



Federation Northern Ireland

## Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister

# A Response to: A Strategy to Improve the Lives of Disabled People 2012 – 2015

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15 August 2012

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*Open to anyone affected by domestic violence*

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## **Core Work of Women's Aid: Background Information & Statistics**

### **1.0 Introduction**

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

### **2.0 Core Work of Women's Aid**

The core work of Women's Aid in Northern Ireland, including Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland and the 10 local Women's Aid groups is:

- To provide refuge accommodation to women and their children suffering mental, physical or sexual abuse within the home.
- To run the 24 Hour Domestic Violence Helpline.
- To provide a range of support services to enable women who are leaving a violent situation to rebuild their lives and the lives of their children.
- To provide a range of support services to children and young people who have experienced domestic violence.
- To run preventative education programmes in schools and other settings.
- To educate and inform the public, media, police, courts, social services and other agencies of the impact and effects of domestic violence.
- To advise and support all relevant agencies in the development of domestic violence policies, protocols and service delivery.
- To work in partnership with all relevant agencies to ensure a joined up response to domestic violence.

### **3.0 Women's Aid Statistics (2010 - 2011)**

- 12 refuges with 300 bed spaces, playrooms and facilities.
- 1058 women and 754 children sought refuge.
- 15 resource centres for women seeking information and support; group work and training.
- 3,450 women and 3,739 children accessed the Floating Support service enabling women to access support whilst remaining in their own homes and communities.
- Move-on houses for women and children leaving refuges.
- In 2010/11 the 24 Hour Domestic Violence Helpline, open to anyone affected by domestic violence, managed 38,296 calls. This represented an increase of 18% on 2009/10.

### **4.0 Additional Women's Aid Statistical Data**

- Since 1999, Women's Aid across Northern Ireland gave refuge to 14,714 women and 14,356 children and young people.
- During the last 16 years Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland managed 282,860 calls to the 24 Hour Domestic Violence Helpline.

### **5.0 Statistics: Domestic Violence & Violence Against Women**

- Domestic violence is a violation of Article 5 of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights – that “no one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment”;
- The joint NIO, DHSSPS Strategy “Tackling Violence at Home” estimates that the cost of domestic violence in Northern Ireland, including the potential loss of economic output, could amount to £180 million each year.
- UNICEF research released in 2006, showing per capita incidence, indicates that there are up to 32,000 children and young people living with domestic violence in Northern Ireland.
- Where the gender of the victim was known, 76% of adult victims of domestic crimes recorded by the PSNI in 2010/11 were female.\*
- Over 30% of all domestic violence starts during pregnancy. \*\*

## 6.0 Domestic Violence: Crime Statistics

- Domestic Violence is a crime. PSNI statistics for 2011/12 indicate that there were more recorded crimes with a domestic motivation (10,387) than the combined total of all the following crimes (10,327) – all recorded sexual offences (1,836), shoplifting (6,201) and theft of a motor vehicle (2,290).
- PSNI Statistics for 11/12 indicate that they responded to a domestic incident every 21 minutes of every day of the year.
- The total of 10,387 crimes with a domestic motivation in 11/12 represents an average of approximately 1 domestic crime every 51 minutes in Northern Ireland.
- The number of all recorded offences of murder in Northern Ireland in 11/12 total 16. Those classed as having a domestic motivation total 3. Therefore, 19% of all murders in Northern Ireland in 11/12 had a domestic motivation.
- There were 553 rapes (including attempted Rapes) in Northern Ireland in the period 2011/12.

(Source: PSNI Statistics 2011/12)

- Official sources (NISOSMC) estimate that up to 80% of sex crimes are not reported.
- Violence Against Women is not limited to domestic violence, it includes amongst other crimes murder, rape, sexual assault, sexual exploitation, trafficking, sexual stalking and sexual harassment.

(\*Findings from the PSNI Crime Statistics Report 2010/11 N.B. "Adult" defined as aged 18 and over)

(\*\* Women's Aid Federation NI)

## **7.0. Comments**

7.1 Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland welcomes the publication of the strategy to improve the lives of disabled people 2012 – 2015, and the opportunity to comment upon it on behalf of our ten local groups.

