence and abuse

2.a.7 As previously stated, we recommend the removal of section 2.51 from the document. Alternatively, we urge that its wording is amended. The section states “*it is also important to acknowledge that both men and women commit these acts*”. As it stands this statement is potentially misleading. We would welcome a statement after this comment to highlight the fact, well documented in research, that in the majority of cases of domestic and sexual violence and abuse, the perpetrator is male. It would also be useful to have some research and statistics to illustrate this further. We suggest the inclusion of the latest MARAC statistics, including the gender

breakdown to highlight this. This does not diminish in any way, the point that perpetrators can be female but merely places this in context.

Question 2 (b): Do you agree with the definition of Sexual Violence and Abuse as outlined in the Strategy?

- 2.b.1 Women's Aid is largely supportive of the definition of sexual violence within the document. However we recommend that the definition includes "*informed consent*", as this would include situations in which someone may consent without the capacity to do so, for example where the 'consenting' party is a child or a vulnerable adult. We note that "*informed consent*" is included at p7 of the document, but is absent at p25.
- 2.b.2 We recommend the removal of the sentence "*The term 'sexual abuse' has become widely associated with the sexual assault of children*" in section 2.54 (p 25). This negative statement is a rather weak and inappropriate opening statement to the definition section – instead this paragraph should be an unambiguous statement of what sexual violence and abuse is, so that victims and practitioners alike can recognise sexual violence and abuse.
- 2.b.3 We welcome the recognition of the similarities between domestic and sexual violence in Section 2.58 (p 26), and the recognition that sexual violence occurs within a domestic setting. We also welcome the complementary statement in section 2.3 (p 13) that "*although domestic and sexual violence and abuse often merit similar, if not identical, preventative and responsive approaches, they are not the same.*" It is essential that the Strategy recognises both the similarities and differences between domestic and sexual violence. We would urge some further explanation of this point, perhaps a statement that domestic violence is always perpetrated within intimate or familial relationships, whereas sexual violence can also be perpetrated where such a relationship does not exist between perpetrator and victim as well as within such relationships. We would also recommend the inclusion in section 2.3 of a further brief statement acknowledging the fact that sexual violence often occurs within the context of domestic violence.
- 2.b.4 We do however recommend amending section 2.58 to better reflect the reality of sexual abuse and violence. The phrase "*although women and girls are often victims*" is weak and is then followed by a paragraph on how males are also victims. We do not dispute that males are victims of sexual violence and abuse, nor do we contest that this strategy must also support male victims or seek to undermine the

devastating impact of sexual violence on every male victim. Sexual violence and abuse of anyone is abhorrent and must be recognised and tackled. However this paragraph in its current form appears to downplay or deny the fact that women and girls are overwhelmingly the majority of victims of sexual violence, and that much sexual violence and abuse is embedded in historical and persistent gender inequality, discrimination and objectification of women. It denies the gendered nature of sexual violence in a bid to treat everyone “equally”, even though the levels of sexual violence are not equal and the roots of such violence and abuse are different. This is an entirely unhelpful approach as it portrays an inaccurate picture of the nature and extent of sexual violence, and in doing so renders this strategy less effective as a tool to tackling it both against women and men. A further exploration of this issue in relation to the whole document is included in para 2.c.1 of this response.

2 (c): Further comments relating to Section 2 of the Strategy

Introduction (sections 2.1 – 2.9, pp 13 & 14)

2.c.1 While Women’s Aid Federation Northern Ireland agrees it is important to acknowledge the experiences of males in relation to domestic and sexual violence, we have serious concerns about how this is presented in the strategy. While striving to be inclusive, the document sends out a potential message that such violence can be perpetrated by males and females in equal proportion. This is misleading and fails to highlight the fact, clearly documented in research, that in the majority of cases of domestic and sexual abuse, the perpetrator is male and the victim is female. It also fails to recognise the impact of gender inequality and ingrained notions of a woman’s place in society on domestic and sexual violence.

There are several areas within this section, and the Strategy document as a whole, where the phrasing used conveys the impression that domestic and sexual violence is perpetrated against women and men equally, or even places more emphasis on violence against men. While we appreciate the intention behind this is to ensure that all victims are represented in the strategy (an intention which we fully support), we fear that the actual effect of this phrasing serves to deny the gendered reality of domestic and sexual violence. We have highlighted a number of areas of concern throughout this response where we suggest amendments to better reflect reality and ensure that violence against women, and the gendered reasons for its endemic nature, are reflected accurately in the Strategy.

Ultimately, we all want this Strategy to be effective in tackling domestic and sexual violence and abuse for all. Women’s Aid believes that this will only be achieved if the

experiences of abuse by women and men are explored and services / service approaches tailored to the different needs of women and men are developed.

- 2.c.2 In keeping with established human rights language and in recognition of the fact that the vast majority of victims of domestic and sexual violence are female, we recommend amending the phrase within section 2.1 (p13) to “It violates the basic human rights of *women, men and children* to be treated with respect and dignity”.
- 2.c.3 While we firmly agree that multiple types of vulnerability and discrimination affect a person’s vulnerability to domestic and sexual violence and abuse, we would seriously question the examples given in section 2.2 (p 13). While scenarios like “a female from an ethnic minority who is a child; a same-sex attracted male who may have concerns that his sexual orientation will become public knowledge; or a female with a disability” do exist, they are not an accurate list of what constitutes the greatest risk of being a victim in the manner stated in the document. The greatest risk is being a woman, and this combined with other section 75 characteristics are what makes a person more vulnerable to abuse. We also question the use of the word “potential” in section 2.2 – there isn’t just more ‘potential’ for women to be victims, more women are victims in practice and this must be reflected as fact in the strategy document. We recommend a rephrasing of this section of the document to more accurately convey issues surrounding the intersectional nature of abuse and multiple discrimination along the following lines:

“Most victims of domestic and sexual violence and abuse are women and girls, and women are at much higher risk of domestic and sexual violence and abuse by virtue of their gender. However we acknowledge that men and boys can also be victims. We also acknowledge that a person can be vulnerable in multiple contexts – for example women with disabilities, BME women or older or LGBT people – and that this both increases their risk of abuse and makes them harder to engage with to provide support.”

- 2.c.4 Under section 2.4 (p 13), we query the reference to “*improved, effective collaborative and cohesive engagement within and across Northern Ireland*”. There is no information as to how and with whom this engagement will take place.
- 2.c.5 In section 2.6 (p13), we would point out that ‘*sexting*’ is not *per se* a type of abusive behaviour, rather one that may leave a participant vulnerable to exploitation, particularly if they are under the age of 18, a vulnerable adult, or if the explicit images are used against them in an abusive manner. We recommend replacing the term “*sexting*” with “*online and digital exploitation, abuse and grooming*”.
- 2.c.6 We also disagree with the contention in section 2.6 (p 14) that stalking, FGM, forced marriage, honour based crime, sexual exploitation, online sexual exploitation, abuse

and grooming, and trafficking should not be dealt with within this strategy. We recognise that there are other mechanisms for dealing with these disparate issues, but the link and overlap between them and domestic and sexual violence cannot be understated. It would do a disservice to the victims of these crimes if they were not recognised within this strategy and their abuse recognised as forms of domestic or sexual violence. It is also the case that many forms of violence against women are interlinked, and indeed forced marriage and ‘honour’ killings can occur in the context of an abusive relationship.

- 2.c.7 In section 2.8.1 (p 14) the term “*offending behaviour*” is used to describe all behaviour that constitutes domestic or sexual violence. The word “*offending*” commonly relates to criminal offences, yet much of the behaviour that constitutes domestic violence (psychological abuse, coercive control, many types of financial abuse) isn’t a crime. We recommend the replacement of this phrase with “*abusive behaviour*” to ensure that there is no ambiguity.
- 2.c.8 We support the broad definition of the victim in section 2.8.2 (p 14). It is often the case that domestic and sexual violence can victimise those close to or connected to a direct victim; for example children witnessing abuse of one parent by another, or close family of rape victims who are severely affected by the impact of the violence against the victim.

Strategic context (sections 2.10 – 2.42, pp 15 – 22)

- 2.c.9 We note that the human rights context of domestic & sexual violence is raised at section 2.10 (p15). We regard this section as unsatisfactory in outlining the human rights context surrounding domestic and sexual violence, and urge that it is reflected more accurately within the strategy. For example, it is a misleading statement to say that the UN, WHO and EU take a “*keen interest*” in the elimination of domestic and sexual violence (section 2.10, p 15). In fact the interrelation between the UK and NI government and the UN and EU is much more concrete – the UK and NI government have specific legal and human rights obligations as a consequence of the UK’s membership of the UN and EU, as well as its ratification of the International Covenant on Civil & Political Rights (ICCPR), International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), the Convention Against Torture, Convention on the Rights of the Child, European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), the Istanbul Convention (signed but not yet ratified). Government obligations should be outlined clearly within this strategy.

2.c.10 As suggested in our original comments pre-consultation, we recommend the re-wording of section 2.11 (p 15) to accurately reflect the nature of domestic and sexual violence. We suggest that a statement along the following lines would be more accurate:

Much of the work of these institutions has been carried out with women and girls as international research clearly evidences that they represent the majority of victims of domestic and sexual abuse, and the UK government is obligated under international human rights law to respond to domestic and sexual violence as a gender equality issue for women and girls. However this strategy also recognises that domestic and sexual violence also affects men and boys.

2.c.11 In section 2.20 (p 17), the reports of the Criminal Justice Inspectorate in relation to domestic violence and sexual violence are referenced. These reports and follow-up reports made specific recommendations⁴ to be taken forward by the Department of Justice and justice agencies relating to their response to domestic and sexual violence. It would be useful to reference them in this section and make an explicit commitment to achieving all recommendations within this strategy.

