

Ending Violence Against Women & Girls in NI

THE STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK
CONSULTATION RESPONSE
BY WOMEN'S AID

 **Women's Aid**

October 2023

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INFORMATION & STATISTICS

Who We Are

Women's Aid is the lead voluntary organisation in Northern Ireland addressing domestic abuse and provides support services for women, children, and young people. Women's Aid NI is made up of eight local Women's Aid groups and the regional body, Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland (WAFNI).

Women's Aid exists to challenge attitudes and beliefs which perpetuate domestic abuse. We work to promote healthy, non-abusive relationships.

What We Do

Women's Aid supports all women, children & young people affected by domestic abuse.

We work to help women and children be safe, to break free from the cycle of abuse, and to rebuild their lives. Women's Aid has eight local groups and one regional umbrella body covering the whole of Northern Ireland, and our wraparound services are available across Northern Ireland.

Our core work includes:

- **Refuge accommodation** for women and their children suffering domestic abuse.
- **Support services** to enable women affected by domestic abuse to rebuild their lives and the lives of their children.
- Support services for **children and young people** who have experienced domestic abuse.
- **Preventative education programmes** in schools and other settings.
- Educating and **raising awareness** among the public, media, police, courts, social services, and other agencies of the impact of domestic and sexual violence.
- **Advising and supporting** other agencies in responding to domestic abuse.
- **Working in partnership** with other agencies to ensure a joined-up response to domestic abuse.

Throughout this response, the term "Women's Aid" refers to the overall Women's Aid movement in Northern Ireland, including our local groups and Women's Aid Federation.

KEY NUMBERS IN 2021/2022



543 women stayed in a Women's Aid Refuge



397 children stayed in a Women's Aid Refuge with their mum



8 Babies were born to women in our refuges



7,444 women received support in their own homes



5,897 children had mums who were supported in Women's Aid Services



242 women who were pregnant received support from Women's Aid

DOMESTIC ABUSE POLICE SNAPSHOT



16 minutes

The average time the PSNI receive a call regarding a domestic abuse incident in 21/22



1/5 of all Crime

The amount of crimes committed that were domestic abuse related in 21/22



women murdered

The number of women killed in Northern Ireland since 2020

INTRODUCTION TO SUBMISSION

This is Women's Aid response to the Executive Office consultation to their Ending Violence against Women & Girls (EVAWG) Strategy for Northern Ireland.

The EVAWG Strategy for Northern Ireland has been produced following a robust consultation and co-design process with multiple agencies including Women's Aid services across Northern Ireland including one to one meetings, and focus groups with women, children, and young people. Consultation has also taken place with all our Women's Aid local groups including staff and volunteers.



"I found everyday another reason to apply makeup. A mark, a cut, a bruise. To hide not only physical, but to emotionally hide behind a mask.

To hide the tears and put on a brave front to face another day."

Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland (WAFNI) is the lead organisation addressing domestic abuse in NI. WAFNI's vision for the twenty-first century is the elimination of domestic abuse. Women's Aid exists to challenge attitudes and beliefs which perpetuate domestic abuse. We seek through our work to create healthy, non-abusive relationships. Our strong ethos has been built upon our long, rich heritage of campaigning to end domestic abuse, which began in the 1970s and continues to be based on our premise of: for women, by women, with women.

There are eight local Women's Aid groups throughout Northern Ireland. Local groups deliver a range of specialised support services to women and children who have experienced domestic abuse. All eight local groups are members of the Women's Aid Federation of Northern Ireland (WAFNI). By enabling the eight groups to speak with one

voice, WAFNI aims to amplify the impact and influence of Women's Aid throughout Northern Ireland. Through lobbying, preventative education, and working in partnership with other agencies, WAFNI seeks to improve the lives of women, girls, and young people affected by domestic abuse.

Our Mission

Women's Aid exists to challenge attitudes, structures and systems which perpetuate domestic abuse. We seek through our work to enable women, children, and young people to live free from violence and abuse.

Our Core Aims

To work collectively across Northern Ireland to:

- engage with women, children, and young people, to give them a voice and ensure they inform all aspects of service development and delivery.
- provide trauma informed support services to women, children and young people who have experienced domestic abuse.
- deliver preventative education programmes in schools and community settings to promote healthy non-abusive relationships and share key safeguarding messages.
- educate and inform the public, private, voluntary, statutory and community sectors of the context and impact of domestic abuse.
- provide quality assured education and training to a wide audience, to increase capacity to respond to domestic abuse.
- monitor, influence and respond to government policy and legislation as a Subject Matter Expert, giving a voice to survivors of domestic abuse.
- work in partnership, sharing our expertise with all relevant agencies to ensure a joined-up response to domestic abuse.

WAFNI work on a strategic level with government departments to help implement and develop strategy to end domestic and sexual abuse. We support Survivors, the VAWG Sector and our Members, by campaigning and influencing, training and education and public awareness around domestic abuse.

Survivors

WAFNI supports survivors through our Survivor Engagement Group and through wider consultation and support.

At Women's Aid, we recognise the women we work with are 'experts-by-experience' and their voices must be at the heart of all efforts to end violence against women and girls. We acknowledge that women's participation in these efforts must be at all levels. At an organisational level, this means that a woman has a voice from the moment she walks through the doors of Women's Aid, and that her voice is listened to at all stages of her journey. This also entails facilitating survivor engagement in broader efforts to end violence against women and girls, such as: prevention and education efforts; and lobbying policymakers to guarantee that legislation and policy reflects the needs and experiences of women, girls, and young people. Apart from improved legislation and policy, Women's Aid acknowledges that engagement can have a transformative effect upon survivors of domestic abuse. By empowering survivors to recognise the power and value of their voice, engagement can support women in their journeys of healing and self-discovery.



“This was a familiar sight in many rooms of the house when his temper went. I’m busy fixing up these holes and fixing my life again.”

We are developing a VAWG Sector in NI by providing, training, support for working with survivors through our Survivor Engagement Group and data collection for research to strengthen domestic abuse service outcomes for survivors.

Members

Our members provide specialist, direct domestic abuse services to women, children, and young people, and make up a federation of 8 local groups across NI, speaking with one voice on the issue of VAWG. Collectively we make real change through domestic abuse legislation, adding their voices to all campaigns to influence policy and law. We support our members with professional development through the delivery of training and qualifications. Support is provided to all our members through template policies, documents and toolkits.



Campaigning and Influencing

Survivors' experiences are at the heart of our policy and campaigning. This includes making coercive and controlling behaviour a criminal offence, to continued campaigns for removal of the rough sex defence, non-fatal strangulation legislation and all the other new legislation including Stalking, Safe Leave Bill, and other elements of the Justice Act which WAFNI have been fundamental in briefing, consulting and campaigning for. We will continue to influence government and conduct vital research into key areas of VAWG to

bring about social change. We lobbied for the VAWG Strategy to be introduced here in NI and this has now come to fruition through continued work with The Executive Office.

Training and Education

We work to deliver up to date training and education for our 8 local Women's Aid groups together with all external agencies including PSNI, PPS, Social Services, and other key stakeholders. We have a Centre of Training Excellence for training throughout NI and are the lead experts in domestic abuse and VAWG training and awareness.

Awareness and Public Awareness

We believe everyone can come together and play a role in ending domestic abuse and all forms of VAWG. We know that domestic abuse is devastatingly common, as the figures above clearly illustrate although that's only the tip of the iceberg, as so many women don't report abuse due to fear or the worry they'll be judged or not believed. 18 women have been murdered since 2020 by a partner or family member which shows so much needs to change before women are safe.

The role of WAFNI is to respond to government consultations and report based on the lived experience of victims and survivors within Women's Aid services across NI, together with our 8 local Women's Aid groups, we respond to consultations on their behalf to make sure their voice is heard. This is the only way to truly be accountable. By incorporating the voices of women, children, and young people, we want to ensure that decision makers listen to these voices so that we can make positive change and ensure the best way forward for all those affected by VAWG and ensure they get the best support. WAFNI have met with 157 women, and 25 children and young people across NI to respond to this consultation.

At the time of writing WAFNI has had its core funding of £147,000.00 completely cut by the Department of Health from the end of September 2023, and are now the only Federation in the UK and Ireland that are not in receipt of state funding to take up our important role as outlined above to work for and on behalf of our 8 local Women's Aid groups across NI. Without this core funding, the future of our services is uncertain, as is the VAWG sector and it is hard to fathom how the EVAWG strategy together with the Domestic & Sexual Abuse Strategy will continue to progress without the lead agency being funded to undertake this work, maintain relationships with key partners and stakeholders, represent the 8 local Women's Aid groups on a strategic basis and most importantly be the voice of women, children and young people. There needs to be a concerted effort to

have core VAWG funding implemented within this strategic framework and to reinstate the funding for WAFNI urgently.

We have seen a suite of legislation which has been introduced over the last three years which has had no funding attached for training, implementation, monitoring or oversight and it is simply not working. We need to invest now to save lives. The following legislation is an example of what is needed in NI but simply not implemented well enough.

The Domestic Abuse & Civil Proceedings Act 2021 is passed by the NI Assembly and becomes law. It makes coercively controlling behaviour a crime in NI, bringing us in line with other parts of the UK. This Act became enforceable in February 2022.

The Act is still not fully operational with no Domestic Abuse Protection Orders and Notices enforceable here in NI. This puts NI in breach of the Istanbul Convention, Article 52¹

Article 52 of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (hereinafter the Istanbul Convention) establishes the obligation of states parties to ensure protection to victims of domestic violence, among other measures, by ordering the perpetrator to leave, to stay away from the home of the victim or person at risk, and not to contact the victim or person at risk, on the basis of an emergency barring order (EBO)

The Justice (Sexual Offences & Human Trafficking) Act: which abolishes the 'Rough Sex' defence, makes non-fatal strangulation a specific crime, and makes threatening to publish image-based violence a crime.

The Act is not fully operational and has come through very piecemeal since Royal Assent. Another example of legislation being drafted, implemented but no resources or obligation to follow through, monitor its progress and demand training for all front-line responders in the example of Non-Fatal Strangulation.

The remaining elements of the above legislation are being implemented gradually. It was a big piece of legislation with lots of recommendations from the Gillen Review and will take time, effort, commitment and again resources if it is going to truly work and change the lives of victims and survivors of both domestic and sexual abuse.

Protection from Stalking Act (Northern Ireland) 2022: makes stalking a specific offence in Northern Ireland, as prior to this many perpetrators are usually charged under less severe harassment laws.

¹[ES190177_Premis084117_GBR2574_ConventionIstanbulArticle52WEB A5.pdf \(coe.int\)](#)

Stalking Protection Orders, which were also legislated for within the Act are not operational, yet again another Act that is not fully implemented, with little public awareness due to no resourcing for campaigning and public information.

Domestic Abuse (Safe Leave) Bill: Allows victims of domestic abuse up to 10 days paid leave each year to deal with domestic abuse issues.

There is no commencement date for this legislation and therefore it has stalled and gone no further and WAFNI to date have received no update in relation to a start date.

Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence 2011 (Istanbul Convention), to which the UK government is signatory, defines violence against women as:

“a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women and shall mean all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life”.

Article 3 of the Istanbul Convention states that violence against women is understood as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women. In this context, the convention establishes that all acts of gender-based violence must be addressed whether occurring in public or private life for example, sexual harassment occurring across sectors and industries and in public and private spaces is viewed as a violation and a form of discrimination. The Istanbul Convention identifies that all forms of violence against women must be condemned by states. This means that in defining VAWG, the definition recognises all forms of violence within the definition – experienced by women and girls under 18. This includes domestic violence – all acts of physical, sexual, psychological, or economic violence occurring in the family, domestic unit or between current or former spouses or partners. The definitions within the Istanbul Convention allows for a standardisation of understandings of VAWG across UK nations, which supports alignment across devolved and non-devolved agencies – which is particularly important for funding, commissioning of services and multi-agency working.

We recommend the new VAWG strategy:

- Upholds the established international and human rights-based definitions of VAWG and delivers a comprehensive and integrated approach to tackling all forms of VAWG – including, and not separating, domestic abuse.

- Delivers the ratification of the Istanbul Convention and ensures this gold standard framework for addressing abuse against women and girls should underpin the entire strategy.

Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) is endemic across society (affecting 1 in 3 women in their lifetime) and remains disturbingly high in Northern Ireland. Whilst the UK government has repeatedly expressed their commitment to ending VAWG as a priority, it remains the case that every three days, a woman in the UK is killed² by a man and one in four women experience domestic abuse in their lifetimes.³ Meanwhile in Northern Ireland, our government has not committed to ending VAWG and has not seen it as a priority, as we do not have a VAWG Strategy, no VAWG sector and no specific VAWG funding or resourcing. At the time of writing, NI does not have a functioning government and with no potential sign of return, this is extremely discouraging, as we respond to the Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Women & Girls produced by the Executive Office. How can we move forward with a strategy that has no oversight, no government departmental commitment to delivery of the strategy nor funding and resourcing. The issue of VAWG in NI is no different to other jurisdictions, yet our government has chosen not to prioritise the issue and we continue to see a rise in domestic and sexual abuse figures. Domestic abuse figures are currently at their highest – PSNI records for 2021/2022 saw 33,146 domestic abuse incidents, 21,723 domestic abuse crimes, the highest level recorded since the data series began in 2004/5. There were 17 domestic abuse incidents per 1,000 population and the PSNI received a call about a domestic abuse incident every 16 minutes of every day. Sexual offences increased to 4,049 an increase of 22% in the last year.⁴



² Femicide Census (2020) UK Femicides 2009-2018: <https://www.femicidecensus.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Femicide-Census-10-year-report.pdf>

³ Refuge (undated) The facts: <https://refuge.org.uk/what-is-domestic-abuse/the-facts/>

Office for National Statistics (2023) Sexual offences in England and Wales overview: year ending March 2022

⁴ PSNI Statistics – Bulletin 2020/21

THE REALITY OF DOMESTIC ABUSE IN NORTHERN IRELAND



**16
minutes**

The average time the PSNI receive a call regrading a domestic abuse incident



**33,186
incidents**

The number of domestic abuse incidents recorded in 2021/22, the highest level recorded since 2004/05



**59 crimes
per day**

The average figure the PSNI responds to domestic abuse crimes per day

In Northern Ireland, women and girls are disproportionately affected by violence, abuse, and intimidation, accounting for 78% of all victims of sexual crimes and 68% of victims of domestic abuse.