## **8.0 Living safely in the Community (Strategic Priority 15)**

8.1 Women's Aid welcomes the reference to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRC) Article 16, relating to the right to be protected from all forms of exploitation, violence and abuse, including their gender based aspects, within and outside the home (at p32).

8.2 We are however extremely disappointed that this has not translated specifically into Strategic Priority 15 of the strategy. While Strategic Priority 15 aims to ensure that disabled people "can live safely in their own community", there is no mention of the right to live safely in their own home. Nor is there any specific mention of the unique needs and circumstances of people with disabilities who suffer domestic violence.

8.3 We note that this strategy is largely based on the PSI Working Group report on disability, which did not cover the issue of violence against people with disabilities in the home. Women's Aid believes that while it is important to address the recommendations contained within the PSI Working Group report, this strategy needs to reach beyond the report and fully embrace the provisions of the UNCRC, in order to produce a strategy that addresses all the needs of disabled people in Northern Ireland. While we welcome the inclusion of Strategic Priority 15 in the strategy, we believe that it must go further in outlining the rights of disabled people in this regard under the UNCRC and how this might be achieved.

8.4 Women with disabilities are at an increased risk of suffering domestic violence – according to research they are over twice as likely to be victims (Slyter, 2009). In addition to the types of abuse suffered by victims in general, violence and abuse of disabled people can include:

- withdrawal of wheelchairs, mobility aids, hearing aids,
- refusal to carry out caring duties (eating, washing, toileting, administering medication)
- Financial abuse – withholding of benefits / funds
- Entrapment in the home

8.5 In the period 2010 – 2011, 191 women who stayed at our refuges identified themselves as having a disability. A further 833 women with disabilities were helped through Floating Support/outreach services.

## **9.0 Social Inclusion & Independent Living (Strategic Priorities 2, 5, 7, 11 and 12)**

- 9.1 We welcome the aims in Strategic Priority 2, to achieve social inclusion of people with disabilities (at p 24), and in Strategic Priority 5, to eliminate barriers in accessing the physical environment, goods and services (at p 26). However, we regret that there is no mention of working to ensure that people with disabilities are not forcibly isolated or denied access to goods and services by others. Social exclusion is both a type of abuse and a factor which prevents disabled victims of domestic violence seeking the help they need. If this strategy is to improve the lives of all people with disabilities, domestic violence must be recognised as a problem at strategic level, as well as being reflected in the action plan that follows.
- 9.2 We support the aims of Strategic Priorities 7 and 12, to ensure that disabled people have the freedom and adequate support to live independently, and welcome the creation of an Independent Living Programme. We would stress, however, that a comprehensive, co-ordinated, multi-agency approach is required to ensure that people with disabilities can truly live independently. Domestic violence is often manifested in forced social exclusion and abuse of the dependency of a person with disabilities, and so it is crucial that this strategy and forthcoming action plan recognise this. To this end, it is essential that any Independent Living Programme is linked with the Tackling Violence At Home strategy and accompanying action plans. We would argue therefore that the aim to “get Executive departments to work together more effectively “(at p 27) should be a requirement and should include mandatory linkage with existing strategies like Tackling Violence At Home.
- 9.3 For disabled victims of domestic violence, independent living can be impeded not only by the actions of a perpetrator, but also by inadequate welfare support and increased financial dependency on others. As already stated, people with disabilities may be susceptible to particular kinds of abuse, including financial abuse. This is acknowledged in the Background and Policy Context of the strategy (at p 19), quoting a report which states “almost half of those surveyed thought that the cuts may make people who receive disability benefits more open to abuse and attack”. However while the accompanying documentation to the strategy mentions the dangers of financial dependency and welfare cuts to the independence and safety of disabled people, this is not effectively transposed into the strategy itself. If cuts to disability benefits result in increased dependency on carers and family, this may leave many people with disabilities vulnerable to abuse. Thus Strategic Priority 12 must allow for people

with disabilities as individuals to be adequately supported to live independently, as well as in the context of their families.