2.c.12 We welcome the reference to *Our Children, Our Pledge* at section 2.21 (p 17). We recommend that the correlation between violence in the home and the strands relating to safety and stability and being healthy is explained in more detail. Children living in a household where domestic violence exists are themselves victims, either because they are also abused by the perpetrator and in danger while in the care of a perpetrator, or because they are witnesses of abuse. The effects of witnessing such abuse on the health and wellbeing of a child are well known and numerous. They include: trauma, guilt, shame, inability to trust, isolation, anger, loss of confidence, fear and stress.⁵

2.c.13 At section 2.22 (p 17) we would suggest linking to the NIASP Strategic Plan 2013 – 2018, and that more information about the link between safeguarding and domestic & sexual violence should be included.

2.c.14 We welcome reference to the Gender Equality Strategy in 2.39 (p 21). However we would welcome the addition of a separate point to highlight that there is a recognised and evidenced link between the prevalence of domestic and sexual violence against women and women's unequal position in society.

⁴ <http://www.cjini.org/CJNI/files/34/34118bcc-00c5-4071-bf2f-5397e6b20332.pdf>;
<http://www.cjini.org/CJNI/files/d1/d1c3dab5-25f3-45a4-9e19-4f7ed8a0c9fc.pdf>

⁵ For further information please see *Our Place – Safe Space: A Strategy for Children & Young People 2012 – 2017*, Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland, <http://www.womensaidni.org/themainevent/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/our-place-safe-space-strategy-for-children-young-people-2012-2017.pdf>

Patterns, Facts and Figures – Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse (2.62 – 2.66, pp 27 – 28)

2.c.15 In relation to the evidence presented about patterns of domestic violence and abuse at section 2.63, we wish to point out that points 1 and 2 relate to women victims of domestic violence – for instance, “Domestic abuse *of women* often starts or escalates during pregnancy”. Furthermore, research carried out on the risk of homicide rising at the point of separation or after leaving a violent partner is specifically about women victims and male perpetrators⁶ – this includes the research by Sue Lees referenced within this strategy. The nature and patterns of domestic abuse and violence are different for female and male victims, and again where those victims are in same-sex relationships. It is misleading to make assumptions that patterns applicable to male violence against women apply to all forms of domestic violence. We would also welcome reference at this point to the issue of repeat victimisation which is common where there is domestic and sexual violence. This is evidenced through research and through MARAC findings.

We would also point out that there is a significant amount of expert research on domestic and sexual violence which indicates a number of differences between the abuse that women and men experience. This can be informative in developing tailored services that meet the needs of women and men. For instance, women are twice as likely than men to be killed by a partner or ex-partner,⁷ women who are killed by their partners have usually experienced ongoing abuse while men killed by women are more likely to have been perpetrators killed by violent resistance⁸, men are less likely than women to be repeatedly victimised and are less likely to feel fear as a consequence of that abuse.⁹

2.c.16 It would also be useful to acknowledge the dangers associated with leaving an abusive relationship within the Strategy – research corroborates our experience that the most dangerous time for a woman is when she tries to leave an abusive relationship, and that her risk of death or serious harm increases significantly. This context is important to acknowledge the risks that women take in order to break free from abuse, or even to disclose abuse to another person, and provide context to stakeholders and agencies working with domestic violence victims, so that they understand the risk and can act to mitigate that risk effectively.

⁶ Council of Europe (2002). Recommendation Rec(2002)5 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the protection of women against violence adopted on 30 April 2002 and Explanatory Memorandum. Council of Europe: Strasbourg, France

⁷ Scottish Government, *Scottish Crime and Justice Statistics: Homicide*;

⁸ Walker, L, *Terrifying Love: why Battered Women Kill and How Society Responds (1989)*; Stark, E, *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life (2007)*.

⁹ Dobash & Dobash, *Women’s Violence to Men in Intimate Relationships: Working on the Puzzle (2004)*

2.c.17 We strongly urge that additional statistics are included in section 2.64 (p 27) to present a wider and more accurate picture of the incidence and prevalence of domestic and sexual violence in Northern Ireland. Given that it is well known that many victims of domestic or sexual violence never report to police for a wide number of reasons, it would be helpful if the strategy included statistical information from other reliable sources, such as expert voluntary sector organisations who provide support to victims. In particular, PSNI statistics do not account for those who experience abuse other than physical abuse and are thus unlikely to contact the police, those who are unwilling to go to the police out of fear or indeed love and loyalty towards their abuser, as well as entire communities where there still exists suspicion and hostility with the police.

2.c.18 A total of 61,964 individuals sought support from Women's Aid in 2012-13 (including callers to the 24 Hour Domestic & Sexual Violence Helpline). These can be broken down as follows:

- 880 women and 546 children sought refuge
- 53 women in refuge were supported during their pregnancies and 14 babies were born to women in refuge
- 1,517 on to one support sessions were held with children and young people in refuge.
- 3,659 women with 4,469 children accessed the Floating Support service, and a further 811 women accessed other Women's Aid outreach support services, enabling women to get support while remaining in their own homes and communities
- 1,591 women participated in a range of group work and personal development programmes including *Journey to Freedom* and *You and Me, Mum*.
- 375 women with 519 children accessed support from a Women's Aid Safety Worker while their partner or ex partners were undertaking the IDAP perpetrators programme provided by the Probation Board Northern Ireland.
- The 24 Hour Domestic & Sexual Violence Helpline, open to all women and men affected by domestic and sexual violence, managed 47,597 calls.

These are important statistics highlighting accurate numbers of victims of domestic and sexual violence and abuse who have sought support from the lead agency addressing domestic violence and abuse. Many of these victims may never identify themselves to police, social services, medical services or any other government agency – as such, they should be presented as key contextual data in this section.

2.c.19 In addition, it would be useful to include Women's Aid refuge uptake as a figure to more reliably record homelessness as a consequence of domestic violence. Women's Aid refuges are funded by Supporting People / the Northern Ireland Housing

Executive, and every woman and child who stays in those refuges are regarded as homeless, even if only for a short time. During 2012 – 13, a total of 880 women and 546 children stayed in our refuges. On a technical note, the number of 697 victims and children presenting as homeless due to domestic violence within the Strategy document is in fact the number of households – this logically equates to a greater number of individual victims and children.

- 2.c.20 It would be useful for section 2.66 (p 28) to include a statement about how increases in prevalence of domestic and sexual violence crimes and incidents can be a result of the success of previous multi-agency work to raise awareness about domestic & sexual abuse and improve confidence in reporting to agencies – this would help contextualise the numbers and celebrate success where it is due given the hard work of statutory and voluntary organisations over the years to break the taboo surrounding domestic and sexual abuse and encourage reporting.
- 2.c.21 We would also suggest that the comment in section 2.66 about the increase in prevalence of domestic and sexual violence should be accompanied by statistics which corroborate this statement. According to PSNI statistics from between 2004/05 and 2012/13, reportage of domestic abuse incidents has risen 7.9% since 2011/12 and 29.7% since 2004/05. Additionally, 47,597 calls were managed by the 24 Hour Domestic & Sexual Violence Helpline in 2012/13 – this is an increase of 8.3% on 2011/12, and an increase of 134.9% since the 24 Hour Domestic Violence Helpline was launched in 2005.

The cost of Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse in Northern Ireland (2.67 – 2.83, pp 29 – 34)

- 2.c.22 There is quite a bit of repetition of the same point in paragraphs 2.67 – 2.68 (p 29). A concise editing process would allow this to be cut to one paragraph without losing any of the details, which are all pertinent. We would also question the use of the word “*misguided*” to describe the low self-esteem that many victims of abuse have – this is an uncompassionate term and implies blame. Instead, this section could focus on making the link between the abuse and why a victim’s self-esteem is so low:

“Psychological abuse can have a devastating effect on a person’s mental health and wellbeing. Abusive acts include criticising appearance/intelligence/worth/ability to parent, undermining decisions or opinions, blaming the victim for everything that goes wrong, berating them, being jealous and accusing the victim of being unfaithful, ‘gaslighting’ or manipulating someone to think that they are going crazy or doubt their own knowledge or recollection of past events. This pattern of manipulation and

control often shatters the self-esteem of victims and makes them feel insecure, inferior and inadequate.”

- 2.c.23 We note that the cost of domestic violence in Northern Ireland has been calculated as £610 million. This is a sizeable and necessary devotion of resources to such an endemic problem. Even at that, we question whether for example the Health & Social Care Services cost allocated for children is accurate – given the number of Looked After Children whose situation has been impacted by violence in the home, we believe that this figure actually may be much higher. We also wish to point out that our vital support services and those of the Helpline comprise only one percent of the overall cost of domestic violence as outlined in 2.72 (p 30). We are the primary support agency for women suffering domestic violence and their children, providing emergency refuge and protection, outreach to help women remain in their own homes, ongoing support and self-esteem building programmes to help women recover from the effects of abuse, help and guidance through all processes connected with being a victim of domestic violence from obtaining benefits to navigating the court process, support services to children and young people, and training, capacity building and preventative education work. We suggest that the £610 million devoted to tackling domestic violence could in fact be allocated in a smarter manner, by investing a larger percentage in trusted expert support organisations like Women’s Aid. Not only would this continue to represent value for money in terms of the vital, life-saving and life-changing services provided, but it would also ultimately lead to a reduction of the overall £610 million investment as effective preventative work and social guardianship takes effect within society.
- 2.c.24 In Table 1 (p 30), we question the statistics presented for the female/male cost split i.e. 75%:25%. In our experience in Northern Ireland, domestic violence is perpetrated overwhelmingly against women. While we do not question that domestic violence is perpetrated against men, we would question the accuracy of this ratio.
- 2.c.25 We are puzzled as to why neither child rape and sexual assault nor sexual assault within a domestic setting have been included in the costing for sexual violence and abuse at 2.74 (p 31). The most recent figures from SARC show that 41% of those treated at SARC since it opened have been children and young people. Additionally, PSNI statistics for 2012 – 13 show that of the 533 rapes offences, 236 offences of Rape were reported as having been committed on children and young people under the age of 18, and 102 of those were under 13 years of age. It is well-evidenced that the levels of sexual violence within a domestic context are high. Therefore this cannot be said to be an accurate cost estimate of the cost of sexual violence in Northern Ireland at all, and we question the value and utility of having such an

inaccurate figure within the strategy. We urge that more accurate estimates are put together and added to the strategy document.