Overall, 1 in 6 children are estimated to have been subjected to sexual abuse, with girls being three times more likely to experience sexual abuse than boys,⁵ and women are 27 times more likely than men to receive online harassment and abuse⁶. Behind the statistics and data, there are adult and child survivors, and sometimes bereaved families, dealing with the trauma of these harms. Within our work at Women's Aid, we know first-hand of the trauma that families deal with, unresolved, intergenerational trauma that impacts over lifetimes. In Northern Ireland we also have the unique situation of being a post-conflict society and this also needs to be addressed within the strategy.

In Northern Ireland there has not been any adequate investment in services to break the cycle of all forms of VAWG. Our government departments have not looked at any of the issues through a gendered lens and this is important in tackling VAWG because it helps to address the underlying factors that contribute to this issue and ensures that responses consider the specific needs of women.

⁵ NSPCC (2021) Statistics briefing: child sexual abuse <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/media/1710/statistics-briefing-child-sexual-abuse.pdf>

⁶ National Police Chief's Council (2023) Violence against women and girls strategic risk assessment

VAWG is a gendered issue which is deeply rooted in societal inequality. It is violence that is “directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately”.⁷ Women are more likely than men to experience multiple incidents of abuse and different types of abuse (intimate partner violence, sexual assault and stalking) - in particular sexual violence.⁸ Any woman or girl can experience VAWG, however those who face other forms of inequality as a result of their race or ethnicity, wealth or social class, religion, sexuality, gender identity, disability, mental health or age are more likely to experience abuse and less likely to receive support and justice. As VAWG is a cause and consequence of gender inequality and other intersecting inequalities, it is essential that we situate our work to end it alongside wider ambitions to tackle said structural inequalities. For example, policies to tackle economic inequality, poverty, health inequalities and to look at childcare and employment opportunities for our women and girls.

Through this WAFNI response, we hope that the Executive Office truly listens to the voices of women, children and young people, as well as Women’s Aid staff across Northern Ireland and the WAFNI team who have put their heart and soul into this response to truly make a change to the lives of everyone in Northern Ireland. By keeping our women and girls safe we keep everyone safe. Much needs done, but we are up for the challenge, if WAFNI are still here to do that due to current funding crisis.

⁷ CEDAW 1992: para. 6

'IN THE EYE OF THE STORM'

A foreword by the Women's Aid Survivor Engagement Forum

As you know, coercive control is a pattern of behaviours. If these behaviours are considered individually, perhaps they don't look like much. But come into our heads and put it all together, then you will be able to see the full picture.

Anticipating and managing these behaviours being perpetrated is a storm in itself, but now the storm has evolved. Alongside the unknown of what is to come as a result of our perpetrators, we are surrounded by a storm of an entirely different kind – a storm of institutions, and we are at the eye of it.

Just as we, and we alone, can see these individual behaviours of abuse mount to frightening patterns of coercion, we also hold the unique perspectives of attempting to navigate our way through the systems and agencies that profess to be in support of ending VAWG.

The words you will read throughout this consultation response have been spoken and inspired by us, survivors of domestic abuse from across NI. Individually, the stages we are at on our journeys vary and therefore, the insights that we offer into this storm of institutions covers everything from first impressions to overviews of processes that have lasted years too long.

Inconsistencies in how each institution responds to VAWG are clear both between said organisations as well as internally among their staff; leaving the provision that we and our children receive entirely up to luck.

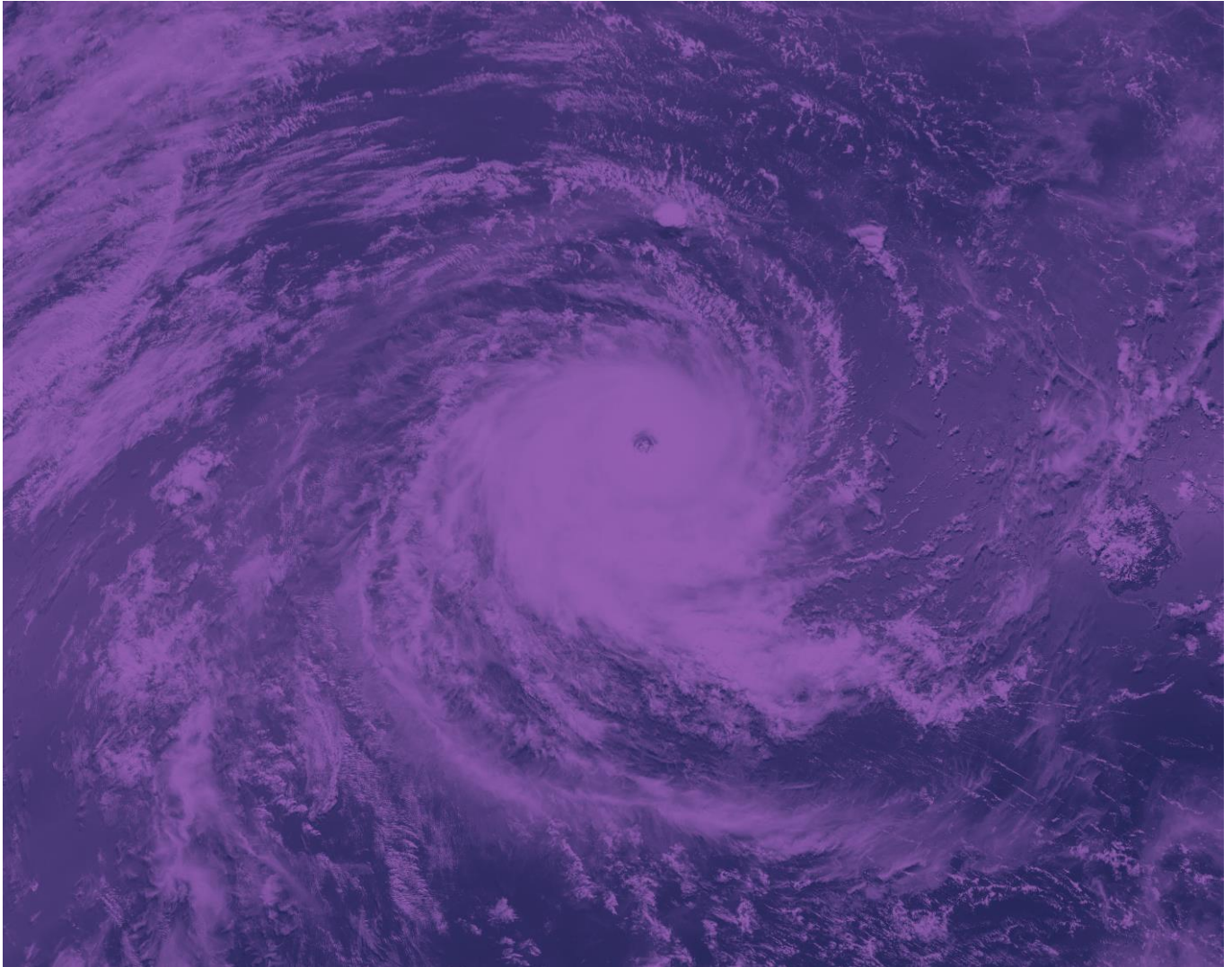
Some of us have had positive experiences, most of us, unfortunately negative.

It is within the positive that we see potential for hope, that the system *can* work fairly, and therefore *should* work fairly and consistently for all.

As we share our knowledge of being at the eye of the storm with you and highlight these inconsistencies; we are in fact the *only* consistency and have perspective over it all. This is what makes our words of lived experience so vital to the implementation of an EAWG strategy for Northern Ireland.

We not only share our past experiences to inform change that will benefit the women and children coming after us, but we also share our present with you, experiences that we live daily, believing that we too can be beneficiaries of this strategy that should aim to calm the winds.

Thank you for hearing our voice.



THE WOMEN'S AID SUBMISSION

10. Do you agree or disagree with our vision below?

“A changed society where women and girls are free from all forms of gender-based violence, abuse and harm including the attitudes, systems and structural inequalities that cause them.”

	Strongly Agree
X	Agree
	Neither Agree nor Disagree
	Disagree
	Strongly Disagree

We asked those who were interviewed for this consultation their ideas and opinions on the proposed vision as it stands, are there any parts they would change about the vision, or anything they would add/remove from the proposed vision.

Overall participants welcomed the tone, meaning and ambition of the proposed vision in ending violence against women & girls in Northern Ireland. The most common first response we receive from participants was that the vision was ‘ambitious’ and ‘clear’ on the goal that’s trying to bring a fundamental change to society – as one woman commented: *“It’s ambitious but needs to be ambitious to tackle this issue.”*

In further discussion on this proposed vision with those whom we interviewed; several key themes began to emerge that participants felt needed to be referenced in our submission to effectively tackle VAWG in Northern Ireland.

Meaningful Action

Whilst many of the women and young people we consulted for this submission felt comfortable with the wording of this vision, many expressed to us repeatedly that these words need to bring about meaningful change in reality and cannot just exist in sentimental terms on a document. Women we interviewed informed us that for this Strategy to effectively work at this fundamental level, government and all of wider society must do all that they can to ensure this proposed vision on creating ‘a changed society where women and girls are free from all forms of gender-based violence, abuse and harm’ comes into being, despite obstacles in the wider context including the political stalemate in Stormont.

Indeed, the phrasing of this vision was also welcome in the context of international human rights legislation and obligations and the inclusion of this wording closely aligned to the government's human rights obligations including obligations from the Istanbul Convention and the recommendations of CEDAW. It's important that as the keystone of any effective strategy, the vision must also encapsulate not only the moral obligation to end gender-based violence, but also must essentially factor in the legal obligation any state of devolved government has within international human rights framework to ensure these obligations fully inform any action that comes from this vision. The overwhelming desire expressed by the women we interviewed can be encapsulated by paraphrasing a slogan used by the Women's Suffragette movement as they fought for women to have the right to vote in the United Kingdom: *"deeds, not words."*

System & Structural Inequalities

Participants expressed to us when exploring this proposed vision that they greatly welcomed the acknowledgement of the system and structural inequalities that facilitate gender-based violence, harm and abuse as many women we interviewed felt that the system facilitated the continuation of their abuse which we will explore throughout our response to each outcome in this submission. Women stressed to us that as highlighted previously about the importance of meaningful action following this vision, that meaningful action must also be taken to tackle these structural inequalities if we truly want to end violence against women and girls in Northern Ireland. A Survivor expressed to us that:

"I like that it does identify clearly that there is a structural problem and I think that is nearly more abusive than sometimes the abuse that you go through because when you try to get out, you sort of get a bit of a kickin' on the way out. So, for me that is nearly a bigger thing than the actual thing that happens that initiates you leaving the house or something."

Another woman simply put her feeling of bringing system change was needed as:

"Women can't win in a system that's so entrenched in misogyny."

Clear Communication

When discussing the different aspects of this vision, the needs for clear communication with the general public kept coming up as participants felt that in order to get the public 'on board' with a Strategy to end violence against women and girls that the messaging around it must be clear and put in 'layman's' terms.

Whilst many felt the Strategy was clear in its wording, some women did express to us that the general public may not be familiar with the meaning behind 'gender-based violence' or 'what misogyny can look like' as examples. Clarification and education on these examples through effective communication will be critical to ensure that attitudes that allow violence against women and girl to flourish are effectively challenged through this Strategy as expressed by one woman who told us:

"As a vision it is pretty broad, I know it is meant to probably be quite snappy, 'this is our vision, this is just so you can see really clearly what we are going to do', but I don't know if in layman's term anybody is going to be like, 'oh yes absolutely, I understand what you want to do!'"

Local Context Lens

Due to the legacy of the Conflict in Northern Ireland and the repercussions of such a history still felt today, women interviewed for this response felt that reflecting the unique situation of Northern Ireland and the legacy of the conflict should be referenced in this Framework. Historic mistrust of the police, perpetrators of violence against women and girls who have known paramilitary connections which is perceived as a form of 'protection' and intimidation of the community if they try to speak out about violence against women and girls were just some examples that came up during our extensive consultation across Northern Ireland which are engrained in the attitudes and cultural 'structures' within communities that make it more difficult for victims and survivors of violence against women and girls to seek help and support. Whilst we can look to our neighbouring jurisdictions for examples around best practice based on the VAWG Strategies, it is important to remember we have our own unique context regarding violence and specifically gender based violence here and it's important we acknowledge it for the major barrier, particularly in working class communities, for what it is and that's the continued influence of paramilitary organizations and tackling the historic mistrust of the Police.

In summary to this question, the women, children and young people who gave their thoughts, feelings and opinions on the vision welcomed the intention around this vision and would like to see these actions create a reality in Northern Ireland where women and girls are able to live from violence.



11. Do you agree or disagree that Outcome 1 below, will enable us to achieve this vision?

Outcome 1 – Changed Attitudes, Behaviours and Social Norms.

“Everyone in society understands what Violence Against Women and girls is, including its root causes, and plays an active role in preventing it.”

X	Strongly Agree
	Agree
	Neither Agree nor Disagree
	Disagree
	Strongly Disagree

During our extensive consultation with women and young people for this submission, the importance of prevention work was repeatedly highlighted to us as the essential component to create long term societal change in creating a society where VAWG is unaccepted, and unacceptable.

When asked for their views on this Outcome, the women, children and young people we consulted for this response felt overwhelming that tackling the societal norms, behaviours and attitudes that allow VAWG to fester is critical to help make Northern Ireland safer for women and girls as this Strategy moves forward.

When asked about their thoughts, feelings and opinion on this Outcome, the women, children and young people expressed the following common responses:

Education on VAWG

Of those we listened to as part of this consultation, many women, children and young people expressed to us that the general public and the wider sectors in our society did not have an acceptable level of understanding of what VAWG is or what gender based violence actually is when it comes to the reality of how many people go about their daily lives here in Northern Ireland despite women making up 50.8% of the official population⁸ according to the last Census.