- 9.4 We would also draw attention to Strategic Priority 11, which aims to reduce poverty among people with disabilities and protect their right to an adequate standard of living (at p 30). While we support the sentiment, we find it difficult to reconcile this aim with proposed welfare cuts, changes to the DLA system, and introduction of Universal Credit. If proposed changes to welfare and DLA go ahead as planned, and the number of DLA payments is cut by 20%, there is a very real danger that the government will not reduce poverty levels among people with disabilities but in fact increase them. As this is a high level consultation, and the action plan has not as yet been formulated, Women's Aid is unable to comment in detail about the delivery of Strategic Priority 11. However, if the action plan fails to address these concerns, and if welfare reforms are carried out in a manner than increases poverty levels among people with disabilities, the government will have failed in its commitment to reduce poverty under Strategic Priority 11.

## **10.0 Challenging perceptions and Prejudice (Strategic Priority 4)**

- 10.1 We support Strategic Priority 4 in principle, which aims to raise awareness on disability issues and challenge negative perceptions and prejudices regarding people with disabilities. We would argue however that this Priority does not sufficiently cover all forms of prejudices and misperceptions regarding disabled people. In our professional experience, one of the most common misperceptions regarding disabled people is that they cannot possibly be victims of domestic or sexual violence. They may be viewed as asexual and therefore incapable of suffering sexual violence. Or there may be a perception that a carer or intimate partner is an inherently 'good' person, who could not therefore be guilty of abuse or violence. Therefore we would stress that Strategic Priority 4 needs to deal not only with negative perceptions of disabled people themselves, but all forms of misperception surrounding disability.
- 10.2 Women's Aid also notes the absence of the Tackling Sexual Violence and Abuse Strategy from the list of related policies. People with disabilities are as vulnerable to sexual violence as the rest of the population, and we would question why this strategy has not been included in the list.

## **11.0 Children, Young People, & Family (Strategic Priority 8)**

- 11.1 Article 23 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states that disabled children should “enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child's active participation in the community”. According to a significant body of research, children who live with domestic violence can suffer trauma, fear, isolation and stress. The trauma of domestic violence can impact upon all areas of life, including health, education, and the development of relationships, recreation and social activities. All of this applies to children with disabilities who are victims of domestic violence.
- 11.2 Children with disabilities have the right to live in safety and with stability, and this includes the right to support and early intervention in instances of domestic violence. As there are fewer opportunities for children with disabilities to disclose domestic violence – whether due to alternative schooling arrangements, more infrequent contact with social guardians, or communication difficulties – it is even more important that a strategy to improve the lives of people with disabilities addresses this. Strategic Priority 8 should therefore include support and protection of disabled children who live with domestic violence, and a commitment to proactively engage with children with disabilities and intervene at the earliest opportunity in domestic violence situations.

## **12.0 Scope of the Strategy – A Gendered Analysis**

- 12.1 Regarding the scope of the strategy, Women's Aid notes that it identifies children, young people and adults as distinct groups with particular needs and issues, but fails to identify men and women as distinct groups.
- 12.2 We note that the strategy cites Article 28 of UNCRPD, specifically its reference to the unique needs of women and girls with disabilities. However this is not transposed into Strategic Priority 11, which makes no mention of the specific needs of women and girls.
- 12.3 The needs of disabled men and disabled women are often different and specific, and so a strategy to improve the lives of disabled people must acknowledge this and set out analysis and support in a gendered fashion. It must also be acknowledged that disabled women and girls can be particularly vulnerable, for example to domestic and sexual violence and exploitation. For this strategy to fulfil its purpose of improving the lives of all disabled people, it must ensure that it meets the particular needs of disabled women and girls.



- 12.4 It is also extremely disappointing that there is little mention of multiple discrimination or disadvantage. People with disabilities may suffer disadvantage not solely due to their disability, but also due to their ethnicity, gender, age, rural location or other vulnerable characteristic. Failure to identify the link between multiplicity of disadvantage and the negative effects this can have on the lives of disabled people only serves to contribute further to their disadvantage.
- 12.5 To this end, the strategy should recognise the complexity of multiple disadvantage and its impact on the health & wellbeing of disabled women. Linkage to the government's Gender Strategy is crucial, as is a joined up approach towards all existing strategies and action plans across departments. We would particularly stress the vital importance of ensuring that this strategy is linked with and feeds into the Tackling Violence At Home and the Tackling Sexual Violence and Abuse strategies and accompanying action plans.

For further information about this response contact:

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