The response to date in tackling Domestic & Sexual Violence and Abuse (s 2.77 – 2.83, pp32 – 34)

2.c.26 In section 2.78 (pp32 – 33) there is no mention of existing domestic or sexual violence victim support services, many of which are provided by Women’s Aid. If someone read this strategy with no prior knowledge of domestic violence support provisions they may gain the impression that there are no refuges or outreach services in Northern Ireland. In an effort to not mention voluntary organisations within the strategy, even to outline existing ongoing work, the document is presenting an untrue picture of the response to domestic & sexual violence in Northern Ireland and the hugely successful work that has been done and funded by government to tackle domestic and sexual violence to date.

2.c.27 We strongly recommend addition of the following promising advances in supporting victims:

- Rise in use of Women’s Aid Floating Support service, enabling women to remain in their own home while accessing support.
- The establishment of Women’s Aid Criminal Justice Workers in police stations resulting in support provision for victims and reduction in attrition rates.
- Sustained and improved provision of refuge accommodation.
- Pilot domestic violence court listings in Foyle area.

2.c.28 Under 2.79 (p33), we note the reference to an educational programmes for children & young people about healthy relationships based on mutual respect and “a similar programme... developed for post-primary schools”. Yet there is no information at all as to what that programme is, what it entails, who developed and delivers it or how the public can find out more about it. This is in spite of the fact that this section of the Strategy is about raising awareness and educating the general public. We understand the education programmes referred to here are the preventative education programmes developed and delivered by Women’s Aid, in partnership with the Department of Education and the DHSS&PS. We recommend that these programmes and the provider are named in full i.e. *Helping Hands* (primary schools) and *Heading for Healthy Relationships /H4HR* (post primary schools). In relation to primary schools involved in the roll out of the successful capacity building model for teachers *Effective Communication Skills for Social Guardians Delivering Helping Hands*, our most up to date statistics show that 418 schools and 644 teachers have

been involved to date. Funding has been secured for 2013/2014 with plans in place for the training of another 160 teachers. This is a huge success resulting out of the previous *Tackling Violence at Home* strategy and it would, we strongly believe, be a serious omission not to clearly reference it.

2.c.29 In section 2.81 (p 33), we note that the IDAP programme is outlined. We welcome reference to this programme, but regret that there is no mention of the concurrent support for the abused partners of perpetrators undergoing IDAP via Women's Safety Workers based in Women's Aid. This is an essential component of the IDAP process based on best practice¹⁰ – without a Safety Worker for the victim connected to the IDAP process, such perpetrator programmes put victims at extreme risk. Therefore the current description of existing perpetrator programmes within this document is not only inaccurate but also creates the impression that government may be following bad practice and endangering the lives of victims. We would also add that the IDAP programme only concerns domestic violence.

¹⁰ The men's domestic violence charity Respect outlines established best practice in perpetrator programmes succinctly in their briefing paper:
http://www.respect.uk.net/data/files/resources/respect_briefing_paper_on_the_evidence_of_effects_of_perpetrator_programmes_on_women_revised_18th_march_10.pdf

3. Section 3 – Strategic Vision

Question 3: Is the Strategy Vision reflective of what we want to achieve?

- 3.1 Women’s Aid Federation Northern Ireland welcomes the five new delivery strands attached to the strategy, which will form the basis for the development of recommendations and future actions.
- 3.2 We would suggest that this overarching statement could be renamed as the “Vision” of the strategy, as it is an aspirational and bold statement by which the outcomes and priorities under each strand operate.
- 3.3 We feel that at times, there is confusion between what constitutes an outcome and a priority across all strands. Some priorities read more like outcomes and *vice versa*. Additionally the priorities are often vague and weak in nature, or don’t actually commit to any improvements to the current status quo. We suggest a review of these to strengthen them as overarching progressive and proactive priorities. It is highly likely that these priorities will be extracted from the document referenced on many occasions in various contexts and they need to stand alone as strong, progressive and proactive priorities.
- 3.4 With this in mind, we have reviewed all outcomes and priorities, endeavouring not to lose anything that is currently present but simply make the outcomes and priorities clearer, stronger and more specific. The approach that we suggest to differentiate a priority from an outcome is as follows:

Priorities:

*The primary focus area under each specific strand that will ultimately lead to the overall achievement of the vision presented, i.e. **what you will do** to achieve your vision.*

Outcomes:

*The anticipated and evidenced result / achievements / successes following successful delivery of priorities listed i.e. **what you will see** as a direct result of your priorities.*

- 3.5 We welcome the commitment to include “effective services and support” to all victims and holding perpetrators to account within the overall outcome (p 35). We would recommend adding prevention through promotion of healthy, non-abusive relationships to the overall outcome. We would also question the language used in

the opening sentence, and suggest that the phrase “the people of Northern Ireland” is a little rhetorical for a strategy document.

4. Section 4 – Key Delivery Strands

Question 4: Do you agree that the Strategy should be considered under these key strands?

- 4.1 Women's Aid is generally supportive of the issues identified within the 5 key strands in the document.
- 4.2 However we question whether or not there is duplication and overlap between *Prevention and Early Intervention* (Strand 2), *Delivering Change* (Strand 3) and *Support* (Strand 4). This becomes more evident in the specific sections for each strand, and is further complicated by the use of terminology such as 'primary / secondary / tertiary prevention'. These terms do not fit well with the overall government response to domestic & sexual violence as the response is not purely a health or medical one, and using such terminology is confusing and unhelpful.
- 4.3 We recommend that the parameters of each strand are clearly established to ensure that there is no overlap or duplication. This will both make the strategy easier to follow and understand, and easier to deliver in future action plans.
- 4.4 Specifically, we recommend that:
 - Strand 2 focuses primarily on preventative education and other early intervention preventative work to mitigate the risk of people becoming victims or indeed perpetrators;
 - Strand 3 focuses on the societal awareness-raising and myth-busting in general, and creation of social guardians to carry out the work under Strand 2 and capacity-building of expertise.
 - Strand 4 focuses on support to victims, including dealing with repeat victimisation from the victim's perspective.

5. Section 5 – Strategic Outcomes / Priorities

Question 5(a): Do you agree with the strategic outcome and priorities on Driving Change for this Strategy? (Page 36)

- 5.a.1 While we welcome that the NI Executive recognises the impact of domestic and sexual violence, we feel that this is a weak outcome. A stronger statement would be to say that *“There will be a clear recognition by the Northern Ireland Executive of the impact of domestic and sexual violence and abuse and a continued demonstration of commitment to driving change, through provision of strategic leadership and promotion of effective partnership working.”*
- 5.a.2 At section 4.1 (p 36), we would point out that tackling domestic & sexual violence isn’t a matter of justice, equality and human rights for some victims, it is a matter for *all* victims.
- 5.a.3 We welcome the importance placed upon recognising responsibilities and promoting change. We particularly welcome the focus upon integrated working across all sectors and the renewed commitment from the NI Executive to providing leadership in the promotion and delivery of change.
- 5.a.4 At section 4.2 (p 36) we would point out that not all domestic violence and abuse is in fact a crime, so the sentence *“The Executive is determined to end violence and leads the way in tackling these crimes”* does not encompass all forms of domestic abuse. Many of the women who seek support from Women’s Aid have told us that it is the psychological violence and abuse which they find to be the most difficult to recover from, and we believe it is essential that this strategy does not fail to recognise and tackle this form of abuse by omission.
- 5.a.5 We note that there is no mention of Domestic Violence Partnerships within the *Driving Change* section. Local Domestic Violence Partnerships are an essential component in the multi-agency approach to tackling domestic violence, and provide the critical link between the local and regional implementation of the strategy. We urge that this section is amended to include the role of the DV Partnerships so that the strategy accurately reflects the partnership work being done to tackle domestic violence.
- 5.a.6 It is extremely disappointing that the only Priority identified for the Inter-Ministerial Group is to continue to be chaired by the Minister for Health, which is not really a commitment to do anything.
- 5.a.7 We suggest amendment of Priorities 1 and 2 along the following lines:

*Priority 1: All government Departments **demonstrate their commitment** to working together and in partnership with other organisations to continue to promote societal change in attitudes and in the provision of services, support and justice for victims of domestic and sexual violence and abuse.*

Priority 2: On behalf of the Northern Ireland Executive, the Departments of Justice and Health, Social Services and Public Safety will provide co-leadership and strategic direction to promote change and ensure the effective delivery of this strategy.

- 5.a.8 Regarding the Hagemann-White model cited at section 4.6 – 4.8 (pp 37-38) we question why this model has been included within this section and how in fact it has actually been applied across the strategy. If this is to be the basis of the government’s multi-agency approach, each aspect of the model should be referenced with a benchmark as to how the different agencies involved will strategically act along the lines of the model. As it stands, the strategy merely mentions the model but doesn’t follow this up through the strategy.
- 5.a.9 We would also submit that, in our view, the draft Strategy has not actually adhered to the Hagemann-White model in its approach. The Hagemann-White model is related to violence against women and girls specifically – it cannot be assumed that it can be extended to violence against males, as much of the basis for the Hagemann-White model is based on a gendered analysis of violence and abuse in the context of discrimination against women and girls. It isn’t possible to pick and choose limited aspects of an extensively researched model and ignore other significant and important parts of it. We would also question why there isn’t recognition of the impact of gender inequality and the unique drivers and impacts for violence against females / males within the Strategy. The research models and best practice that have been identified here, as well as a significant body of evidence and expertise, call for a gendered approach to tackling domestic & sexual violence, and we would urge that this expertise is heeded and reflected in the final Strategy document.

Question 5(b): Do you agree with the strategic outcome and priorities on Prevention and Early Intervention for this Strategy? (Page 39)

- 5.b.1 Women’s Aid Federation Northern Ireland welcomes and commends the clear strategic focus on preventative education programmes and early intervention in this section of the strategy document. Preventative education work with all children and young people in schools and community settings is essential to ensure that attitudes within society are changed to the point where domestic and sexual violence are unacceptable and no child or young person is left without information and support.
- 5.b.2 While we welcome the outcome governing this Strand at the top of page 39, we would point out that a “skilled and resourced workforce” doesn’t adequately explain what that workforce should be skilled and resourced in. We suggest amending the outcome to

“Incidences of domestic and sexual violence and abuse will be reduced through effective preventative education programmes and the development of a skilled workforce, equipped to recognise and respond to domestic and sexual violence and abuse, thus promoting best practice, earlier intervention and creating of a culture of community responsibility at all levels of society”.