⁸ [Census 2021 main statistics demography tables – age and sex | Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency \(nisra.gov.uk\)](https://www.nisra.gov.uk/census-2021-main-statistics-demography-tables-age-and-sex)

Women we spoke to conveyed to us that effective education and awareness on what is VAWG is a key component to tackling it, as there are a number of myths and misconceptions about what it actually looks like and how it manifests in different ways everyday here. Including how bias creates more barriers such as victim blaming for women and girls trying to seek support for gender-based violence. One woman simply put it as VAWG is an *“issue is that it is socially acceptable at the moment.”*

Other women we spoke to also shared this sentiment expressing:

“A lot of people don’t know what gender-based violence is so there needs to be a lot of education around that.”

“Structurally [we] need to get rid of the myths around domestic abuse in society including victim blaming.”

“We need an open and healthy society that challenges unconscious bias, particularly with professionals and practitioners who are in close proximity to children and are able to influence them.”

One woman also expressed to us the challenges of trying to tackle entrenched misunderstanding of VAWG stating its *“hard to change core values within individuals”* and prevention work as soon as possible with children and young people is key to bringing change.

Based on the overall sentiment from those we interviewed, clear understanding of what VAWG is and this knowledge being effectively communicated to the public and societal sector partners is essential so that everyone knows what it looks like to be able to call it out.

One example suggested by a woman who took part in our research was that VAWG be part of the curriculum in schools so that these types of behaviours are highlighted from a young age as unacceptable to happen to women and girls, and unacceptable to perpetrate on women and girls. Recent research by Queen’s University Belfast and Ulster University found that half of their respondents disclosed that there were under the age of 11⁹ when they first experienced at least one form of violence.

When raising awareness of what VAWG can look like, it’s also essential to explore this issue through an intersectional lens and to create better understanding about how gender

⁹ [‘It’s just what happens’: girls’ and young women’s views and experiences of violence in Northern Ireland – Queen’s University Belfast \(qub.ac.uk\)](https://www.qub.ac.uk/research/research-projects/its-just-what-happens-girls-and-young-women-s-views-and-experiences-of-violence-in-northern-ireland/)

based violence can manifest for different societal groups as to build confidence of all in society to recognise what Violence against women and girls looks like, how it can manifest differently for different groups in conjunction with other discriminatory behaviours and how we can remove barriers to support. Examples of these intersectional women who can face gender-based violence in different ways and barriers to support include LGBTQIA+ women, women with disabilities, women of colour and women of visible faith to name but some.

Reflecting on this Outcome, many of the women we listened to told us of their personal experiences and reflections of gender-based violence and the different interactions they received when taking about their experiences. Many of those who spoke to us told us of their frustration that women and girls are expected to risk assess and manage their own safety, whilst society is not doing enough to put the onus on the person committing the violence. One woman told us:

“It’s about taking the onus off women & girls to keep themselves safe and putting the blame back on where the blame actually lies. You target the perpetrators and make sure they are properly held to account. What you need to do is to train police up, not that should have to train anyone up, to treat people with respect but it is about making sure perpetrators are held to account and the onus is off women to make sure they are safe. The onus to keep yourself safe as a woman, the onus should be on men to not abuse you in any shape or form.”

Another survivor we engaged with said:

“I know as a woman, I don’t feel safe walking down the street by myself all of the time, how are they going to achieve that when every woman doesn’t feel safe in most places. There needs to be programmes in place to educate men on unacceptable behaviours.”

Women in our society are conditioned from a young age that their personal safety from gender-based violence is part of their personal responsibility. From not walking home alone at night, carrying a personal protection alarm, not wearing too short of a skirt, never leaving their drinks unattended, to telling women they must be the one to leave their home to stop the abuse, the onus is repeatedly put on women over and over again that they are the ones that must change their daily actions to stop themselves from experiencing gender based violence, which in its very nature, is victim blaming.

The focus should **always** be on the perpetrator of gender-based violence, they are the ones who committed the violence, and this Strategy needs to meaningfully address this if we are to change society for the better here in Northern Ireland.

Talking to Men & Boys and Bystander Intervention

As reflected through Police and PPS Statistics, men are most likely to commit several crimes that disproportionately affect women and girls including domestic abuse motivated¹⁰ crimes and sexual offences¹¹.

When talking with participants during our research, overwhelmingly the view was presented about talking to Northern Ireland's men and boys about gender-based violence was essential to effectively tackle these issues. It needs to be done in an open, non-judgement way and this was repeatedly expressed for men and boys to gain a meaningful understanding of VAWG and to become allies to stop VAWG.

Woman conveyed to us on this topic that:

"We shouldn't have to educate girls on how to keep safe, we should be educating boys on respect, respecting themselves and others."

"We need examples to be set in society and bring men and boys into the conversation as well."

"There was a sense that older men felt they could inappropriately touch women without permission i.e., back/bum."

Based on the conversations we had with women, children and young people, overwhelming the emphasis when it came to effective prevention work was that men and boys need to have this conversation in a way that is nonjudgmental and open in order for them to effectively work. They need to be given the tools to effectively support women and have the knowledge to know how to react in certain situations when they hear misogynist behaviours and see misogynist acts. Whilst conducting our research for this submission, Women's Aid came across several campaigns that rolled out in Great Britain over the last couple of years that effectively start the conversation of the roll men and boys can play on tackling gender based male violence including 'Don't Be That Guy'¹²

¹⁰ [Trends in Police Recorded Domestic Abuse Incidents and Crimes Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland 2006/07 to 2021/22 \(psni.police.uk\)](#)

¹¹ [Statistical Bulletin - Cases Involving Sexual Offences 2021-22_0.pdf \(ppsni.gov.uk\)](#)

¹² [Police Scotland launches new advert on ending sexual violence - Police Scotland](#)

'Say Maaate to a Mate'¹³ and '#IsThisOK?'¹⁴. Overwhelming these campaigns have dedicated resources to discussing the specific issue of male violence against women and girls. It is important to learn from what neighbouring jurisdictions have found successful through best practice in this area in engaging men and boys as allies against gender-based violence and then incorporate it in a local context here in Northern Ireland.

The Northern Ireland Context

Of the women we listened to when discussing the topic of "everyone in society understands what Violence Against Women and girls is, including its root causes, and plays an active role in preventing it" some of the women reflected on the specific context we find ourselves in here in Northern Ireland and how women have been treated here in the past, and how women are treated now in the present.

Women expressed to us:

"We need to address the post conflict society that we live in Northern Ireland."

"In NI we have normalised violence and there are still very traditional views."

"In NI there is still a cultural and religious issue around domestic abuse."

"Issues are different in rural communities including culturally and through use of religion and church still an issue."

"Religion is still a big issue also new people coming to NI cultural issues including their leaders and gatekeepers needs to change."

The woman we spoke to reflected that there is still a prevalent socially conservative culture here in Northern Ireland that makes it difficult for some women and girls to feel safe coming forward and reporting violence they have experienced. Indeed, even in our most recent history, the women who experienced violence allowed by the State¹⁵ had trouble when coming forward including shame, being seen as 'sinful' and shunned by the community.

¹³ [Say Maaate to a Mate | London City Hall](#)

¹⁴ [Sexual harassment campaign aimed at male's behaviour launched in Greater Manchester | ITV News Granada](#)

¹⁵ [Investigation Into Mother and Baby Institutions, Magdalene Laundries and Workhouses | PSNI](#)

It's important that any actions resulting from this Strategy such as engaging men and boys, must approach those from socially conservative backgrounds in a way in which is open and allows for conversations and training in a way that explains how best we can all work together in tackling VAWG through different social world views.

We must also address the barriers in the way many women and girls who have experienced violence from a perpetrator with known paramilitary connections and how women and girls fear of speaking out. This can be seen as 'informing' on their community or speaking out against a man who is seen as having a 'standing' in that community. It's important we have frank conversations in our society that despite a world view you may have with a perpetrator, or if he seems like a nice guy in public, perpetrators of VAWG are still perpetrators despite whatever 'respectable' persona they have in a community, and it's important when victims come forward, they are listened to, heard and believed without victim blaming from the community.

In conclusion to this question, the women we spoke to felt that this Outcome was incredibly important in tackling many of the root causes of violence against women and girls here in Northern Ireland, as to tackle the attitudes, behaviours and social norms that allow misogyny and acts of violence against women to flourish.



12. Do you agree or disagree that Outcome 2 below, will enable us to achieve this vision?

Outcome 2 – Healthy, Respectful Relationships.

“Everyone in society is equipped and empowered to enjoy healthy, respectful relationships.

X	Strongly Agree
	Agree
	Neither Agree nor Disagree
	Disagree
	Strongly Disagree

Before we even spoke about specifics of this Outcome you have asked us to consult on, straight away women, children and young people immediately and unprompted started talking about the importance of effective education from a young age so that children and young people understand what healthy relationships look like, what abuse looks like and the importance to knowing about boundaries and that their boundaries should be respected.

The women, children and young people covered the vast age range we have in Northern Ireland, and they shared with us their lived experiences, education and understanding around healthy and respectful relationships.

Overwhelmingly both women in Women’s Aid services, survivors & staff stated that their education on healthy, respectful relationships and recognizing the signs of abuse was fairly non-existent. Participants felt that age appropriate RSE should start as young as possible within the child’s formal education and must be mandatory – unfortunately not every child in Northern Ireland starts of in equal footing in terms of knowledge and support structures around them.

Indeed, the importance of effective RSE in tackling sexual violence here in Northern Ireland was highlighted in the review¹⁶ by Sir John Gillen into the law and procedures in serious sexual offences when one of his key recommendations was the need for extensive public education and schools’ education programmes to help dispel rape myths, a crime that disproportionately effects women & girls.

¹⁶ [gillen-report-recommendations.pdf \(justice-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

The women who have experienced domestic abuse we listened to for this consultation response, whom would be representative of the age spectrum of the adult population here in Northern Ireland, told us they felt they never had any formal or informal education on healthy relationships when they were under the age of 18.

Some of the women we listened to told us:

“When a woman is being emotionally abused a lot of women don’t realise that’s what actually is happening to them. Women need to be aware and educated that this behaviour isn’t right and ‘this is what emotional abuse looks like’ ‘this is coercive control’... see to be honest, my two previous partners, the most recent one was really physically abusive but looking back now the first partner was incredibly emotionally abusive and controlling when I got with him when I was 19. Everything he did to me was abusive, but I never realised it was abuse because he never lifted his hand to me. Looking back with what I know now, the first partner did the most damage to me.”

“A lot of girls don’t know about domestic violence and don’t know it’s not okay in a relationship.”

“I think education needs to start at schools. It’s important to show both boys and girls what healthy relationships look like. I was with my abuser for nearly 40 years and I look back and it wasn’t physical abuse but emotional and mental abuse and I didn’t know what wasn’t abuse.”

Indeed, concerns have long been raised by Women’s Aid and the wider Voluntary Sector about the need for effective and standardised RSE for all children and young people in Northern Ireland in order to ensure they are equipped to understand what healthy and respectful relationships look like, what abuse looks like and to know they will be supported and believed if they come forward to report what’s happened to them. At the time of writing, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has acted¹⁷ on the gap on RSE and mandating the updating of the Curriculum to come into force in 2024 which Women’s Aid greatly welcome.

“Children need to know about boundaries from a young age.”

Children and young people have the right to education under Article 28 of the UNCRC¹⁸ and in Northern Ireland we know our children and young people deserve the best

¹⁷ [Relationship and Sexuality Education \(RSE\) | Department of Education \(education-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/Relationship-and-Sexuality-Education-(RSE)-Department-of-Education)

¹⁸ <https://www.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/unicef-convention-rights-child-uncrc.pdf>

education and that knowledge of what unhealthy relationships look like and what support is there for them will help empower young people to speak up and help stop further abuse and exploitation happening in their lives which is never acceptable and never okay.

“Starting as young as possible is key, especially with more vulnerable children and young people and the resources need to be there.”

The voices of children and young people must be heard by government when tackling such a culturally shifting strategy that an Ending Violence Against Women & Girls Strategy would bring, and later in this submission you will find our specific comprehensive response from children & young people that can be found on page 73.

Open & Non-Judgemental

“They need to teach young people it’s okay to speak up. When you’re in secondary school you’re trying to fit in and make friends and don’t want people to know in case they judge you.”

Throughout this consultation the women we spoke to repeatedly emphasised to us the importance of children and young people being able to learn about healthy and respectful relationships Children and young people need to feel comfortable and safe to discuss these issues in a non-judgmental way, open for discussion and a space safe.

Children and young people in the 21st Century have never had more access to information or been more connected to one another due to the internet and whilst this availability of information can be of a benefit to many, the unregulated nature of online content means that children and young people are exposed to many different influences and bias sources without having independent learning and discussion around these. For example, the influence on young men by figures such as Andrew Tate, whom many young men see as a ‘successful’ role model and promotes misogyny as a norm to those young people who watch him. He also has a long list of accusations of domestic and sexual abuse against him and is currently being prosecuted for human trafficking and sexual exploitation offences against women,¹⁹ but is still viewed as an inspirational figure by some young men. Young people are consuming content from influencers like Andrew Tate both directly and indirectly through popular culture, so it’s important that young people know they can get independent information on what a healthy relationship looks like from a trusted

¹⁹ [Who is Andrew Tate? The self-proclaimed misogynist influencer - BBC News](#)

source like their school, like their local youth club, etc and as a society we cannot shy away from the fact unhealthy behaviours thrive if we fail to address them directly.

Several women we listened to for this consultation highlighted to us the influence of popular television programmes like *'Love Island'* and *'Below Deck Down Under'* that have started conversations amongst young people about gaslighting²⁰, coercive control and sexual assault²¹ and it's important they have the space to have those conversations about unhealthy behaviours without feeling judged and being able to be open about them to help tackle gender-based violence.

BAME Communities

During this consultation we spoke to many women from BAME Communities here in Northern Ireland to ensure their thoughts and experiences were weaved throughout this submission. Women told us that in some BAME communities here that there are a number of cultural barriers when trying to access support and speak out about VAWG and acts of gender-based violence.

One woman told us:

"A lot of girls don't know about domestic violence and don't know it's not okay in a relationship."

The women we listened to told us that they would greatly welcome effective education around healthy respectful relationships from the very beginning of a child's school career and for more educational resources to be made available in different languages that parents/guardians could access online with support information which would be helpful to women and girls experiencing abuse.

One woman from a BAME background told us about her experience;

"My daughter was in Primary 7 and she told her school what happened to me after the Police attended the school for an Assembly and told them about feeling safe and the school really helped us."

²⁰ [Love Island has a gaslighting problem – yet again | Love Island | The Guardian](#)

²¹ [Below Deck Down Under: Jason Chambers addresses sexual misconduct row - BBC News](#)

Women also told us that education and training sessions on healthy and respectful relationships coming from women from that particular community would be incredibly beneficial, as this trainer would have a good cultural understanding around barriers to support and some women feeling more comfortable if the trainer was a woman who had a greater understanding of their culture from their background.

When we asked the women what ways they would find it effective to access information on support, they said that many BAME women living here share information and information graphics via group chats they are in with other women on apps like Telegram, WhatsApp and Meta Messenger. Whilst they felt physical leaflets had a place, they said online was the easiest and most effective way for them to share resources with other women from their community and they felt this should be highlighted in this response.

Equity in Information – ‘Breaking the Cycle’

When discussing all of society being able to learn and know what healthy and respectful relationships look like to tackle violence against women and girls, it's essential that we acknowledge that not everyone in society comes from an environment where healthy relationships are their norm or their personal experience. Whilst not all children and young people are in the formal education system here, the vast majority are, and schools are often seen as 'safe' spaces for them if they come from a household in which abuse is common place. Some of those we listened to for this response reflected on their personal experience of being in this exact situation:

"I stopped going to school because of what was going on for me at home, but no one cared, and no one asked why I didn't come back."

"They need to teach young people it's okay to speak up. When you're in secondary school you're trying to fit in and make friends and don't want people to know in case they judge you."

"School never asked what was going on for me, they need to recognise signs and symptoms."

Those we consulted with felt that a consistent approach to the teaching of RSE needs to be consistent for all children and young people right across Northern Ireland as to not do so will mean learning about healthy and respectful relationships will become a postcode lottery and not create the societal change this strategy has in its proposed vision and also let those who are suffering from abuse that what their experiencing is never okay.

Resourcing

Repeatedly throughout our research, women in Women's Aid services and Women's Aid staff brought up the issue of the importance of resourcing for preventative education programmes, for them to be effective and help to truly tackle VAWG in Northern Ireland. They stressed that there is a need for dedicated, specialist resourcing in preventative education programmes and the follow up of specialist support needed following this education which is essential for those who come forward to disclose what happened to them. For the Outcome of this proposed Strategic framework to work we need 'buy in' from government with the dedication to ensure specialist support services are effectively resourced to meet the needs of those in our society who experience all forms of violence. We cannot educate our society on healthy and respectful relationships without ensuring that specialist support services have the adequate resourcing and capacity to support those who come forward as demand increases long term.

One Women's Aid Staff member suggested how invaluable a practitioner on their team whose role is specifically to support young women under the age of 25 who have experienced VAWG would be incredibly beneficial to young women in their support and rebuilding their lives as an example.

Education For All of Society

"Not just schools and young people, they should target older women too through church groups, Women's Centres, luncheon clubs, etc."

It's important when talking about "everyone in society is equipped and empowered to enjoy healthy, respectful relationships" that we not just think of children and young people but also those in our society in older age groups who are also or have experienced gender-based violence. Older women we listened to as part of this consultation who have experienced domestic abuse highlighted to us about the generational taboo about speaking about violence they've experienced, especially within intimate partner relationships, and how once marriage was seen as you 'made your bed' as far as those around them were concerned. They highlighted to us having education programmes focused on places women go to who are older to ensure they know that the violence they have experienced is no longer accepted in society and that help is there.

They also in contrast told us how it's important to talk to older men about acceptable behaviours and respectful relationships and that campaigns targeting men tend to focus

on the actions of young men but should also focus on older men in our society too. They gave examples of older men being sexually inappropriate to them when they were young women and even teenagers and that a zero-tolerance message must be sent out to older men who grew up where misogyny and acts of VAWG were seen as socially acceptable.

As stated earlier in our submission to this question, overwhelming those we consulted with for this response repeatedly emphasised the importance of everyone in society knowing what healthy and respectful relationships look like and how that will help create a culture in which VAWG is unaccepted and unacceptable.

To achieve this goal, we need education and resourcing from all sections of society because these issues affect all women and girls, not just one group or a certain kind of person.



13. Do you agree or disagree that Outcome 3 below, will enable us to achieve this vision?

Outcome 3 – Women and Girls Are Safe and Feel Safe Everywhere.

“Organisations and institutions across government and society embed the prevention of violence against women and girls in all that they do so that women and girls are safe and feel safe everywhere.”

X	Strongly Agree
	Agree
	Neither Agree nor Disagree
	Disagree
	Strongly Disagree

During our internal consultation process the women we spoke to had a lot of different thoughts and feelings when it came to the phrase ‘women and girls are safe and feel safe everywhere’ and how we as a society embed prevention of violence against women and girls into all aspects of our society.

Women who spoke to us from Women’s Aid Services told us of their experiences of reaching out and seeking support for the abuse they experienced and the various barriers they came across when trying to get themselves in a safe place and feeling safe in our society. Many women who had experienced abuse told us that whilst they came forward to get help and be safe from abuse, they felt many different organisations and institutions they engaged with do not have insight into VAWG, nor did they meaningfully empathise with the experiences of women and girls who are victims of violence. The different groups of women who spoke to us would routinely bring up the same issues despite coming from different places across NI, and they wanted us to stress to you that they did not feel supported by state organisations and institutions, didn’t feel safe and felt there was no trauma informed understanding from said institution.

Social Services

Women who are victims and survivors of domestic abuse often face many barriers and worries about coming forward to report what has or is happening to them. For women with children, their major fear after trying to leave their perpetrator is their children being taken away from them despite them being victims of domestic violence and abuse.

Woman after woman who spoke to us repeatedly stressed how the threat of Social Services being used by the perpetrator to have her children removed from their care and given to the perpetrator despite reported domestic abuse with *“the children being used a pawns.”*

One woman shared with us:

“When people say ‘why don’t you just leave?’ people understand the mental and emotional abuse side of it...and it’s used against you by people like social services. Not only are you afraid of him (the perpetrator) you’re afraid of Social Services, you’re afraid of the Police... all of that then puts you under so much pressure and you’re trying to keep your kids and stay together. You’re trying to mentally hold yourself together with all of this at play and it’s not a good situation. People like Social Services really need to be more aware of the effects of domestic violence on women and how effectively deal with that situation and with women in that situation and not go against them... Men will use Social Services to abuse women by threatening women with Social Services.”

The woman gave us numerous examples of how Social Services explicitly told them as victims of domestic abuse that they were failing to ‘protect their children’ from the risk posed by the perpetrator. In some cases, Social Services did in fact remove their children from their custody due to the domestic abuse in the household where the mother was the victim of domestic abuse and (overwhelming the father to those who spoke to us) being given full or partial custody despite the violence being known to Social Services. Several women explicitly expressed to us their regret coming forward about their abuse because it resulted in them losing custody of their children despite being victims of the violence.

As one woman stated:

“A lot of women feel like Social Services are setting up women to fail. They put the fear of God in a lot of women.”

Women across NI explicitly stressed that Social Services not understanding the barriers that women and girls face when they are living with domestic abuse day and daily and it is a primary reason why more women with children don’t come forward to seek support. Social Services need to embed the prevention of VAWG into their ethos and best practice to truly support victims and survivors of gender-based violence. They need to be able to identify domestic abuse and provide timely, specialist interventions in place

for the family in a non-judgmental way, rather than accusing mothers of a “failure to protect” their children.

One woman told us during our research:

“There needs to be messaging to key players like Social Services around domestic abuse cases that the child being taken into care should be avoided as much as possible and that given the circumstances where mum was in an abusive relationship that the child being taken away is not in the best interests of the child.”

Family Courts - The Extension of Violence

International legal Human Rights frameworks discuss child contact to varying degrees. Most legal mechanisms place the best interests of the child as paramount. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in article 18 identifies that state Parties shall use their best efforts to ensure recognition of the principle that both parents have common responsibilities for the upbringing and development of the child. Parents or legal guardians, have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of the child. The best interests of the child will be their basic concern.

The UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women shares this view, noting in article 16 that in all matters relating to children, ‘the interests of the children shall be paramount’. CEDAW’s General Recommendation No. 35 echoes this, noting ‘The rights or claims of perpetrators or alleged perpetrators during and after judicial proceedings, including with respect to ... child custody, access, contact and visitation, should be determined in the light of women’s and children’s human rights to life and physical, sexual and psychological integrity and guided by the principle of the best interests of the child’.

The Istanbul Convention, which the UK has signed but not yet ratified, has the most explicit guidance regarding issues of child contact and domestic abuse. Article 31 of the Convention States:

“Custody, visitation rights and safety

Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to ensure that, in the determination of custody and visitation rights of children, incidents of violence covered by the scope of this Convention are taken into account.

Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to ensure that the exercise of any visitation or custody rights does not jeopardise the rights and safety of the victim or children.”

Child Custody Provisions within Domestic Legislation

WAFNI believes that legislation already exists within our jurisdiction to deal with child contact and the withholding of visitation. The Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 is the overarching legislation governing the care of children in Northern Ireland, with Part III of the legislation outlining orders with respect to children in family proceedings. This legislation led to the publishing of Co-operating to Safeguard Children (2003, revised March 2016 and refreshed August 2017), policy guidance for child protection. Various other legislative provisions and policies already exist to support and safeguard children. The Children's Services Co-Operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 aims to improve cooperation amongst departments and agencies and places a duty on children's authorities as defined by the act to cooperate to deliver services aimed at improving the wellbeing of children and young people. The Act required the NI Executive to develop and deliver a strategy to improve the wellbeing of children and young people in NI. This strategy, The Children and Young People's Strategy 2019-2029 sets out eight parameters of wellbeing. Domestic abuse cuts across of all these and in particular "living in safety and with stability". The Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland Procedures Manual sets out clear direction in relation to safeguarding children and young people. Other government strategies, include the new Family and Parenting Support Strategy, which will seek to build on the strengths of the existing 'Families Matter' strategy and to respond to the Draft Programme for Government commitment to give every child the best start in life. This is being developed by the Department of Health, with the support of other Government Departments.

We believe contact should never be presumed to be in the best interests of the child. Over the years we have witnessed the physical and emotional distress of children before, during and after contact visits with many demonstrating behaviours such as bed-wetting, crying and other stress symptoms.

Many children and young people have told us they do not want to have contact and do not feel safe attending contact visits but have been forced to do so though through court proceedings.

While we agree children have a right to preserve family relations and maintain direct contact with both parents, we also believe they have a right not to and their voices need to be heard in all court proceedings. We strongly believe that parental alienation is not a concept best placed to solve these contact issues, given its proven monopolisation by perpetrators of abuse.

We strongly oppose the use of the term parental alienation in family court proceedings and believe resources would be better utilised. We support safe contact for both parents

where it is in the best interests of the child, but strongly believe that the concept of parental alienation obscures this.

The family courts continue to operate in isolation, being resolutely resistant to changes that would protect women and children from ongoing abuse. The area of private children law has been a particular focus for criticism, but the problems occur across the entire system. They are, perhaps, more acute in private children law, where women who expect the court to want to protect their children from abuse are horrified to find this is often not the case.

The Harm Report²² published by the Ministry of Justice in June 2020 concluded that the Family Court was making orders that place victims of domestic abuse and their children at risk of harm through unsafe contact. There were four key barriers identified and wide-ranging recommendations.

The key barriers are:

- The court's pro-contact culture.
- The adversarial nature of the court system.
- Resource limitations affecting all aspects of private law proceedings.
- The lack of coordination with other courts and organisations dealing with domestic abuse.

We are aware that the Harm Report was not specific to NI, but its messages are something we need to take into account.

When discussing this Outcome and the need for society to embed prevention of violence against women and girls, another constantly recurring area that kept coming up wherever we went in Northern Ireland is the Family Court System.

Overwhelming women told us their harrowing experiences that can be encapsulated by this sentiment: *"Family Courts are used as an extension of the abuse."*

Women's Aid in Northern Ireland, and indeed our sister organisation in England, Scotland & Wales, have long called for a full review of the Family Courts and overlap with the Criminal Justice Courts when it comes to Child Custody arrangements. Every year in Northern Ireland, Women's Aid support thousands of women who have consistently and repeatedly told us over many years that their perpetrator is using the Family Courts to continue their abuse by constantly bringing the woman to Court over child custody arrangements, despite these perpetrators often having criminal convictions due to their

²² [Assessing risk of harm to children and parents in private law children cases - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/86422/assessing_risk_of_harm_to_children_and_parents_in_private_law_children_cases.pdf)

abuse of their child's mother, especially when these women also have protection orders against the perpetrator.

Some women told us their experiences of the Family Court System:

"A judge told my barrister: "I am sick of hearing about domestic violence."

"I went to the police about domestic abuse and after this I had to personally take my children to him at his house by Court Order."

"Women are being brought to (Family) Court time and time again by the Perpetrator."

"Women are being told to be quiet about their abuse by their legal representation in Family Court."

"Mental ill-health because of the abuse is being used against women."

For women who have experienced gender based violence, the lack of understanding around acts of violence like domestic abuse and stalking and how that can manifest in Family Court is absolutely terrifying to these women, as this Court is being used by the Perpetrator as a means of control over mothers who are trying to break free from abuse but are being repeatedly brought back to Court over and over again, and being told by their legal representation not to disclose their abuse as it can make the situation 'messy.'

For victims and survivors of VAWG, the Family Court must review and embed trauma informed best practices in all that they do, or this Strategy will not create a society in which these women feel safe coming forward, nor feel safe anywhere if they are forced to engage with their perpetrator via Court Order and this needs to be addressed urgently.

Some staff members also referred to the lack of Re: L Hearings in relation to contact cases where there is domestic abuse. We ask WHY would a court not want to know about a child who could potentially be at risk from a perpetrator of abuse?

Fact Finding Hearings (Re L Hearings)

When there is a dispute and allegations of domestic violence/abuse the solicitor / court may view it necessary to hold a fact-finding hearing. Sometimes these hearings are described as Re L Hearings. Re L is a case in law {Re L (A Child) (Contact: Domestic Violence) [2001] Fam 260}, which held that courts should consider the nature and effect of alleged violence at the earliest opportunity when determining contact arrangements.