- 5.b.3 In section 4.9 (p 39), the draft strategy highlights the diversification of society in particular as a reason for heightened levels of domestic and sexual violence. While we agree that being part of an ethnic minority group can make victims harder to reach as a consequence of language barrier, community isolation, individual isolation and cultural barriers, this does not equate to ethnic minorities being more prone to commit acts of domestic or sexual violence. While a more culturally diverse society can present additional and more complex needs we would be concerned that section 4.9 gives the impression that domestic and sexual violence in Northern Ireland can be attributed to a more culturally diverse society or to people from different countries or cultures, which is certainly not true. Similarly, although BME persons are one ‘harder to reach’ group, they are not the only group. As stated earlier, there are a number of other characteristics that render someone more vulnerable to domestic & sexual violence and harder to reach. For example, research has shown that women with a disability are twice as likely to suffer domestic abuse than women who do not have a disability.
- 5.b.4 We are extremely disappointed by the points made in section 4.10 (p 39), as these appear to represent the endorsement of the many dangerous myths surrounding domestic and sexual violence. It is dangerous and unhelpful to make vague statements about the interrelation between alcohol, substance misuse, high risk sexual behaviours, poor mental health, and domestic and sexual violence and abuse.

In relation to domestic violence, we are especially disappointed that there is no statement within the strategy which outlines the true cause of domestic violence, which is that domestic violence is caused by a motivated perpetrator who intends and sets out to manipulate and control their victim. This has been firmly established and affirmed by experts across the globe. While alcohol misuse may be present in some cases of domestic violence, it is by no means present in all of them, and it is certainly not the cause. It may exacerbate a situation and result in more extreme violence or be used as an excuse by the perpetrator to carry out such abuse, but domestic violence always occurs in a context of power imbalance between the perpetrator and victim. An act of physical violence is rarely the first act of domestic abuse by a perpetrator, it is the pattern of psychological abuse to wear down a victim, erode their self-esteem and manipulate them into compliance and subservience that is the primary indicator of abuse. We appreciate that the justice and health systems tend to see domestic violence cases at crisis point, where there has been serious injury and in cases where there is also alcohol or substance abuse. However that is no excuse for making the misguided leap of logic to assume that substance abuse causes domestic violence.

5.b.5 We are also disappointed that the phrase “high risk sexual behaviours” has been included in this section, again without context or definition of what such behaviours might be. This reads like victim-blaming, as if the Strategy endorses the ill-informed view that wearing a short skirt or engaging in casual sex is what causes rape or sexual violence. This strategy must be clear and unambiguous that rape and sexual violence are in fact caused by a perpetrator who decides to carry out sexual acts without consent. A victim’s sexual history, level of intoxication or attire might contribute to their vulnerability to attack, but they are not the cause. This strategy must make the clear statement that perpetrators of sexual violence are solely to blame for the sexual violence they commit, otherwise the strategy is in danger of resolutely failing every victim of sexual violence in Northern Ireland.

5.b.6 At 4.11 (p 39), we urge caution in applying a life course approach to tackling domestic & sexual violence. While we recognise that a number of factors over the course of a victim’s life may contribute to their vulnerability to domestic and sexual violence, we are concerned that the life course approach is not sufficiently explained in the Strategy. For example, it would be extremely damaging if the life course approach also sought to justify or excuse perpetrator behaviour by looking at events in their earlier lives. There is also a danger of pigeon-holing perpetrators and victims based on their upbringing, economic status and so forth – this could lead to many victims who do not fall into these categories being missed out. We also question the value in adopting what is quite an untested approach in domestic violence, even if it is a success in the health field dealing with chronic illness. Any approach used must

be clear that the responsibility for committing acts of violence and abuse lies with the perpetrator and their choice to commit that abuse. We also question the highlighting of high-risk behaviour over other factors that cause health inequalities. Health inequalities can be caused by a wide range of factors – inability to secure employment, barriers to social mobility and progress in life or fulfilling potential, PTSD, mental health consequences and so on. This should be recognised within the strategy.

5.b.7 At 4.12, we question the inclusion of the three areas of prevention listed. This would sit better in the overall introduction as it seems slightly out of context here, given that each strand covers a different level. We also query the merit in dividing the response to domestic and sexual violence into “*primary / secondary / tertiary prevention*”. In particular, *tertiary prevention* appears to be a Department of Health term which actually means *support* in plain language. Reading this section gives the impression of government using opaque official terminology for the sake of it, without any examination of whether such terminology suits the subject at hand. This has been confirmed by the women who have used our services – in focus group sessions, women consistently queried what primary, secondary and tertiary prevention meant and opined that the definitions didn’t make sense or relate to their reality of domestic and sexual violence, and were a barrier to their understanding and ownership of the Strategy. We would also point out that financial abuse is not mentioned under tertiary prevention.

5.b.8 In section 4.13 (p39), we suggest emphasising the importance of developing social guardianship in society as a key element of early intervention and prevention.

5.b.9 We recommend that Priority 4 is amended to strengthen the language and include a specific commitment for government to act, along the following lines:

Priority 4: Government Departments will work together to develop and implement a baseline on societal attitudes to domestic and sexual violence and abuse.

5.b.10 We welcome the development and implementation of an information plan, to promote a greater awareness and understanding of domestic and sexual violence among the general public. In the key elements of the plan, presented at 4.20 (p 41), at the third bullet point, we suggest the addition of a statement to emphasise the greatest risk factor where there is domestic and/or sexual violence is being a woman. We suggest that any element of an information plan developed needs to clearly link into the 24 Hour Domestic & Sexual Helpline. We further recommend that an additional bullet point is added, to commit to consult with experts in the field of domestic and sexual violence when formulating messaging campaigns, to ensure

that the messages being disseminated to the public follow best practice and are maximised to send out the most effective message to the public.

5.b.11 We suggest the amendment of Priority 5 to simplify the language and message, and recognise the challenge of reaching out to all communities:

Priority 5: An integrated Information Plan will be developed to promote understanding and recognition of domestic and sexual violence and abuse across all communities in Northern Ireland.

5.b.12 Women's Aid strongly contests the application of the 'Toxic Three' model to domestic violence within this strategy at section 4.23 (pp 41 – 42). While the traditional *Toxic Three* model may be fitting in relation to child protection, this model cannot simply be inverted to become an explanation for why domestic violence occurs. On the contrary, this model may serve to ingrain dangerous myths about domestic violence that are unhelpful and a barrier to effective tackling of domestic violence in society. It is a falsehood that domestic violence is caused by or always causes substance abuse and mental health issues. While in some cases or instances of domestic violence a perpetrator may be a substance abuser or have mental health issues, in many he or she does not. Even if substance abuse or mental health issues are present, it does not follow that they must be the cause of domestic violence. While some victims are rendered vulnerable to abuse by their substance dependency or mental health issues, or develop mental health issues and / or substance abuse issues as a consequence of their abuse, others do not. Unfortunately, by linking the three together in a vague manner in this document, the strategy risks sending out false messages about the nature of domestic violence and what exactly causes it, and also implies that this strategy is not for the many people who do not experience domestic violence in this manner. In focus groups with women who have used our services, many of the participants were offended by the inclusion of *Toxic Three* model and the implication that it was alcohol that caused the abuse against them, when what they had experienced was calculated and deliberate manipulation, control and abuse. They were disappointed that they could not relate to the strategy as the *Toxic Three* model did not describe their own experience of domestic violence and felt that the abuse against them was being ignored or deemed unimportant.

5.b.13 We strongly urge that Priority 6 is replaced with the following:

Priority 6: Government Departments and their agencies will work together to dispel myths and increase understanding of factors which may contribute to domestic and sexual violence and abuse, acknowledging the primary factor is the misuse of power and control by one person over another.

- 5.b.14 Under 4.26 (p 42), we agree the development of positive parenting and support programmes for those at risk of domestic and sexual violence is important. Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland believes the best way to support children and young people affected by domestic and sexual violence is to work with and support the non-abusing parent.
- 5.b.15 In addition to the programmes highlighted at section 4.26 (p 43), we would wish to highlight the *'You and Me, Mum'* programme, a unique ten week self-help programme provided by Women's Aid to mothers to empower, support and develop further understanding of their role as mothers, in addressing the needs of children and young people who have lived with domestic violence. While *'You and Me, Mum'* is a parenting programme, it is different to other parenting programmes such as Triple P as it also covers the specifics of domestic violence and as such is extremely relevant to this strategy. This programme has been recently independently evaluated with highly successful outcomes for mothers and children. *You and Me, Mum* was also the agreed showcase programme from Northern Ireland at Raising the Standards conference in Jersey in 2008, highlighted as a model demonstrating best practice. Northern Ireland has been a trail-blazer in this arena and we believe that such success should be championed and celebrated within this strategy.

We would also suggest that all programmes mentions should include a footnoted reference to enable anyone reading the strategy to find further information about them. We would further question why programmes such as the Solihull programme, which is an English initiative, is mentioned in this list, while ongoing local initiatives that are in Northern Irish schools and funded by our own Department of Education such as *Helping Hands* are absent.

Education (4.27 – 4.36, pp 43 – 45)

- 5.b.16 Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland welcomes a strong emphasis on education as an important tool in creating an environment where children and young people can identify their concerns and seek appropriate support and help when necessary. Women's Aid believes that preventative education work with all children and young people in schools and community settings is essential to ensure that attitudes within society are changed to the point where domestic and sexual violence is unacceptable and no child or young person is left without information or support.
- 5.b.17 However, we are disappointed to note that there is very limited reference to the ground breaking and highly successful preventative education work that has been progressed by Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland, in partnership with

Department of Education and DHSS&PS. This work was clearly embedded within the *Tackling Violence at Home* Strategy and associated action plans. We also find it arbitrary that the strategy includes reference to voluntary sector work when it is research into a subject (for instance NSPCC's *Keeping Safe: the development of an effective preventative curriculum in primary schools* at section 4.31), but will not reference and recognise the work that has been done and programmes that are actually already in place to deliver the aims of the Strategy.