The fact-finding hearing will determine if violence/abuse occurred and will include a risk assessment to ascertain further risks of harm before making consent orders for contact. In effect, this will help ensure that safety is the paramount consideration when determining whether contact is in the child's best interest. It is important that the possibility of a fact-

*finding hearing is considered by the victim and their legal representative at the initial stage of proceedings.*²³

Further recommendations within Family Court

Introduce legislation that psychologists appointed to assess adults or children in the family court must be regulated by the Health and Care Professions Council.

Prohibit the use of parental alienation or related pseudo-concepts in family law cases and the use of so-called experts in parental alienation and related pseudo-concepts, in line with recommendations by the UN Special Rapporteur on VAWG.

Every survivor of domestic abuse in the family courts should have access to specialist court support.

The Importance of 'Buy In' from Wider Society

Women we listened to during our internal consultation also talked to us about what would make women and girls feel safer in all parts of society and how it relates to their day to day lives. Women talked about the importance of feeling safe in the workplace and how workplace sexual harassment and disclosures of abuse for example must be taken seriously for women and girls to feel safe. Whilst there are several laws in place to help protect women in the workplace, it's important that employers have the right specialist training and strong 'Buy In' to help tackle gender-based violence in the workplace and know how to appropriately deal with situations when disclosures are made.

Another suggestion from a focus group was the importance of specialised VAWG training for front line responders and those individuals throughout society who would be more likely to get a disclosure of an act of gender-based violence like sexual harassment/assault or abuse, so they would know how to appropriately react in that situation. Suggestions for who those first responders might be included Paramedics, Emergency Call Handlers, and Translators for those women whom English isn't their preferred language so that they can understand how to best refer women and girls to support.

They also stressed the importance of a 'zero tolerance' approach to VAWG being embedded across all aspects of our society. This must include anyone that a woman may seek help or support from. Enhanced security checks via Access NI must be standard to ensure women are not being left vulnerable by someone they may seek help from, i.e., security staff who may only have got a basic security check on in which Civil Orders such

²³ [Families experiencing Domestic Violence \(belfastdvp.co.uk\)](https://www.belfastdvp.co.uk)

as Non-Molestation Orders do not show up and this would be a major concern for anyone supporting vulnerable women and girls.

In summary to this Outcome, those we consulted with for this response said Yes, they do agree that this Outcome if implemented effectively would make a meaningful contribution to ending VAWG in NI. They did, however, repeatedly stress the barriers that are currently in place in institutions and organisations which have not embedded the prevention of VAWG into their everyday practices. Victims and survivors explicitly told us that institutions such as Social Services and the Family Court need to fully review their practices, because at the moment, they are furthering the harm caused to women and girls through actions that penalise women for coming forward and trying to break free from the cycle of abuse because of the actions of their perpetrator. This act in itself is victim blaming to women and girls who have experienced violence. We need to review and reevaluate how we create a society in which victims and survivors are supported, not punished.



14. Do you agree or disagree that Outcome 4 below, will enable us to achieve this vision?

Outcome 4 – Quality Frontline Services, Protection, and Provision for Victims and Survivors of Violence Against Women and Girls.

“Provision of high-quality services for women and girls who are victims and survivors of violence against women and girls.”

X	Strongly Agree
	Agree
	Neither Agree nor Disagree
	Disagree
	Strongly Disagree

As the largest specialist support service for women affected by domestic abuse in Northern Ireland, Women’s Aid understands the essential need for the prioritisation of high-quality specialist services, protections, and provisions which are timely and effective to help support victims and survivors of VAWG. Every year Women’s Aid support thousands of women and their children through emergency accommodation and floating support services in their community and demand for our services is increasing year upon year, despite no meaningful uplift in the funding to Women’s Aid Services from the Department for Communities through the Northern Ireland Housing Executive ‘Supporting People’ fund.

In 2021/22, Women’s Aid in Northern Ireland supported 543 women in our refuges, 7,444 women through floating support services and 242 women who were pregnant²⁴ that reflects the vast amount of work Women’s Aid do to help support women who’ve experienced domestic abuse and we will continue to do so until VAWG is eliminated in our society. The demand for Women’s Aid Services has only increased with the strengthening of legislation over recent years that disproportionately affect women & girls including Coercive Control, Stalking, Non-Fatal Strangulation, and the Safe Leave Bill.

Whilst Women’s Aid are committed to providing specialist support for women, children and young people throughout NI, our specialist support services are constantly trying to manage demand. With the limited resources we have It will be a challenge moving forward as more women and girls reach out to us for support when this Strategy is

²⁴ [WAFNI Annual Report 21-22 \(womensaidni.org\)](https://www.womensaidni.org)

implemented and as knowledge of recent legislation changes embeds itself in the public's consciousness.

In November 2022, Women's Aid launched a campaign called '*Time is Ticking*' to raise awareness of the lack of adequate funding²⁵ to meet the demands on Women's Aid Services here in NI. Unfortunately, since we launched this campaign in 2022, the situation has only worsened, and Women's Aid services are battling to try to find sustainable funding sources to ensure our services continue to help support as many women, children and young people as possible who've experienced domestic abuse.

When consulting with Women's Aid Support Staff for their views on the services they run daily, the issue of long-term funding repeatedly was raised as a major factor of concern. Women's Aid staff told us:

"Funding is key and it has to be we aren't chasing funding all of the time. The funding has to be guaranteed and it has to be guaranteed in some form of legislation and not providers having to worry the funding is going to be cut."

"If the rest of the UK nations have serious funding attached to their VAWG Strategies we need to do the same, Northern Ireland shouldn't be any different."

"We can't keep doing 'jigsaw' funding and this is opportunity to provide specific designated funding...where's the specific funding for children especially with prevented work we do?"

"Unless they align meaningful resources to this Strategy, and I'm taking about our community-based children's workers here providing a service for young girls coming in, but in line with this Strategy, how can we provide this service for girls when we've no designated funding for our Childrens Services Teams? And that's right across Women's Aid Northern Ireland for Children's Services. If they are saying well-funded, well give us the funding in the first place."

"Our core funding really comes from Housing (Supporting People Fund) but all these other important specialised pieces of work receive no core funding or it's only for a year as a pilot. Pilots upon Pilots upon Pilots."

²⁵ [16 Days of Action x Women's Aid - Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland \(womensaidni.org\)](https://www.womensaidni.org/)

Every interview and focus group we conducted with Women's Aid Staff for this submission repeatedly raised the issue of providing quality frontline services with their very limited resources. Issues including Cost of Living Crisis and the budgetary ramifications of Northern Ireland Executive, means that Women's Aid cannot be expected to maintain their service levels without the implementation of long-term funding for these much-needed specialist services for women and their children who are experiencing gender-based violence. Without these services women and girls will suffer and will not have the quality specialist support they need to live free and safely here in Northern Ireland. Those we spoke to overwhelmingly expressed that we must convey through this response the need for long-term, ring-fenced funding for specialist, dedicated support services for women & girls if this Strategy is to meaningfully carry out its proposed vision.

Long Term Resourcing Brings Long Term Change

When discussing the issues of resourcing for frontline Specialist Services like Women's Aid, we asked participants what they felt would make a difference to women and girls that they presently don't have the resources for. Several Women's Aid Staff across NI spoke of the further specialist support for women in their Services to help them around substance abuse and mental health issues, much of which were results of the trauma they've endured due to the abuse inflicted upon them.

The sector needs to be provided with long term funding. The sector continues to face funding challenges through the continued fragmented funding. This continues to result, all too often, in services providing part of their work with no dedicated funding and having the burden of sourcing funding from multiple funders.

The impact of VAWG on the mental health of survivors can be devastating, and there is a lack of consistent mental health care for survivors and their children. In 2023, data analysis showed that women who experience intimate partner violence (IPV) are three times more likely to have made a suicide attempt in the past year, compared to women who have not. Furthermore, sexual IPV is ten times more common in women than men and is an IPV type particularly associated with self-harm and suicidality.

In 2022, Women's Aid's England #DeserveToBeHeard campaign²⁶ sought to understand what survivors value when it comes to mental health support, and what an effective response to domestic abuse looks like. The seven pillars of suitable mental health support developed by Women's Aid are:

²⁶ [#DeserveToBeHeard - Women's Aid \(womensaid.org.uk\)](https://www.womensaid.org.uk/campaigns/#DeserveToBeHeard)

1. An empathetic and understanding response;
2. Expertise on the dynamics and impact of domestic abuse;
3. A space to talk;
4. Support for children and young people;
5. Practical support;
6. Women-only spaces, including support led by and for marginalised groups of women; and
7. Timely and long-term support.

One Women's Aid Colleague gave this example:

“Having specific Women's Aid workers working with certain parts of health, or addiction services or homelessness would really make a difference, but would be hit and miss because they are often only funded for a year and that's not enough time to make an impact.”

Indeed, there are specific roles like this within Women's Aid providing key interlinking work within Sectors including Health & Social Care and the Police that are making a massive difference to women and girls effected by violence. Armagh Down Women's Aid in collaboration with The Southern Health Care Trust have a Domestic Abuse Safety and Support Advisor (DASS) Pilot within Craigavon Hospital whose role is to:

- Pilot a Domestic Abuse Safety and Support Advisor (DASS) to provide advocacy and intervention to women aged 16+.
- Provide education and training for Maternity and ED Staff (CAH) on DASS Service and Domestic Abuse
- Create referral pathways for women at risk of Domestic Abuse in Emergency Department (ED) and Maternity Services
- Create a referral pathway between DASS/ Hospital Social work / Adult Safeguarding Team / Community Teams in respect of recording systems and sharing of information.

When consulting with Staff and women in this area about the effectiveness of this role, all participants felt that this role has been incredibly beneficial both to Trust Staff and Women seeking support following abuse in terms of knowledge and understanding the pathways to support as a key 'lynch pin' post. The strategically valuable Post, however, remains a pilot, and long-term funding has not been secured despite the overwhelming positive feedback received since it's been put in place.

In Belfast & Lisburn Women's Aid, there is a specific Criminal Justice Worker based in the courts that works directly with women throughout the court process, providing support. The funder of this Criminal Justice Worker post is the United States State Department, which, again highlights the lack of investment in essential posts throughout NI to tackled domestic abuse. This post should be funded through Department for Justice through our Domestic & Sexual Abuse Strategy and be a key indicator of good practice within the current action plans.

“Our Criminal Justice Worker post was only a year’s funding, and we are scrambling trying to find money for that to continue as the success rate is so high on it. More things like that are needed. When you get posts that really work as well and you go to government to try to get more funding, they fire in more criteria and more specifications that dilute the nature of the role and reducing the impact of the work as long as it’s seen to be all things to all people and it can’t be when it’s trying to specifically support women & girls... If we can get funders to understand that and get the funding, were it directly needs to go it will make a difference.”

These examples highlight specialised ‘lynch pin’ roles that have the ability to be life changing and lifesaving when trying to tackle VAWG here in NI as they provide the vital link to those who need specialist support and interventions and help make it easier for victims and survivors to know where to go and feel more confident coming forward for help after experiencing violence.

Victim Support runs the SOLAS project for all victims of sexual abuse engaged in the criminal justice system. This pilot project is a government initiative funded by the Department of Justice NI. It is aimed at tackling sexual violence, supporting victims of serious sexual offences by providing legal advice in relation to their Article 8 rights and previous sexual history, and improving their experiences of the Criminal Justice system in Northern Ireland. Whilst Women's Aid fully support this project why can victims of domestic abuse not have a similar project to help them through court. There should not be a hierarchy of victims!

Housing Provision for Victims & Survivors of VAWG

VAWG is a human rights issue which often directly impacts the right to a safe and stable home²⁷. For survivors of VAWG, home is often the most dangerous place to be, and domestic abuse continues to be the leading cause of homelessness amongst women.

²⁷ Walker, S-J. and Hester, M. for the Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance. (2019) Policy Evidence Summary 4: Justice, housing and domestic abuse, the experiences of homeowners and private renters. Available online

Housing insecurity and uncertainty is the primary barrier for women attempting to leave their abuser(s).²⁸

Housing is a major concern for many women who are thinking of leaving or who have left abusive relationships. Within the United Kingdom, domestic abuse is known to be a contributing factor to homelessness. A study by St Mungo's Sheltered Lives found that, of their female clients, 50% had experienced domestic abuse, compared to 5% of their male clients²⁹. Further connections between homelessness and domestic abuse can be identified when one considers the mental health implications of domestic abuse and the strong causal effects between homeless and mental illness³⁰. Deciding to leave an abusive relationship is difficult enough for victims, without being faced with the possibility of making yourself and your children homeless as a result. In some cases, it can be the difference between a woman ending an abusive relationship or staying.

Our current Domestic Abuse & Civil Proceedings Act had an opportunity to address this but omits mention of housing. Women's Aid would argue that this ignores a fundamental issue faced by victims of domestic abuse. It is also an issue with gendered implications when we consider women's differential access to housing as a result of their disadvantaged position within the labour market³¹. Similar legislation in England and Wales very clearly mentions housing and the government's duty pertaining to victims of domestic abuse. We would be remiss not to insist on similar protections within our own legislation. This is certainly a change that is needed within the Domestic & Sexual Abuse Strategy for NI, but we also need the Executive Office to understand the issue of housing and how interlinked it is to domestic abuse and homelessness. We need ringfenced funding for refuge and secure tenancies for social housing. We accept that NI is a different jurisdiction with different laws, however, it should not be a postcode lottery with regard to safety and protection.

As referenced earlier in this submission, in the financial year 2021/2022, 543 women and 397 children stayed in a Women's Aid refuge in Northern Ireland. The demand for our emergency refuge accommodation is always high as women try to break free from the violence being perpetrated on them and our refuges are often operating at full capacity as a result.

The major issue of lack of housing in Northern Ireland is nothing new here, but when talking about supporting women who've been victims of violence it's another major barrier to them rebuilding their lives and creating a new life free from gender-based violence,

²⁸ DAHA (2021) Facts and Statistics. Available online.

²⁹ Gentoo study

³⁰ <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.911.4996&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

³¹ <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.911.4996&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

especially when the woman is trying to create a safe environment for her children. When discussing the need for quality frontline services, protections and provisions, the issue of housing was constantly mentioned by those we listened to.

In this increasing economically hostile environment we find ourselves in as a society, it's never been more important that we support women and girls who've been victims of abuse and are committed to helping them rebuild their lives.

Many women told us trying to access affordable housing was a major barrier for women who've experienced domestic abuse, many of whom are often prevented from accessing their finances by their perpetrators and may have bad Credit Scores as a result of economic abuse.

Those we listened to told us:

“There needs to be prioritising on social housing for victims of domestic abuse.”

“The Housing Crisis is getting worse and women can't afford them and some are giving up their jobs in order to stay in social housing.”

The abuse many of these women have experienced was horrendous, traumatising and the exact issue this Strategy is trying to stop from happening long term here in NI. These women deserve to feel safe and to be able to rebuild their lives, but many cannot do so because of the major barriers such as lack of social housing as a priority for victims and survivors that means they are stuck in 'limbo' as a result of trying to break free from the violence perpetrated on them. We are calling for investment and a need to prioritise housing provision for victims and survivors of gender-based violence so that they can have the stability needed to help rebuild their lives and live safely.

We also call for this prioritisation for women who live here but weren't born in NI and have experienced VAWG. There is a need for the review of the point system within the NIHE for all victims of domestic abuse in relation to intimidation points. We welcome the research that has been recently commissioned by NIHE to investigate this issue.

Women with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) often experience additional barriers as they do not have the same entitlements to benefits and amenities, even when they experienced horrific violence at the hands of a perpetrator. Women's Aid access a specific pot of funding made available to us through the Home Office to help cover the cost of supporting a woman in refuge with NRPF, however this pot is limited and often local

Women's Aid Services swallow the cost to ensure a particular woman is safe and supported. Long term however, these women often aren't entitled to social housing due to their immigration status and can wait years before their immigration status is resolved and they can finally access social housing. However, for women with NRPF who are victims of abuse, this wait sees them stuck in an never ending 'limbo' situation in which they cannot move on with their lives.

One woman we spoke to shared with us her incredibly difficult experience. She is not from the British Isles or an EU Country. She met her husband and then moved here to NI to be with him, and they had a child together. He was abusive, and after many years of abuse she came forward to report what had been happening and sought specialist support from Women's Aid.

She has the right to work in the United Kingdom but doesn't have the right to access Social Housing and doesn't earn enough to be able to privately rent an apartment on her own presently. She also doesn't want to leave Northern Ireland as this is her daughter's home and she is an UK National. She has been in refuge with her daughter for over a year and finds it incredibly difficult to women come in and move on when she is stuck in a housing 'limbo' with her pre-teen child and just wants to be able to create a safe life for her child. She is not entitled to housing benefit due to her insecure immigration status despite being a recognised victim of violence. She emotionally told us:

"I did not come to the country to be abused, and now I'm stuck."

Support for Women with Insecure Immigration Status

As part of this consultation, we listened to the experiences of women who have been victims of Human Trafficking supported by our colleagues at Belfast & Lisburn Women's Aid, who manage the Human Trafficking Project funded through the Department of Justice. The women engaged in our services have been victims of abuse, including sexual abuse and exploitation, domestic servitude and domestic abuse who have insecure immigration status.

Some of the woman we listened to are currently being housed in hotels by the Home Office for those with Asylum Seeker Status. The woman we spoke to living in these hotels are all recognized victims of Human Trafficking and the abuse they've experienced was horrific and deeply traumatizing. These women require specialised support following this trauma and abuse. Our colleagues who work with them are specialised experts and tailor support to the individual women's needs.

When listening to the experiences of these women for this consultation, they told us of the difficult conditions they experience living in these hotels and as victims and survivors of gender-based violence, they have major concerns about the conditions for those women and girls living there who are incredibly traumatised, vulnerable, and alone. They highlighted several issues to us including that they don't feel safe with hotel staff as there have been several incidents of hotel rooms being searched and personal items going missing from their rooms. There are no support workers for many traumatised women and hotel staff do not have any understanding what these women have been through and are certainly not trauma informed.

One woman told us that:

"It came to light one of the night security men was going up the rooms of vulnerable women and it was only when another woman saw it and she was very concerned that she voiced her concerns to Women's Aid workers that we were able to tell the authorities and they moved him on to another hotel... She was afraid to speak in case she got in trouble."

Another woman told us as a victim of Violence that she was placed in a hotel and was unable to leave her room due to a serious injury that prevented her from walking, so she was essentially left alone in a hotel room for 4 months without support despite what she had experienced. She didn't realise she could get support until a chance conversation with another woman housed in the Hotel who told her that she could speak to Women's Aid and she was then able to get the support she needed. No official advised her at any point that support was available to her and there was no language barrier.

If we truly want to tackle violence against women and girls here in Northern Ireland through provision and protections, it's important that we must remember that not all women and girls in NI have the same right of access to support from the State and that is a major barrier for women and girls coming forward for help and getting the appropriate specialised support they need. We appreciate that whilst immigration is a reserved matter for the UK Government, the provision of health and social care, as well as housing, is a devolved matter, and we can create local mitigations to help support vulnerable women and girls who've been brutalised and traumatised due to gender based violence. As a society we know they deserve the compassion and dignity to be supported like every other woman in Northern Ireland with secure immigration status. We cannot truly tackle violence against women and girls in Northern Ireland if we do not act on the interests of

some of the most vulnerable women and girls in our society through adequate provisions and protections.

Funding & Valuing Provisions Tackling VAWG

Indeed, it's also essential to note that (WAFNI) the authors of this submission, have had their Core Funding completely cut by the Department for Health despite previously being funded continuously for over 30 years. This annual funding accounts for £147,000.00 and allows WAFNI to regionally fundraise and income generate other grants for the 8 local Women's Aid groups. We have worked for and on behalf of the local groups since 1978 (then Belfast, Foyle, and Coleraine Women's Aid groups). We brought together these then refuge services and for the first time created a national network, which enabled women and children experiencing violence and fear in the home to travel across the country to a place of safety. We also started to campaign for new laws and policies to protect women and children living with domestic abuse. Our roots are in the women's rights' movement, and the organisation is run by women, for women (and their children), with women. We are proud to have been at the forefront of key achievements that have increased legal protection for survivors, and we have also raised public awareness of domestic abuse. This is a vital role which we hope WAFNI will be able to continue for the next 40 years.

WAFNI completes a number of duties on behalf of the local Women's Aid groups including conducting the vital research for consultations such as this, and working directly with government on policy to help improve the lives of the women we support who've experienced violence, which is outlined in great detail at the introduction of this response.

The regional responses by WAFNI ensure we can capture a comprehensive picture of the needs of victims and survivors of domestic abuse right across Northern Ireland and to the capacity benefit of the local Women's Aid Services, many of whom would not have the capacity to respond comprehensively on policy consultations such as this within their very limited resources. WAFNI carry out our regional work in order for the frontline Women's Aid Specialist Services to be able to dedicate all resources possible for the direct support of women affected by abuse, and without funding for our work as a representative regional body, there will only be further unnecessary intense pressure on the limited resources of local Women's Aid Services, and as such, would result in a major hindrance in achieving the Outcomes of this proposed Strategy.

TIME HAS STOPPED.



#SAVEOURFUNDING

Women's Aid
FEDERATION
NORTHERN IRELAND

15. Do you agree or disagree that Outcome 5 below, will enable us to achieve this vision?

Outcome 5 – A Justice System which has the Confidence of Victims, Survivors, and the Public in its Ability to Address Violence Against Women and Girls.

In the context of violence against women and girls, a just system that considers and addresses the need of people who come into contact with it, holds perpetrators to account, while challenging and supporting them to change, gives victims and survivors a voice a place in the process, and has the confidence of the public.

X	Strongly Agree
	Agree
	Neither Agree nor Disagree
	Disagree
	Strongly Disagree

“Taking trauma seriously is not revolutionary, but to ‘operationalise effectively’ the scale and impact of trauma needs to be understood and support systems need to be in place A ‘fully trauma driven response’ may be unachievable, but greater acknowledgement of the pervasiveness of trauma, the challenges it presents and the ways in which participation in the criminal justice process can come at the cost of individual therapeutic recovery, provides a mandate for further reform as a whole of justice approach”.

Professional Felicity Gerry QC : Trauma Informed Courts³²
www.newlawjournal.co.uk

NI can work towards building a justice system that meets the needs of all victims of VAWG by the implementation of action plans, specific safeguards, and support services that can help ensure that victims are heard, their voices amplified, and their needs are addressed. The development of a strategic framework for ending VAWG can help guide efforts to prevent and address this issue. We welcome the above outcome, it is aspirational with regard to instilling confidence in a justice system that currently does not work to meet the needs of victims and survivors, quite the opposite in reality with most victims saying they wish they hadn’t engaged or rang the police for support in the first place, as the situation as just got worse. The current system judges victims, is not victim focused or trauma

³² Professional Felicity Gerry QC : Trauma Informed Courts³² www.newLawjournal.co.uk

informed, and victims have no autonomy or ownership of the process. In fact, they sit outside of the process, as a victim in the criminal justice process, with no support, no advocacy and they are constantly retraumatised. Much needs to be changed to make a justice system that victims and survivors have confidence in moving forward with.

The court system itself has huge delays, a lack of support available to victims in court, and court backlog, with our victims and survivors facing years-long waits for court dates. Cases involving VAWG are often complex and require staff and supporters to have specialist knowledge of the issues to ensure the right information is available to decision-makers, but de-prioritising these cases to clear court backlogs creates additional delays for some of the most distressing crimes, overwhelmingly experienced by women. The lack of support available to victims throughout their engagement with the criminal justice system causes significant distress and often the re-traumatisation of victims. They need a dedicated specialist support service to take them through the process.

Breaking this cycle will require investing in gender and trauma-informed responses across the criminal justice system, accounting for the trauma and abuse many women may have and currently there is not adequate support services for advocacy. The whole system lacks a gender and trauma-informed approach failing to consider the impact that domestic abuse. This of course needs adequate resourcing to fully meet the needs of victims and survivors to truly change the criminal justice system.

Police Response from Survivor Focus Groups:

On Police Interview: "I've never felt so dirty walking out of that interview. I felt so little like it was my fault what happened to me. I felt to blame."

On getting Justice: "It starts with the police. They haven't enough training" on domestic abuse and gender-based violence.

The role of the police in cases of domestic abuse and all forms of VAWG is crucial, although some of our respondents have been critical of the response of frontline officers. Victims might not always get the police response they require and there are still gaps in whether some victims get 'justice' or not. Despite criticisms, the police remain one of the key frontline services which victims can use to prevent and stop incidents of domestic abuse and ultimately can save lives.

It was disappointing to hear the poor responses in relation to police that were heard during our focus groups. There was great concern that PSNI officers responding to

domestic abuse incidents did not have a good understanding of coercive control and the impact of trauma.

Women's (survivor and victim) Voices within focus group stated:

"On PSNI treatment: "I was completely disappointed on how I was treated... I was asked what did you do to him to make him react."

"Being more informed just the police ringing and letting you know that they are going to be released. My ex got out on Friday and came straight to my house. Just one phone call, it was awful it was so terrifying, I was so scared, that's what it comes down to. Just one phone call could have changed so much you cannot imagine how frightened I was (starts crying)"

"I was married to a police officer and the whole system is a joke, the problem here is the PSNI. They are all talk they don't care. I have met with senior officers, and nothing was done. They have been given training, information, so many ways of changing things they just don't care."

"My experience of the police was very good, especially the investigating officer. He still contacts me and stays in touch with me to make sure I am safe."

"Need to be more informed and communication needs to be better, an example is release date for ex partners getting out of prison. Communication is so important and putting us at risk."

"Police officers need more training to respond appropriately."

"More work needed within PSNI for perpetrators who are police officers - what is being done?"

"Feel let down by criminal justice system, let down by PSNI"

"After giving a police interview on the abuse she suffered including rape "After that interview I really thought about taking my own life."

"Police don't understand coercive control and what it looks like need more training, think domestic violence has to be physical abuse."

“Don’t understand the high risk around non-fatal strangulation.”

Frontline Support Workers Responses to engagement with PSNI:

“Nothing to encourage a woman to go through the legal system, nothing positive or supportive within the system, no follow through on what the PSNI say and no consequences to breaches in non mol orders... This all together contributes to high dropout rates.”

“Really how important is a breach, when it can’t even get through to MARAC”.

“The PSNI need to be clear and transparent with women around what is needed to evidence a breach.”

“PSNI need training don’t know what CC is or stalking - still using harassment just don’t understand.”

“Police lifting bail and women not being informed.”

“Issue with serial perpetrators of abuse.”

“Claire’s Law gives a false sense of security.”

“Around communication when police do make a willing referral: “women assume that Women’s Aid are told everything by the Police” and its distressing to repeat themselves.”

On specific issues in relation to MARAC and Policing:

“Specialist working groups to discuss professional response to individual/overall cases. This would encourage collaborative working through a multi-agency approach.”

“Trust needs MARAC training and training around risk assessment in general.”

Delay in taking statements and issues with MARAC e.g 5 breaches = 5 referrals to MARAC

“The Threshold for systematic issues is far too high. For MARACs for example: “Until it gets to crisis point it’s not being taken seriously.”

“Children’s services need improved to be able to link in with criminal justice cases - children need to be listened to and heard and understood.”

“Social services and police don’t understand the risk and they don’t assess it - don’t understand how frightening dv is just don’t listen.”

“Assessing risk is so important and this is done so differently with police and Women’s Aid e.g. the DASH form different all the time.”

“The Threshold for systematic issues is far too high. For MARACs for example: “Until it gets to crisis point it’s not being taken seriously.”

Court System, Judiciary, PPS etc

“Going through the Court process was worse than the abuse... my abuser assaulted two other women since me, how is this allowed to happen?”