- 5.b.18 Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland has, over the last number of years, led the way in developing and implementing strategic and creative approaches to addressing issues of personal safety in education settings. Over the past 4 years, Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland has delivered a capacity building programme in primary schools "*Effective Communication Skills for Social Guardians Delivering Helping Hands*" which develops teacher's skills to fulfil their roles as social guardians through delivering the renowned and highly successful Helping Hands pack. This work has been, and continues to be, delivered in partnership with the Department of Education and has been externally evaluated with extremely positive outcomes for teachers and children. Statistics showed that to date 418 schools and 644 teachers have been involved with plans in place to train another 160 in this financial year.
- 5.b.19 Plans are in also in place for the roll out of a capacity building model for teachers in post primary schools, to enable them to develop their capacity to deliver the post primary education package *Heading for Healthy Relationships (H4HR)*. This programme, which is unique to Northern Ireland, explores differences between healthy and abusive relationships with young people and promotes personal safety in relationships. This programme has been developed in partnership with Department of Education NI, and fulfils the recommendation in the *Report of an Evaluation of Relationships and Sexuality Education in Post Primary Schools* cited in this Strategy at 4.32. Our work, at both primary and post primary levels, continues to develop strategically and also clearly fulfils Priorities 7, 8 and 9 of this strategy.
- 5.b.20 Such progress in relation to preventative education is a key successful outcome resulting from previous strategies and continues to be a priority for this combined strategy. It would, we feel, be a serious omission if it was not referenced comprehensively in the strategy document and we would therefore suggest reference to it under the Education heading and the following information about the programmes:

In partnership with the Department of Education, Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland has delivered the programme "Effective Communication Skills for Social Guardians Delivering Helping Hands" to primary school teachers across the five Education and Library Board Areas

since 2010 and is accredited through the Institute of Leadership & Management (ILM). The programme has the following Social Guardian outcomes:

- Assist teachers to understand the context and impact of domestic violence in the lives of children and their families.
- Assist teachers to develop preventative and early intervention strategies in relation to children who do not feel safe, specifically children affected by domestic violence.
- Enable teachers to deliver the Helping Hands programme linked to the curriculum.

The Department of Education is continuing to fund the programme in 2013/14 which will enable roll out of the programme to a further 160 teachers across the five Education and Library Boards. Plans are also in place for the roll out of a parallel capacity building model for teachers in post primary schools to develop their capacity to deliver the post primary education package “Heading for Healthy Relationships” (H4HR). This programme, which is unique to Northern Ireland, explores differences between healthy and abusive relationships with young people and promotes personal safety in relationships.

5.b.21 We are concerned that there is a complete absence of the Department of Education’s main Aim, “*capacity building for teachers*” within Priorities 7 – 10. In relation to Priority 8, we suggest that the language is strengthened to include teachers “*recognising the signs of child abuse, sexual violence and domestic violence*” – not all children may present with obvious distress, they may also be withdrawn, distracted, or unable to concentrate. We urge that this strategy reflects the full spectrum of effects that abuse and violence have on children and young people. We also urge that the Priorities focus more on the children themselves. Often children and young people, and their rights and needs, are left out of the conversation about domestic violence. This is notwithstanding the fact that children and young people are deeply affected by violence in the home, whether as direct victims or as witnesses.

5.b.22 We suggest amendment of Priorities 7 – 10 along the following lines:

Priority 7: All children and young people will have effective, age appropriate curriculum programmes, focusing upon keeping safe and promoting healthy, non-abusive relationships on an ongoing basis throughout their lives.

Priority 8: All teachers will have mandatory training to build capacity and equip them with the necessary skills and resources to teach about domestic and sexual violence and abuse, recognise the signs of violence and abuse, and respond to disclosures by children and young people.

Question 5(c): Do you agree with the strategic outcome and priorities on Delivering Change for this Strategy? (page 49)

5.c.1 Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland welcomes the emphasis on delivering change and the need for everyone to know their roles and responsibilities to help individuals/families/communities access the right service, at the right time and in the right place. We are pleased that many of our suggestions in this strand have been taken on board and are reflected in the public consultation draft. We believe this area of Awareness and Training Expertise clearly needs a strategic approach. The model presented needs to be led and strategically driven by organisations with the necessary skills, expertise and a clear track record of experience in this area. This will help to ensure a standardised approach and to promote consistency in understanding and sharing best practice. As a foundation, this model requires "training champions" to drive this work forward, and to ensure the delivery of standardised quality training provision at all three levels.

5.c.2 However we feel there is confusion and overlap between this strand and the following strand of support. The outcome in particular, is very support focused and doesn't reflect the need for cultural change and increased awareness that we would typically associate with this strand. We suggest a thorough review of these two strands to ensure clarity and prevent overlap.

5.c.3 We suggest that this Outcome should be clarified and strengthened along the following lines:

Everyone will know their role and responsibilities to enable individuals / families / communities access the right service, at the right time and in the right place, resulting in more responsive services for individuals and / or groups at risk of, or subject to, domestic and sexual violence and abuse and its recurrence.

5.c.4 We agree that delivering change is about everyone knowing their role and we believe this should be overarching focus of this strand. At 4.47, we suggest replacing "those who could be involved in the presentation and management of sexual and/or domestic violence" with "those involved in supporting victims of domestic and sexual violence". The first bullet point at this point refers to "signs of violence in others". We query whether or not this refers to victims or perpetrators and welcome clarity in relation to this.

5.c.5 Under the bullet point that lists emergency services, we are extremely disappointed that refuge workers have not been included in this list. Refuges can literally be the difference between life and death for a woman being abused in a relationship. While other support systems are also part of the vital network to protect victims (MARAC, PSNI etc), it is refuges that provide a safe place for women to flee in crisis situations.

We employ our 30 years of expertise in risk assessment, safety planning, and expert knowledge of the nature of perpetrators to ensure that women receive the best support and protection possible in line with established best practice. Women's Aid refuge workers are often the first point of contact for women who have fled a violent situation. Many arrive at our door extremely traumatised, some may have experienced very recent physical and / or sexual violence. Most of them, by virtue of being in a domestic violence relationship, are at greatest risk of murder or serious injury by virtue of the fact that they have fled. Our refuge staff are responsible for taking swift steps to ensure that woman's safety and take action to get any other necessary emergency assistance for her. They are working in a crisis emergency situation and are literally a lifeline for the women who come to them. Our refuges also take in women who have been sexually assaulted or raped following their visit to the Rowan SARC and who need crisis support and a place to stay for the night. It is extremely disappointing that these support staff have been omitted from the list of emergency services.

- 5.c.6 Delivering change through integrated pathways for service delivery clearly requires further comment and discussion. We question where this approach has originated and would like to emphasise the need for it to be developed in partnership with all relevant stakeholders. It will be important to highlight the role of the Children and Young People Strategic Partnership and the associated structures in relation to their role, to ensure consistency and prevent duplication of services. It will also be important to highlight the role of Domestic Violence Partnerships and plans for development of these partnerships.
- 5.c.7 The diagram presented on page 51 outlining the elements of the pathways approach is useful for organisations to understand how to respond effectively and how to ensure appropriate service referral. However, we would welcome the inclusion of **signposting** at the earlier stage of responding to disclosure. We also query whether *identification of harm* should be replaced with *risk assessment* as this is the term currently used in processes such as MARAC.
- 5.c.8 We suggest amending Priority 14 (p 52) to better recognise the scope of safety planning beyond just putting together a safety plan, and associated actions and responsibilities that go with it. Instead of "*The development of a safety plan will be an integral part of the pathways approach*", we suggest the phrasing "*Safety planning will be an integral part of the pathways approach*".
- 5.c.9 At 4.53 (p 52) where there is reference to helplines, we would like to see these stated in full, including the 24 Hour Domestic & Sexual Violence Helpline. Regarding section 4.54 (p 52), we are puzzled as to why the 24 Hour Domestic & Sexual Violence Helpline has not been referenced, as it is an integrated portal for

information and support for both domestic and sexual violence. The Helpline is the only helpline in Northern Ireland to have achieved the Helplines Standard which accredits best practice in helpline work. This quality assurance standard means that the Helpline has been assessed and deemed to effectively meet the needs of all service users, including the groups listed at section 4.54. It should also be pointed out that Women's Aid and the 24 Hour Domestic & Sexual Violence Helpline already engages in work to identify and recognise the needs of different client groups.

5.c.10 It is unclear as to what exactly Priority 15 is referring to when it says "*the diversity*". We suggest it could be redrafted slightly to make it simpler and clearer:

Information on available services will be reviewed to take account of the development of an integrated pathways approach to tackling sexual and domestic violence and abuse and to meet the diverse and emerging needs of all victims.

5.c.11 At 4.56 (p 53), when mapping existing services and potential need, it is essential that there is a commitment within this strategy to at least *sustain current services*. Many valuable services such as those provided to children and young people are under threat due to a loss of or reduction funding, and Women's Aid groups report full refuges and waiting lists for outreach services every year. Emphasis needs to be placed upon sustaining what is already there as well as improving services. This would strengthen this priority and ensure a more strategic approach to service provision.

5.c.12 We welcome Priority 17 relating to developing services with the needs of victims as a primary focus. However, given the sensitive and devastating nature of domestic and sexual violence, and the fact that many victims are unwilling or unable to directly engage with government to inform them of their needs, it is important that this outcome recognises support organisations such as Women's Aid as representative of victims voices. While we work to facilitate victims to share their views directly with government, we are always conscious that many victims are not able to do this, due to the stress involved, the trauma that they are enduring, or concerns over their safety by speaking out in public. Our first priority is always the safety and wellbeing of victims, and their process of rebuilding their lives, self-esteem and confidence in themselves. Therefore Women's Aid acts as a conduit for the views and needs of our women. It should be recognised within Priority 17 that the primary means of hearing the voice and views of victims is by consulting with expert support organisations such as ourselves. We suggest amending Priority 17 along the following lines:

Approaches will be developed in partnership with service providers to gather the views of those who have been affected by (or at risk of experiencing) domestic and sexual violence and abuse in relation to the commissioning and provision of services.