One of the most important roles in addressing domestic abuse is that of the judge. Judges are responsible for making decisions about legal matters related to domestic abuse cases and they must possess a deep understanding of the dynamics of domestic abuse as well as a sensitivity towards victims’ and survivors’ experiences in order to make sound decisions. We need to ensure that justice is served in cases involving domestic abuse and all forms of VAWG, judges must be properly trained in this whole area so that they can better understand what victims and survivors go through and make informed decisions based on this knowledge. This training should include instruction on recognising signs of physical and mental abuse, the impact of trauma as well as strategies for responding effectively in court proceedings, together with coercive control. Additionally, it should cover topics such as identifying potential risks associated with abusers’ behaviour and providing appropriate safety plans for victims who are at risk of further harm after their case has been resolved. Judges being trained appropriately through specialised services can also help ensure greater accountability among perpetrators who are brought before them for sentencing or other actions related to their offences. When judges understand the power dynamics and complexity of intimate partner relationships involving abuse and coercive control, they will be better equipped to make informed decisions about what type of punishment or rehabilitation would be most appropriate in each situation.

Ultimately, it is essential that all judges receive adequate training on how to handle cases involving all forms of violence against women and girls, so that they can protect victims and survivors while simultaneously holding perpetrators to account. Such training will not only help bring justice for those involved but also help prevent further harm from occurring in future situations by ensuring that perpetrators are held responsible for their actions through appropriate legal action rather than being allowed off with just a slap on the wrist due to ignorance or misunderstanding on behalf of the judge deciding their fate. This is the view of many of our respondents, both victims and survivors and members of the Women's Aid local staff teams across NI. Women have lost faith in our criminal justice system, and this is clearly outlined in their responses which follow.

WAFNI would welcome the opportunity to speak to judges and bring our experts by experience into the room so they can hear firsthand what women are experiencing within the court system and why they do not wish to continue with the process due to the re-traumatisation and re-victimisation. In assessing the current court practice within NI we need to move towards a Trauma Informed Court process which is a system in which environments, practices, policies and persons limit unnecessary stress and promote healing in those who have been trauma exposed, to include victims and court professionals.

Court environment needs to consider promoting safety and creating an environment conducive to limiting arousal. Safety needs to be considered so that victims need to feel safe and be in a space away from their perpetrators within the court.



Women's Aid would still advocate for specialist domestic abuse courts:

Why we need Domestic Abuse Courts

This is no ordinary crime and the criminal justice system has traditionally failed to take account of its specific nature and patterns of DVA and element of coercive control. DVA related cases are challenging to prosecute in which attrition and withdrawal rates are high but can be reduced by well-focused action. In addition to these challenges, there are constant changes in the CJS and key players at the court which further exacerbates how chaotic and ineffective the CJS can feel to victims of DVA. The specialist court model seeks to ensure that the criminal justice process is focused on the safety of the victims of DVA and that perpetrators of abuse are held to account. The SDVC model ensures the presence in the one court room of well-trained staff, specialised in relation to domestic violence cases, together with victim/witness support agencies can be shown to assist the justice process and helps ensure that victim safety is prioritised as an outcome. Within an SDV Court, this information can be shared and expertise about domestic violence applied in a systematic, well regulated and timely way. Outside of the courtroom, CJS partners benefit from data and observation collected by the SDVC Coordinator to address system issues arising in the CSJ which need to be addressed to ensure there is a focus on victim safety and to that the component parts of the CJS are working to best effect. This kind of effective, operational partnership is the only way to get the best results from the criminal justice process.

Standing Together Against Domestic Violence (STADV)

[SDVC_STADV_Updated2018.pdf \(squarespace.com\)](#)

Women have shared:

"Not treated as a victim within current court system".

"Witness room is a nightmare to get (Belfast court) and nightmare to get through to VS to book or speak to anyone, no privacy sitting with other people as well."

"Current system is oppressive, little warning when court date coming up."

"Perpetrator in court is very intimidating and still happening."

"Judicial training needed."

“Women do not have a voice in court e.g. wanting to tell their story and have a voice but perp takes plea and PPS are making these decisions without consulting with the women should be allowed e.g. women was in court serious case - PPS agree to a five year restraining order for the women if she drops charges!”

“Women being refused orders when bail conditions are in place - they are meant to keep her safe!”

“Delays are terrible - inter parties hearing currently 2 months. Support worker was so good to have in court, they prepared you before and after, asking the questions.”

We need to evaluate whether the systems we have in place are promoting healing or are we just doing things because that is the way they have always been done? – as highlighted below by workers within our Women’s Aid local groups:

“June 2022 case meant to be heard – I wanted to go into court I believe I need my day in court so trial date not set not heard now in October 2023 – 18 months later. So for every day he is on remand that is two days off his sentence and he doesn’t realise the fear that I still have – how is that fair?”

“Justice system needs work including less delay in going to court.”

“Sentences rubbish – on remand and then sentence is nothing, more at risk when they get out, not good enough.”

“Restraining orders have no weight at all.”

“Reducing the delay. I’m seeing at least two years for sexual cases to go to court. How women still go through with it after two years I have no idea, I don’t think personally I could go through it. It’s about reducing the delays.”

“Perpetrator delay tactics keeps coming up, delays caused by them not showing up to court, sacking his legal team, etc. There needs to be limits and consequences. If just keeps going on and on and it’s just a step back for the woman.”

“You can feel pushed, intimidated and the court advocate is so important.”

"I was denied a second NMO because there wasn't enough evidence. As I was a former shell of who I was. I feel that if I had went there with a massive bruise I would have got it immediately. The process of getting protected against abusive partners is far too long and drawn out. And what you have to prove is unbelievable."

The Price of Justice

In February 2022, the Legal Services Agency introduced a discretionary waiver which will now mean that victims of domestic abuse may be eligible to Legal Aid when defending certain Children (NI) Order proceedings even if their financial circumstances might otherwise mean that they are ineligible. This new waiver scheme is significant as it means that some victims of domestic abuse who were having to pay privately to defend children's proceedings issued before the Courts by their perpetrator may now be entitled to Legal Aid.

The waiver scheme will operate in similar terms to the Domestic Violence waiver available in proceedings under the Family Homes and Domestic Violence (NI) Order 1998.

As such, there may be a contribution to be paid by the person applying, depending on their financial circumstances. There are certain conditions that a person will have to satisfy to be eligible to this Legal Aid.

Women's Aid would call for victim-survivors of domestic abuse to be exempt from the legal aid means test, to ensure they can access the legal support they so desperately need as they escape abusive partners and rebuild their lives.

"I had to pay for a Non-Molestation Order - it was breached several times but no evidence so he was not arrested".

"I am currently paying back £300 a month to my solicitor and it is really a struggle to try and get that every month.

"I am paying my solicitor back £100 per month and have been told that this has to go up to £200 if I am to retain their services, I just can't do it anymore."

"The cost of family proceedings including defending an appeal in the Family Centre are now over £4,000. Add to that the financial strain of being a single mum with job, mortgage, car, schools, all the financial strains everyone faces etc. Solely on my shoulders. And child maintenance of £30.80 per month for 2 children".

“My finances with having to pay a mortgage, my car and look after my child were greatly depleted with having to pay legal fees as well. It has been an absolute nightmare for me. Many nights I didn’t sleep. Every time I thought it was the end the perp would appeal or do something else to bring it back to court. This went on from more than two years. At the start of Summer I really felt I couldn’t take any more financially and decided that I was going to have to self-represent even though I’ve no idea how I would have done this. My support worker at Women’s Aid said she would help as best she could. Thankfully my Barrister indicated that it was definitely coming to an end so I held in there and thankfully for now it’s over. I live with the constant fear however that this will not be the end...I’ve been told it definitely is but I have that constant worry”.

“I had to pay £600 for non mol. I had to represent myself in court for child contact as I could not afford to pay solicitor or barrister. This was extremely stressful for me especially when I was pregnant”. I am now entitled to Legal Aid because I am on maternity leave.”

“My court case has been ongoing for 8 ½ years. He keeps appealing the judges decision, not complying with court proceedings and he is a personal litigant with a McKenzie friend from a father’s rights group. I on the other hand have not been allowed the support of Women’s Aid in court with me. At present I am in debt to the sum of approx. £80,000.”

Perpetrators

Our key decision makers should focus on reducing the harms caused by perpetrators and managing any ongoing risks they pose, alongside more concerted commitment to rehabilitation. This must happen alongside action to prevent violence in the first place. The response must change from one that places the responsibility for survivors to manage their experiences of violence and abuse, to one which holds perpetrators accountable. With the majority of the women, we work with, a very small proportion of perpetrators are currently in the criminal justice system, and those who are often insufficiently held to account, with important opportunities for their rehabilitation and risk management frequently missed. Significant reform is required to ensure that the criminal justice system brings perpetrators to justice. In addition, other agencies outside the criminal justice system need to vastly improve their identification and responses to perpetrators.

Femicide & Parental Responsibility: *“A woman was murdered here a few years ago and he still had full paternal responsibility over the children.”*

“He had the power over the children’s lives.”

Tackling Serial Perpetrators

Most perpetrators of domestic abuse are serial perpetrators. In other words, perpetrators who move on to abuse future partners once their current victim has finally managed to break free from the relationship.

It is important to look at the options in relation to domestic violence and abuse cases in relation to disposal. In NI there are no Court mandated programs for perpetrators of domestic violence and abuse but again there needs to be investment and work in relation to the rehabilitation of abusers as there is such a rate of reoffending in domestic abuse cases.

Women’s Aid were a partner organisation with PBNI for over ten years rolling out the Women’s Safety element of Court-mandated Perpetrator programmes. These programmes have not run for over 3-4 years, apart from a pilot programme in Foyle area in 2018/19. During the ten-year period these programmes were very active with up to 3 rolling programmes in Belfast, Armagh, Foyle and at least 1 running in Antrim and Omagh. We would question the non-referral to these programmes via Court process and would question this major gap in holding perpetrators to account, given the major increase in PSNI domestic abuse incidents year on year. The attrition rate in Northern Ireland is very low and Women’s Aid believes this needs to be seriously addressed as does the entire PPS process in relation to domestic violence and holding perpetrators to account. If legal remedies for victims of domestic violence are not providing positive outcomes for women, they will be reluctant to go through what is a traumatic experience. Non-adjudicated Promoting Positive Relationships Programmes was piloted in Foyle area in 2018/19 and then rolled out through five Health Trust areas over 2019/20 and these programmes during 2020/21 and to date in 2022/23. The aim of the PPRP intervention is to provide 60 men, alleged to have been abusive within their intimate relationships, with the opportunity to engage in an intervention programme aimed at developing knowledge and skills in which to develop healthy, non-abusive relationships. Women’s Aid welcomed the introduction of these programmes supported through Department of Justice with programmes delivered under the expertise of the PBNI. Women’s Aid partner role is to take referrals of female partner/ex-partners and provide Women’s Safety process. We would be calling for the continuation of these programmes as a positive response to addressing domestic abuse within Trust settings.

We need to ensure that quality assured perpetrator interventions are consistently available – addressing risks from primary prevention (like bystander responses and awareness raising communication campaigns) to behaviour change group work, to specialist responses for the most dangerous and serial perpetrators.

Establish a quality assurance system for perpetrator work (such as Respect Guidelines) which ensures that interventions funded by public sector agencies are always accredited, designed to keep survivors and their children safe, and delivered alongside support provided by specialist VAWG organisations and this is key to provide specialist services for women to ensure safety.

Some women have commented during our focus groups:

“With serial repeat offenders more work done.”

“Justice system needs work including less delay in going to court.”

“Sentences rubbish – on remand and then sentence is nothing, more at risk when they get out, not good enough.”

“Perpetrators are not held to account, need more programmes that work collectively with Women’s Aid to support the partner.”

“When it got to court on the day of the trial he changed his plea to guilty... Perpetrators and their legal teams relay on most women not showing up to the Court so that’s why the plead not guilty initially but as soon as she turns up, you see the Perpetrator’s Barrister turn the colour of death and quickly speak to his client to change his plead and they do. If you can get the woman to the court, it’s a really good chance of conviction, not that’s usually a really high sentence but it still gets it on their record... it makes a massive difference to the outcome of the case.”

Risk is a huge issue within the criminal justice system and the pathway that a woman goes down, from the first call out to the police where she is asked to complete a DASH form to assess her risk, when referred to Women’s Aid who will do the same, a possible referral into MARAC to continue to manage that risk. Unfortunately, we hear time and time again that professionals fail to identify the risk posed to that woman or that woman and her children. There needs to be much more training around the area of risk assessment but also risk management, it is a fluid process which changes day to day, hour to hour when living with domestic abuse. From focus groups and our field research, we heard very

clearly that risk was a huge issue with Social Services assessment and the lack of knowledge of domestic abuse impacting on the measures and safety planning for families. It is important that Judges and our courts also understand risk in relation to the actual physical building and attendance at court as discussed within this question, but also the risk they are putting that woman in by not extending an order, granting an order, refusing an order because bail conditions are in place etc. All of these things place women at greater risk and the solution, well that is simple, listen to victims and survivors, get training, robust specialist training, start the Court User Forums and have a robust criminal, civil and family court system that is open and transparent and that talks to each other. They are working in silos and need to work in a coordinated way to keep families safe. The whole justice system needs to be open to engagement and feedback from voluntary partners and experts by experience. That way we can better risk assess; risk manage and save lives.

One woman told us the powerful story of her ongoing Court case which had been delayed by over two years, she told us:

“I have to move out of the county when he gets out of jail as everyone knows the first thing he will do is find me, the police have told me they cannot keep me safe. There was a restraining order in place when this happened to be and no order or no one can protect me. There needs to be more informed and communication needs to be better, an example is release date for ex partners getting out of prison. Communication is so important and putting us at risk.”

Staff responses:

“Women being refused orders when bail conditions are in place - they are meant to keep her safe!”

“Police lifting bail and women not being informed”.

“Not as easy to get occupation order, still obligation to find perp somewhere safe to live.”

“Not fair that women and children are removed from their home to go to refuge and he is sitting in comfort of own home.”

“PPU Officers need more training when sending cases to the PPS on domestic abuse cases.”

“Police are referring women to Women’s Aid when they don’t want to be referred to us.”

“A perpetrator was given a five-year Restraining Order but continued to try to contact the woman. He even put a fake ad pretending to sell the victim’s dog and give her phone number to a ‘buyer’ who called the woman and caused her a lot of distress as she loved her dog greatly... nothing meaningful was done as he didn’t directly contact her himself.”

On removing barriers: “They keep going on about barriers and confidence, but they need to be putting more focus on checks and reviews” to ensure they are really removing them.