5.c.13 At 4.62 (p 55), given the integral nature of PCSPs to identifying local policing priorities across Northern Ireland, we urge that this strategy makes a stronger commitment to the consideration of domestic & sexual violence issues within each PCSP. There is not a single area in Northern Ireland that is unaffected by both domestic and sexual violence, and the hidden nature of such abuse makes it all the more important that a response is always required in every policing area, in spite of the possibility that public perception of the prevalence and importance of domestic and sexual violence in their area may be low. We recommend that the section is amended to read “Each PCSP *will be required* to consider delivery outcomes which take account of available information on domestic and sexual violence and abuse, including PSNI statistics, public and other consultations and wider community engagement.” We further recommend that Priority 18 is amended to read:

“Domestic and sexual violence and abuse will be recognised as a priority area in the network of Policing and Community Safety Partnerships, and clear actions will be developed to improve and promote greater multi-agency working.”

5.c.14 At 4.63 (p 55), we wish to point out that Women’s Aid services are not ‘generic’, they are tailored to the situation of every woman and child who uses them and can include crisis support, emergency safety planning, empowerment and support programmes, court support where victims are engaging with the criminal, civil or family courts, liaising with PSNI, liaising with Social Services in a preventative capacity, supporting victims of sexual violence or exploitation, support for women with immigration issues including victims of human trafficking.

Regarding the description of MARAC, we would point out that MARACs don’t offer specialist additional services beyond what the agencies around the table already provide, they are simply a more coordinated approach in protecting high risk victims. We would also point out that it is not always the case that victims and families “access” MARACs, it is possible for a victim to be referred to MARAC without consent.

5.c.15 We suggest that Priority 19 is amended along the following lines to reflect a stronger commitment to taking the work of MARACs forward to effectively reduce repeat victimisation and better protect high risk victims of domestic violence:

“The success of local MARACs will be harnessed and further prioritised, maximised and strengthened, to reduce repeat victimisation or death for high risk victims of domestic violence.”

5.c.16 Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland welcomes the emphasis placed upon awareness training, skills and development of expertise on page 56 (4.69). There is a clear need for all organisations that come into contact with adults, children and teens that may be experiencing domestic and sexual violence, to understand the issues, recognise symptoms and to know how to respond based upon best practice and multi-agency working. At 4.70 (p 56), we would like to see reference to the fact that the core support work of domestic and sexual violence is provided by Women's Aid refuges and Floating Support services.

5.c.17 When considering how to standardise training relating to domestic and sexual violence, it will be important to build upon and develop some of the key successes already developed in this area. This is not only cost-effective but also draws on tried and tested training from expert organisations at the forefront of knowledge and training on domestic and sexual violence. Women's Aid across the United Kingdom has developed a nationally recognised accredited training programme, *Award, Certificate and Diploma in Preventing and Tackling Domestic and Sexual Violence/Abuse*. These qualifications sit on the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF). They are for professionals who are protecting adults and children from domestic and sexual violence and have been mapped to Domestic & Sexual Violence NOS. The Award in Tackling Domestic and Sexual Violence/Abuse has been approved by the Home Office as accredited training for the role of the IDVA. The award has been developed based upon a tiered approach as follows:

Award: Learners will gain knowledge and understanding of domestic and sexual abuse which will enable them to provide a more effective and safe response within their work role.

Certificate: The certificate aims to further increase knowledge and understanding as a practitioner within the domestic violence sector through the latest developments in training, knowledge, legislation and education tools

Diploma: Aimed at experienced practitioners who have completed successfully the certificate and wish to specialise in particular areas of work within the domestic and sexual abuse/violence sector

5.c.18 Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland also has a long and successful track record of delivering external training to a wide range of agencies which has included, health and Social Care Trusts, Education Providers, PSNI, General Practitioner and Nursing staff. More recently the organisation has provided training to hundreds of qualified doctors and dentists through NIMDTA. A CPD accredited training programme on domestic and sexual violence has also been developed for and delivered to the Royal College of Nursing. As experts within this area, it will be vital that Women's Aid

Federation Northern Ireland is instrumental to the development and roll out of the Tiered Model of Awareness and Training Expertise profiled in the strategy document.

5.c.19 Regarding Priority 21, we would like to see a stronger commitment not only to training but to achieving better awareness and intervention against domestic and sexual violence through that training, such as the following:

“There will be a renewed and strategic emphasis on training, to increase community knowledge and develop general and specialist skills and expertise in line with recognised standards, to ensure awareness and recognition of domestic and sexual violence and abuse, promote earlier and more effective intervention and ensure the provision of high quality accessible services for victims of domestic and sexual violence and abuse.”

5.c.20 Relating to the tiered model of awareness training and expertise on page 57, we suggest that there should be a specific mention of the need for workplace policies on domestic and sexual violence as a requirement, and that there should be a process for training of faith leaders given their role as advisor and confidante within many communities. We also strongly urge that risk assessment should be included within the diagram as the safety of the victim must be paramount.

Question 5(d): Do you agree with the strategic outcome and priorities on Support for this Strategy? (Page 59)

5.d.1 We suggest that the Outcome for Strand 4 is amended to the following, to better reflect the desired outcome for all victims of domestic and sexual violence and their families:

All victims of domestic and sexual violence and abuse and their families will have access to appropriate, high quality support and protection services, to enable them to make positive choices and create a safer future.

5.d.2 Strand 4 in its current form is vague as to what support currently exists for victims of domestic and sexual violence. Once again we wish to point out that the term “tertiary prevention” is jarring and seems to unnecessarily complicate the definition of providing support to victims of domestic & sexual violence.

5.d.3 Sections 4.81 and 4.82 (page 60) refer to IDVAs and ISVAs which are not yet implemented within Northern Ireland. It may be useful to provide additional comment in relation to plans and timescales for implementation of these key support services. As they are not yet in place, it might also be helpful to move them to the bottom of the list below services that are already in place to avoid confusion.

5.d.4 Where the 24 Hour Domestic & Sexual Violence Helpline is mentioned at 4.83 (p 61), we suggest that alternative wording would better reflect the full range of services that it provides.

“The 24 Hour Domestic & Sexual Violence Helpline provides confidential telephone, email, texting and a translation service to females and males who have experienced domestic and/or sexual violence now or in the past, regardless of age, disability, ethnicity and sexuality.

The Helpline provides information, emotional support and the opportunity to talk over all concerns and, if required, signposting to a variety of other agencies that the Helpline works closely with such as PSNI, Social Services and other voluntary and statutory agencies. The Helpline can refer women and children directly to the safe network of Women’s Aid services and outreach support. Men and their children can be referred to safe temporary accommodation. The Helpline can also provide direct referrals to the Rowan, SARC.”

5.d.5 At 4.88 (p 62) we would urge caution over generalising all forms of temporary accommodation or equating them with refuge provision. Domestic violence refuge services are specially tailored to provide a safe, supportive environment for those women and children who stay there, utilising the decades of experience and specialism of domestic violence experts like Women’s Aid to ensure that refuge provision is entirely victim and needs-focussed. While other forms of temporary

accommodation may provide a physical roof over a victim's head, they do not provide the safety of a refuge, nor do workers necessarily have the experience or remit to provide the often intensive emotional and practical support that a victim needs following an incident of abuse or violence.

- 5.d.6 At 4.89 (p 62), we wish to point out that while the Sanctuary Scheme is useful, it only applies to Housing Executive property and not private rented or owner occupied property, so does not benefit all victims. It is misleading to name this scheme at the beginning of this section above refuge provision as it implies that the scheme is the primary option for those seeking crisis support, which is untrue. The Sanctuary Scheme is also complicated by the pending welfare reforms – in England & Wales it has already been ruled that sanctuary scheme panic rooms etc will not be exempt from the Bedroom Tax and thus many women living in houses under the Sanctuary Scheme are being forced to leave the protection of their homes because they cannot afford to pay for the extra 'bedroom'.
- 5.d.7 At 4.90, we would also like to see the full range of Women's Aid support services for people in refuge outlined. These include safety planning, court support, keyworker support, Journey to Freedom programme, one to one support with children, crèche services to support women with court / PSNI / UKBA appointments.
- 5.d.8 We suggest that Women's Aid statistics relating to refuges are included in section 4.90.
- 5.d.9 In line with the victim and needs-focused approach in the Strategy, we suggest that Priority 23 is amended to include the input of expert refuge service providers on behalf of victims. We suggest the priority is amended to better espouse a victim needs-focused approach as follows:

"Stakeholders will review, in partnership with service providers, evaluate and plan for more effective provision of emergency housing support, based upon emerging and complex needs and in line with relevant government strategy."

- 5.d.10 We commend the statement in 4.92 (p 63), as it sums up the trauma and stress that a domestic violence victim endures when trying to protect themselves, and the effect that this has on their wellbeing. In focus groups with women who used our services, some participants commented that they 'saw their own journey and experience' within this section.
- 5.d.11 On page 63, we query the statement presented at 4.93, that *"These coping strategies are not always healthy, for example, victims may try to comply with the perpetrators requests in an attempt to pacify them or misuse alcohol and drugs in an attempt to temporarily escape the situation"*. This is a sweeping generalisation and could be

perceived as being rather judgmental of victims. While domestic violence can lead to mental ill health and substance misuse this is not always the case. This statement is misleading and we urge caution in presenting such links throughout the strategy document. It is important to note that any statement can be extracted from this strategy and referenced in other documents and in various contexts. Subsequently there is a need for caution when presenting statements that are generalisations.

- 5.d.12 In section 4.94 (p 63), the document appears to confuse psychological support with counselling, which is a very specific process. To clarify, victims of domestic and sexual violence do need immediate psychological and emotional support in the broadest sense, and this is provided by Women's Aid and the 24 Hour Domestic & Sexual Violence Helpline. However, in our three decades of experience working with victims of domestic and sexual violence, we have found that many victims do not require counselling for many months after they have initially reached out for support, as they are not immediately emotionally ready to engage in a counselling process. We suggest that this section is reworded to clarify the distinction between psychological support and counselling and better represent what services are available to victims.
- 5.d.13 Under the description of Women's Aid services, we recommend that the list should be expanded to include provision of refuge and specialist services, and support for victims of sexual violence. We would also suggest the inclusion of the Rainbow Project and any other LGBT support organisations in the list at section 4.95.
- 5.d.14 At 4.98, while we agree that those with more complex psychological and emotional needs will require access to specialist resources, we strongly contest the assertion that Cognitive Behavioural Therapy is appropriate for addressing the specific requirements of people with complex needs. In fact, CBT generally tends to be more suited to those with *less* complex needs.
- 5.d.15 Finally, in Priority 24 we suggest that the word "*victims*" might be more appropriate than "*individuals*".

Question 5(e): Do you agree with the strategic outcome and priorities on Protection and Justice for this Strategy? (Page 65)

5.e.1 Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland commends the recognition of the needs of victims and the stated commitment to continually seeking to improve the protection and justice that is available and accessible to victims and their families, presented in the Executive Summary synopsis of Strand 5 at page 8.

5.e.2 We recommend that the Outcome is reworked to focus more on how justice and protection can be achieved – by putting perpetrators front and centre and holding them accountable for their actions and by working towards a justice system that provides effective remedies for victims and inspires confidence in them to engage and report abuse:

“Perpetrators of domestic and sexual violence and abuse will be challenged and held accountable for their behaviour. Victims will have more confidence in engaging with the criminal justice system, as a direct result of more effective, supportive, responsive and timely protection.”

5.e.3 We believe Strand 5 needs to be supported and underpinned by a mandatory training framework, based upon the tiered model already represented under Strand 3 of the strategy document. Such training needs should be compulsory for all professionals working within the Criminal Justice system, including the Public Prosecution Service, Judges and Magistrates. It is essential that such professionals are included in this tiered model presented on 57 of the strategy document, as without the continuous development of their expertise in the areas of domestic and sexual violence, victims will not get the justice they deserve in spite of other improvements made to the system. In the course of our work with women affected by domestic violence who engage with the criminal, civil and family court systems, we have found there is inconsistency across the judiciary and justice agencies in understanding of domestic and sexual violence. This has led to re-victimisation of victims in the court process, failure to protect victims with special measures, and decisions which put victims and their children at risk.

5.e.4 At section 4.99 (p 65) at bullet point 3, we urge that *“family law remedies”* is added to the list of criminal and civil law remedies for victims of domestic violence and sexual violence in a domestic context, and that the Family Court is included in the named Justice Systems on page 68 of the document. Often victims of domestic violence do not utilise criminal courts for a number of reasons, but instead seek civil and family law remedies to protect themselves and their children. In our professional experience, it is often the case that family courts do not take sufficient cognisance of

the presence of domestic violence within a relationship when deliberating on matters of family law. This is often despite the fact that a victim's experience of domestic violence has been accepted and acted upon in other courts. Victims are often forced to engage with a perpetrator who has manipulated and controlled them, sometimes over the course of years, and courts may grant perpetrators access to children in spite of the well-evidenced reality that perpetrator behaviour is a major cause of childhood trauma, anxiety, stress, and in a significant number of domestic violence cases the children are also direct victims of abuse. In particular, special measures are not made available to victims in the civil and family process. In one of our focus group sessions, a woman opined that:

"In the Civil Courts you are made to feel like you are the criminal"

This is not acceptable and it is causing avoidable trauma and re-victimisation of people that have already endured abuse at the hands of a perpetrator.

Due to the nature of perpetrators, family courts will also be used as an avenue to inflict further abuse on a victim due to the access granted to that victim. Family courts become a contested arena, where perpetrators try to gain access to children, and victims try to protect their children from perpetrators. Therefore it is essential that family courts are recognised as part of the protection and justice framework for victims of domestic violence.

- 5.e.5 In 4.104, we suggest replacing the word "harmful" with "abusive" (p 66)
- 5.e.6 We welcome the acknowledgment in Section 4.106 that some victims of violence and abuse may find it difficult to report to the relevant authorities. We would welcome the inclusion of further examples of reasons to those already stated, such as *"fear of not being believed, financial concerns, and concerns for their children."* These are some of the most common fears that women voice to us. We would also point out that no one can absolutely guarantee protection of victims, therefore we suggest rephrasing *"These victims are protected"* to *"Protection mechanisms are in place"*.
- 5.e.7 In section 4.107, we are disappointed that Women's Aid has not been included alongside Victim Support NI and NSPCC as providers of information about the criminal justice system for victims of domestic & sexual violence. Women's Aid provides court support workers for victims of domestic violence who are engaging with the criminal justice process. Our services not only extend to provision of information leaflets and provision of information, advice and support through a court support worker. We also provide direct support for victims throughout the entire process, for example during attendance at court hearings and interviews with justice agency officials.

- 5.e.8 Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland welcomes the clear reference to multi-agency working in this section and the intention to monitor MARACs across Northern Ireland at 4.110 (p 67) to ensure they are operating effectively and in line with best practice.
- 5.e.9 We welcome the commitment to establish Domestic Homicide Reviews in Northern Ireland at 4.111 (p 67), to help organisations learn critical lessons, improve service provision and work together to prevent and protect future victims from coming to harm. We wish to stress the serious absence of this in Northern Ireland where there are domestic violence motivated murders each year and no reviews have ever taken place.
- 5.e.10 Regarding Figure 4 *Victim's Journey* at page 69, we are disappointed that Women's Aid and the 24 Hour Domestic & Sexual Violence Helpline are not mentioned as part of the flow chart. Many victims who do engage with the criminal justice process rely on Women's Aid and the Helpline for support during what is a very difficult time. At the part in the flow chart where the case goes to trial, we suggest addition of Women's Aid Support Workers and the 24 Hour Domestic & Sexual Violence Helpline in addition to the NSPCC, VSNI and NICTS services listed. Additionally this diagram makes no reference to special measures for domestic violence if it goes to court.
- 5.e.11 We also question whether this diagram can accurately be described as the *Victim's Journey*, as for most victims this is not the process they engage in. Most victims of domestic violence do not engage with the criminal justice system, but rather go through civil and family routes. This may be for a number of reasons – the abuse has not yet amounted to a crime eg assault, the victim requires immediate protection rather than a protracted criminal process, the victim requires protection but does not wish to be responsible for the perpetrator gaining a criminal record, the victim feels unable to endure a criminal process. During our consultation with women who use our services, many women voiced their disappointment in this chart as they could not see their own experience in it. Even those who did engage with the criminal justice system opined that the most significant part of that journey was the support they received from Women's Aid to enable them to continue through the often stressful and protracted justice process. In general it was agreed that this chart in fact ignores the voice and experience of the victim and instead focuses on the procedural elements of one particular scenario that isn't the reality for many victims.
- 5.e.12 At 4.119 (p 70) we would like to see a stronger commitment to improve access to special measures for victims of domestic and sexual violence. While special measures are technically available, they are only available via application and can be refused if

contested by the defendant or rejected at a judge's discretion. In the case of victims of domestic violence, this leaves victims open to intimidation and further abuse. Women's Aid believes that the nature of domestic and sexual violence is such that special measures should be granted as a matter of course. As it stands, this section of the strategy creates the impression that there have been no issues with the granting of special measures for victims and that there is no further work to do in this area, which we would strongly contest. We also urge that the phrase "*serious sexual violence cases*" is replaced with "*sexual violence cases*"- all sexual violence is serious and this language is harmful and feeds into the culture of victim-blaming and normalisation of sexual violence that this strategy is supposed to be eradicating.

- 5.e.13 At 4.120 (p 70), we welcome the commitment to evaluate the feasibility of a Domestic Violence Specialist Court for Northern Ireland. It would be useful to state in the strategy that a pilot is currently ongoing in the Derry/Londonderry area.
- 5.e.14 We welcome the commitment at 4.123 (p 71) to "*develop and implement clear laws and policies, in line with best practice, to ensure effective and appropriate enforcement.*" This statement encapsulates what government should be doing to protect victims of domestic and sexual violence, and to that end we urge that this is made one of the Priorities, in addition to the existing Priority 25.
- 5.e.15 We suggest that Priority 25 could be reworded slightly to suit the style of the other priorities:

"There will be a clear emphasis on focused protection, support and information for all victims of domestic and sexual violence and abuse and their families throughout the Justice System process."

- 5.e.16 At 4.127 (p 72), we welcome the commitment to review practices in other jurisdictions such as *Clare's Law* and Protection Orders and Notices, and the commitment to look at repeat victimisation as an issue. We urge that such a review should involve relevant stakeholders such as Women's Aid, to ensure that the best approach and practice are implemented when making such changes. We recommend that the strategy includes consideration of a serial domestic violence perpetrator register so that serial perpetrators are identified and steps can be taken to protect potential victims.
- 5.e.17 At 4.133, we recommend that the existing IDAP programme for perpetrators is mentioned. We also recommend that the phrase "*built-in support systems*" is expanded to explain what this support system is –a Women's Safety Worker provided by a Women's Aid and through Probation Board NI. We would also point out that it isn't *per se* a built-in support system, rather risk assessment and safety planning.

5.e.18 At 4.137 (p 73), we suggest changing the title of this section to *Addressing the Link between Domestic Violence and Offending Among Women*. At first glance, the title of this section could imply that female offenders are being singled out as the primary perpetrators of domestic and sexual violence, which we know is not the intention of the section.

Question 5(f): Are there any other outcomes/priorities that should have been considered?

5.f.1 See Questions 5 (a) – (e) where we have included all suggested amendments to outcomes and priorities and additional priorities and outcomes for consideration.

Question 5(g): Are there any aspects of the strategy that you consider could be made clearer or easier to understand?

5.g.1 See our comments under each strand in Questions 5(a) – (e).

6. Section 6 – Governance and Accountability

Question 6: Are there clear levels of governance and accountability set out within the proposed structure? (Page 75)

- 6.1 Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland welcomes the intentions set out under sections 5 and 6, to monitor and review the combined strategy. We agree there is a definite need for a clear framework to monitor the outcomes of the strategy and measure progress against priorities.
- 6.2 In order to develop a stronger picture of how actions are making a real life difference to the victims of violence and abuse and contributing to desired outcomes, we believe there is a clear and definite need to engage victims in evaluation and review. We would like to see on-going consultation with service users built in to the evaluation and review framework. We would therefore welcome an emphasis on service user involvement in the evaluation framework to demonstrate social impact, identify emerging trends, effectively capture views and ensure service provision is clearly based upon need. We would welcome further consideration and detail in relation to this.
- 6.3 We note that Domestic Violence Partnerships are absent from the Figure 5 – these are a key part of the delivery of the current strategies at local level and, we assume, will continue in their role under this new strategy.
- 6.4 We would also like to see accountability built into the governance structure – at present only the structure itself and roles are outlined, not who each group is accountable to and how overall accountability and transparency is or can be achieved.
- 6.5 At 5.8 (p76), we welcome the continued representation of a range of stakeholders on the RSG, including voluntary & community expert organisations.
- 6.6 At 6.2, welcome this statement and the recognition that increased reporting is a positive sign that awareness raising work is encouraging victims to report.
- 6.7 At 6.5, it is crucial that work is undertaken, and in a timely manner, to develop and monitor these key performance indicators. This is essential to track whether this Strategy is effective and successful
- 6.8 We would also add that both the UK and NI government are accountable to the international and European human rights treaties to which they are signatory, and that this should be recognised in the Strategy and form part of the process of both monitoring the Strategy's success and ensuring accountability.

7. Section 7 – Equality and Human Rights Questions

Question 7 (a): Are the proposals set out in this consultation document likely to have an adverse impact on any of the nine equality groups identified under Section 75 of the NI Act 1998? If yes, please state the group or groups and provide comment on how these adverse impacts could be reduced or alleviated in the proposals.

- 7.1 Please see our comments in relation to equality and human rights context of the strategy throughout our response. Given the gendered nature of domestic and sexual violence, and the fact that equal outcomes are not achieved by providing the same response to different groups with different needs, we recommend that a full EQIA is carried out in relation to the impacts on women and men.

8. Section 8 – Additional Commentary

Please use the space below to provide any additional comments you may have.

It would be helpful if you reference which part of the document you are commenting on. If you refer to any other documents, please provide the title, author and if possible approximate date of publication.

Comments on Executive Summary (pp 6 – 12)

- 8.1 We wish to provide comment on section 1 of the strategy document, the Executive Summary, which did not fall under Questions 1 – 7.

- 8.2 On page 6 under the title “The Importance of the Strategy”, it states

“It is about how the Northern Ireland Executive intends to work across departments, their agencies and in partnership with community and voluntary organisations to reduce the incidence of domestic and sexual violence and abuse...”

We suggest that a better phrasing of this sentence would be

“This draft strategy sets out how the Northern Ireland Executive intends to work in partnership with all relevant organisations, to reduce the incidence of domestic and sexual violence and abuse...”

8.3 We seriously question the relevance and accuracy of the factors presented as contributing to the occurrence of domestic and sexual violence which are bullet pointed at pages 6 and 7. Many of the so-called contributory factors presented are in fact myths about domestic violence and their inclusion within the government's strategy to stop domestic and sexual violence is extremely worrying. A wealth of international research highlights that domestic and sexual violence are complex issues which are deeply grounded in culture, gender inequality and the abuse of power and control. Attributing domestic and sexual violence to factors such as family stress, deprivation, stimulus abuse etc, rather than explaining the true origins of the problem, perpetuates the myths that exist and act as a barrier to effective tackling of these forms of violence and abuse.

We strongly recommend removal of this section and replacement with a more appropriate explanation of the causes of domestic & sexual violence, such as:

“While there are many factors which may contribute to the occurrence of domestic and sexual violence, such as media violence, stimulus abuse, individual factors etc, these do not on their own cause domestic and / or sexual violence and abuse. Domestic and sexual violence and abuse are complex issues which are deeply grounded in gender inequality, culture and abuse of power and control.”

General Comments on the Strategy document

8.4 The draft strategy document in its current format is 101 pages long. The previous *Tackling Violence at Home* strategy was 59 pages long. While we understand there is a need for a robust document, informed by relevant research and facts, we do feel the current format of the strategy document may present a barrier to it being read and fully understood by the general public and also professionals working within the field. We are concerned such a lengthy document may be considered inaccessible and difficult to comprehend by key stakeholders who would benefit from the information contained within. The document also has a feeling of being somewhat disjointed in sections and does not always flow well in terms of both structure and content.

8.5 We recommend a review of the language and length of the document, with a view to making it more concise and dynamic. While the content must not be lacking, much of the phrasing used could be sharpened, and simpler less academic language used. This would solve the dual problems of an overly lengthy document and the contents being inaccessible to all those with an interest in it.

- 8.6 All references to the 24 Hour Domestic & Sexual Violence Helpline should include its full title so that anyone reading the document will know exactly who to call if in need of help and support.
- 8.7 We would welcome clarification on whether Domestic Violence Partnerships will become **Domestic and Sexual Violence** partnerships. If these partnerships are to expand their remit to include sexual violence, we would welcome more information on how this transition will be facilitated and what plans and resources are in place to ensure the existence of capacity, knowledge and expertise across all partnerships.
- 8.8 We regret that this document fails to take into account the impact of the Conflict and our transition to a post-conflict society, or how this impacts on domestic and sexual violence and on violence against women. We have made reference at various points in our response to the fact that some people and communities still feel unable to go to police or government agencies to seek support or redress for abuse. Furthermore, it is well-evidenced that societies emerging from conflict often experience a surge in sexual violence, yet there has been no research to examine this possibility or the link between the conflict and domestic & sexual violence, or to examine the levels of hidden domestic and sexual violence during the Troubles in Northern Ireland to date. It is also disappointing that there is no reference to UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, as this Resolution directly addresses these issues in relation to women and provides best practice solutions and measures to tackle them.
- 8.9 We acknowledge that the strategy identifies children as a vulnerable group within the strategy and explores a number of means of supporting them, including preventative education work, building the capacity of people in contact with children to act as social guardians etc. However we would like to see explanation of the effects of domestic violence on children as witnesses within the strategy and more detail in Strand 4 on how government will act to support these children and young people.
- 8.10 Regarding Appendix 5, we suggest that the full list of relevant international instruments and conventions to which the UK is party is listed.

We would point out that the '*International Bill of Rights*' is in fact several conventions, namely the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)*, the *International Covenant on Civil & Political Rights (ICCPR)*, and the *International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)*. Of these, both the ICCPR and ICESCR are legally binding and carry specific obligation on the part of the UK government. Domestic violence is deemed as discrimination against women and a violation of women's human rights under these Covenants and the Declaration. The

gendered nature of domestic violence means that it is classified as a violation of the human right to equality espoused under the ICCPR (Article 3), ICESCR (Article 3) and the UDHR (Article 2).

- 8.11 Domestic violence can also be categorised as torture within the private sphere / home, and a tool of oppression against women¹¹. Torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment is prohibited within the UDHR (Article 5), the ICCPR (Article 7) and the Convention Against Torture (CAT). The Committee Against Torture, which monitors State compliance with the CAT, and UN Special Rapporteur on Torture have pronounced that domestic violence, rape, human trafficking and FGM can constitute torture, and that the State has a positive obligation to prevent it otherwise it is deemed under international law to be complicit in that torture.¹²
- 8.12 Domestic violence is a violation of the right to life (ICCPR Article 6, UDHR Article 3), and a violation of the right to quality of life under ICESCR. This includes the right to make a living (Article 7, relevant to financial abuse), protection of the family and marriage with consent (Article 10), right to an adequate standard of living and continuous improvement of living conditions (Article 11), right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health (Article 12).¹³

The NI government has specific obligations under CEDAW to work to end discrimination against women. CEDAW specifically links domestic violence to that obligation under General Recommendation 19. We recommend that this strategy explicitly states how it will contribute to meeting the government's obligations under CEDAW, and includes a human rights perspective throughout the document.

- 8.13 Under Appendix 8, we suggest that the full details of all relevant support organisations should be included, including those of Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland, all 9 local Women's Aid groups, the Men's Advisory Project, the

¹¹ Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences E/CN.4/1996/53 dated 6 February 1996

¹² Committee Against Torture, General Comment No. 2, para. 18, U.N. Doc. CAT/C/GC/2 (Jan. 24, 2008)

¹³ General Comment 16 of the UN Economic & Social Council states that: *"Article 10, paragraph 1, of the Covenant requires that States parties recognize that the widest possible protection and assistance should be accorded to the family, and that marriage must be entered into with the free consent of the intending spouses. Implementing article 3, in relation to article 10, requires States parties, inter alia, to provide victims of domestic violence, who are primarily female, with access to safe housing, remedies and redress for physical, mental and emotional damage; to ensure that men and women have an equal right to choose if, whom and when to marry - in particular, the legal age of marriage for men and women should be the same, and boys and girls should be protected equally from practices that promote child marriage, marriage by proxy, or coercion; and to ensure that women have equal rights to marital property and inheritance upon their husband's death. Gender-based violence is a form of discrimination that inhibits the ability to enjoy rights and freedoms, including economic, social and cultural rights, on a basis of equality. States parties must take appropriate measures to eliminate violence against men and women and act with due diligence to prevent, investigate, mediate, punish and redress acts of violence against them by private actors."*

Rainbow Project, and other advice providers like the Law Centre NI and NICEM / the Migrant Rights Centre.

9. Contact Details

For further information about this response please contact:

Louise Kennedy
Regional Policy and Information Co-ordinator
Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland
129 University Street
BELFAST
BT7 1HP
Tel: 028 9024 9041

Email: louise.kennedy@womensaidni.org

Website: www.womensaidni.org

24 Hour Domestic & Sexual Violence Helpline – 0808 802 1414

Email Support: 24hrsupport@dvhelpline.org

Text support to 07797805839

*Open to **all women and men** affected by domestic & sexual violence*