Poor communication between victims and the Criminal Justice System: “One woman found out on Facebook that her abuser was released from prison.”

“All places where bail is granted need to be speaking to each other and to the victim – very poor communication.”

“There is a pattern of men removed from the house and the onus being put on the woman to leave like she did something wrong. In custody men tend to be more problematic than women for the police.”

Criminal Justice worker at Belfast supported 19 women, “when it got to court on the day of the trial he changed his plea to guilty... Perpetrators and their legal teams rely on most women not showing up to the Court so that’s why the plead not guilty initially but as soon as she turns up, you see the Perpetrator’s Barrister turn the colour of death and quickly speak to his client to change his plead and they do. If you can get the woman to the court, it’s a really good chance of conviction, not that’s usually a really high sentence but it still gets it on their record... it makes a massive difference to the outcome of the case.”

“A judge once said to me they had more power to convict someone for smashing a window than someone beating his partner.”

“When you raise the sentences, men just find different ways to carry out the abuse sometimes” meaning switching from physical assaults to more coercive and emotional control.”

“Reducing delays in court cases is important to help give victims confidence in the Courts.”

This question was one that all of our respondents want to comment on, had different experiences of and many ideas for positive change. We hope that has been reflected within the response and that the words will implement change in a system that is currently broken with years of little or no resourcing and a system that victims and survivors of domestic abuse do not have faith in. To create a truly victim-friendly justice system for domestic abuse survivors requires a multidimensional approach that focuses on prevention, support, and a thorough understanding of the dynamics of abuse.

By incorporating these principles, we can strive towards a system that meets the needs of victims and helps them on their path to recovery and justice.



Outcome 6 – All of the Government and Society Working Better Together to End Violence Against Women and Girls.

A whole system approach with collaboration and cooperation by default across government departments and with, within and between the community, voluntary and other sectors.

X	Strongly Agree
	Agree
	Neither Agree nor Disagree
	Disagree
	Strongly Disagree

Since our inception in Northern Ireland in the 1970s, Women’s Aid have long sought to work in cooperation with all of government and society to help make our communities safer for women and girls as they try to break free from violence and abuse. One of our core principles as a movement is ***“Working with others to influence changes’ as we recognise domestic abuse requires a coordinated response and we are fully committed to working across society, with all individuals and organisations, to end domestic abuse³³.”***

Multi-agency partnership working needs to be prioritised if we are to see the whole picture of a victim and survivor’s situation and ensure they receive the most effective safety and support planning from agencies. As things stand, multi-agency structures are dealing with excessive caseloads, with all services in NI currently under tremendous pressure, as we see reported daily due in part if not all to our lack of government here in NI and no one to make decisions. Demand through poor risk assessment and other practices is then something that Women’s Aid have to deal with when family’s needs are not dealt with by specialised, dedicated and timely organisational response. Multi-agency responses too often fail to keep women, children and young people safe, do not meet the needs of women, children and young people, and do not adequately respond to their experiences of abuse – resulting in repeat victimisation rather than early intervention to prevent further harm. Multiagency working can be especially poor for survivors of sexual violence.

Working in true partnership needs to bring together services, including health, housing, social care, education, criminal justice, financial services and communities, to ensure local systems keep victims and survivors safe, hold abusers to account, and prevent VAWG. In

³³ [Our ethos - Women’s Aid Federation Northern Ireland \(womensaidni.org\)](https://www.womensaidni.org/)

order to do this, shared responsibility across agencies, good governance and strong coordination is vital. This response needs to be locally developed and locally owned in order to appropriately reflect and meet local practices, challenges and opportunities. We know that NI is part of the UK but is very distinct in its history, its conflict and its connection to the island of Ireland. An intersectional approach is also needed and for that to work you need the full and equal representation of specialist support services in multi-agency responses. Such partnerships should be the foundation of local ending-VAWG plans, strategies and practices, and must be backed by adequate resourcing for the specialist VAWG sector to ensure their meaningful involvement. NI has a long way to go in our journey to prevent VAWG as a country that has ignored and not even had a strategic policy in place to address the issue. We need to work hard to address the issue of working in partnership, allocate appropriate funding for the EAWG Strategy to thrive, flourish and meet the needs of all victims and survivors of VAWG. Again, it involves investment now to save lives later.

Working in partnership with one another is the key interlink needed to help end VAWG here in Northern Ireland, and it's essential that we all meaningfully 'buy in' and cooperate with one another if we wish to ensure women and girls feel safe and are safe from gender-based violence.

The woman we consulted with for this response felt too that meaningful cooperation was needed to help support women and girls who've experienced violence and were broadly supportive of this Outcome as a way of ensuring that all the relevant parties were speaking to each other effectively to advocate the best outcomes for victims and survivors.

Women told us of experiences of being 'passed from pillar to post' when trying to find the specialist support they needed following abuse, and that strong communication is essential so women can be directed efficiently to specialist support services,

One woman shared her experience: of *'going to her GP, then went to Nexus, then went to local counselling service, went to other mental health service before she found Women's Aid, feels services don't know enough about what Women's Aid do and signposting and referring appropriately should be key. They all need to work better together and know what agencies do and who they support.'*

Women's Aid staff also shared the misunderstanding of the Specialist Services of Women's Aid that they often spend time speaking to other agencies who are trying to incorrectly link in with them.

Some examples include:

“This morning we assessed a woman who wasn’t suitable, and a man then rang the office from housing demanding we take her despite our assessment.”

“I spent an hour explaining to a Housing Officer that he needed to go in a different direction... we’re getting women who are referred to us when it wasn’t domestic abuse but services think we can help because we support women.”

Information Sharing & Effective Partnership is Vital

Those we consulted with for this response stressed to us the importance of partnership working to ensure the wellbeing of victims and survivors was being addressed adequately and effectively. When it comes to any major policy discussion around ending VAWG it is important that all government departments, working groups and wider society all work together to ensure effective implementation is the bare minimum standard. In NI we demand the Gold Standard, as one Women’s Aid Colleague put it: “lack of partnership will cost lives.” Women’s Aid greatly valued the meaningful Co-Design process with the TEO for this draft Strategic Framework and it was felt by colleagues who participated in these sessions that there was true cooperation and respect between all those who were involved. Going forward Women’s Aid wishes to see this spirit of cooperation weaved throughout Government, Institutions and all sectors of society to ensure that we are all cooperating with one another to ensure women and girls can live and thrive safely in our society.

Placing a Focus on Prevention

The emphasis of this Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Women and Girls is on prevention. Effective prevention can both prevent violence from occurring in the first place, such as education and campaigns; as well as interrupt the cycle of violence, like making public transport safer.

Our main focus will be on those Outcomes associated with prevention:

1. **Changed Attitudes, Behaviours, and Social Norms;**
2. **Healthy, Respectful Relationships; and**
3. **Women and Girls are Safe and Feel Safe Everywhere.**

“Prevention is about addressing the underlying causes of violence against women and girls, to stop it before it occurs.” - UN Women, 2012.

17. Do you agree or disagree with our approach of focusing on PREVENTION to end violence against women and girls?

X	Strongly Agree
	Agree
	Neither Agree nor Disagree
	Disagree
	Strongly Disagree

As summarised in our previous responses to this Consultation, many of the women, children and young people who took part in this response greatly emphasised the importance of the prevention work referenced in Outcomes 1,2,3 as being key components to tackling VAWG in Northern Ireland.

We therefore would ‘strongly agree’ with their inclusion in the overall Strategic Framework.

Foundational Action Plan

This Action Plan is a foundational one which establishes our work for the remainder of 2023/24. This approach allows us to make progress in the challenging financial climate this year and to align our planning cycle with the financial year from March 2024. As we go forward, further conversations will be needed to allow us to advise the Executive on decisions to be taken on budgets and priorities.

18. Do you agree or disagree that these are the right actions to take in our foundational Action Plan?

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Strongly Agree
<input type="checkbox"/>	Agree
<input type="checkbox"/>	Neither Agree nor Disagree
<input type="checkbox"/>	Disagree
<input type="checkbox"/>	Strongly Disagree

Impact Assessments

The [Equality Impact Assessment \(EQIA\)](#) (external link opens to a new window/tab), completed in relation to our Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Women and Girls and Foundational Action Plan, is the first stage in the ongoing monitoring of the inequalities that may be experienced by section 75 groups in respect of ending violence against women and girls. It will be reviewed and updated on a regular basis.

We have also completed other impact assessments and screenings in accordance with best practice guidance. All Impact Assessments can be viewed on the [Executive Office website](#) (external link opens to a new window/tab).

19. Do you agree or disagree with the way in which the Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) has been carried out?

	Strongly Agree
X	Agree
	Neither Agree nor Disagree
	Disagree
	Strongly Disagree

20. Do you agree or disagree with the findings of the Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA)?

	Strongly Agree
x	Agree
	Neither Agree nor Disagree
	Disagree
	Strongly Disagree

Are there any other issues or inequalities that you believe need to be considered in the EQIA?



**Speaking up
&
speaking out!**

**The Children
& Young
People's
Response**

INTRODUCTION

Women's Aid Federation NI welcomes the work that has already been carried out by the Executive Office in relation to the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy (EVAWAG). Since 2021, when the Northern Ireland Executive directed that a Strategy to End Violence Against Women and Girls (EVAWG) be developed, we have worked in collaboration with government departments, partners in the community, voluntary and statutory sector, and alongside women and children who have lived experience, to ensure the strategy is as comprehensive and relevant as possible to support changes that are needed within our society in order to keep women and girls safe.

According to Department of Health (Nov 2022)³⁴ There are 441,108 children living in Northern Ireland. On the 31st of March 2022, 24,545 children in Northern Ireland were known to social services as a child in need. On the same date 2,346 children were listed on the Child Protection Register, neglect and physical abuse were the main reasons for a child being placed on the register. From 01 April 21 - 31 March 2022, 34,969 children were referred to HSC Trusts in Northern Ireland, an increase of 9% on the previous year. 36% of referrals came from PSNI... this has risen year on year from 29% in 2017.

The vast majority of PSNI referrals to HSC Trusts are due to the presence of domestic abuse in the home. Research conducted by Barnardo's (2020)³⁵ showed:

- **Domestic abuse is most common factor among children considered to be "in need".**
- **As many as 1 in 5 children in UK are exposed to domestic abuse.**

As part of Operation Encompass, a partnership between the PSNI, the Education Authority and education providers, there have been 3,160 referrals made by police to the designated teachers since the start of the 2021 school year, until 30 April 2023.

Women's Aid Federation NI³⁶ reports from the period April 2022 - March 2023, showed that 5,897 children had mums supported within Women's Aid services and 397 children stayed in refuge accommodation with their mums. 242 pregnant women received support and 8 babies were born whilst mum was living in refuge.

³⁴ The Community Information Branch Information & Analysis Directorate, Department of Health (published Nov 2022)

³⁵ 'Not Just Collateral Damage' Barnardo's Report (2020)

³⁶ Women's Aid Federation NI Annual Report 2022/23

HEARING DIRECTLY FROM CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Women's Aid Northern Ireland is committed to the participation of children and young people in all elements of service and delivery and aims to harness all opportunities, not only to hear their voices, but to advocate on their behalf, based upon what they are telling us. Prior to this current response to the EVAWAG strategy consultation, Women's Aid NI has carried out several consultations with children and young people with lived experience of domestic abuse. Throughout these consultations we focused on the following five themes:

1. Everyone has the right to live in a society free from domestic abuse.
2. Victims and survivors of domestic abuse have a right to support.
3. Everyone can do something to stop domestic abuse.
4. Women and girls have a right to be treated equally.
5. Women and girls should be equally protected in our community.

Women's Aid NI produced a comprehensive Children and Young People's response to the Call for Views in March 2022. *Listen Up Government! Children and young people's response to the Call for Views*. This comprehensive response presented children and young people's thoughts, hopes and vision for a strategy addressing Domestic and Sexual Violence Strategy for NI.

WOMEN'S AID SOCIAL ACTION GROUP FOR YOUNG PEOPLE (SAY)

Since we responded to the Call for Views, Women's Aid Federation NI (WAFNI) has established and launched an exciting youth led project, funded by Children in Need through the *Youth Social Action Fund*, and in collaboration with the See Hear Act project funded by Comic Relief.

The SAY (Social Action for Young People) project has involved the coordination of a series of regional Women's Aid youth led workshops for young people aged 11-18. The SAY project brings together a diverse group of young people (of post primary age) engaged in Women's Aid services across NI, who are survivors of domestic abuse currently engaged in Women's Aid services. The young people work in partnership with staff to help drive forward change.

The project has 3 clear outputs:

1. Facilitate young people's input into the Violence against Women and Girls Strategy consultation.
2. Inform the development of a Training and Learning Framework for professionals working with children and young people affected by domestic abuse. (In partnership with Safeguarding Board NI)
3. Develop branding for educational resources for young people including a Healthy Relationships Website and a post primary education programme focussing on Healthy Relationships.



The SAY project has involved a series of regional, fun filled productive workshops between Spring and Summer 2023. The workshops enable young people from Women's Aid groups across NI to come together, have a say in issues affecting them and make a difference for other young people. Young people participating will benefit from three overarching outcomes (big differences) as follows:



There are currently 17 young people involved in the SAY group, 13 girls and 4 boys, ranging from 11- 18 years of age. The workshops have been facilitated in partnership with **Tinderbox Theatre Company** and are divided into morning and afternoon sessions. Morning sessions are facilitated by Tinderbox and are therapeutic in nature, providing the young people with an opportunity to explore an area of personal development in a creative way using movement, drama etc. Morning sessions include ice breakers and team building activities. Some themes we have explored to date in morning sessions include, *our relationship with ourselves, resilience, how our body keeps the score in relation to trauma* and *creative activism*. These have been well received by the young people and are a good way to encourage them to relax together as a group and prepare them for the afternoon session which has the social action element.

Afternoons sessions have drawn on young people's experience as change makers and experts by experience. These have a **Social Action** element and draw on young people's views and expertise through discussion, working in groups etc. The first Social Action session encouraged young people to develop their vision for the project and think about how we can raise awareness of healthy relationships with young people. They shared their ideas on key messages for young people in relation to healthy relationships and how we can ensure these messages are heard (including the development of a website and schools programme).

Other Social Action topics worked on included consulting on a *Learning and Development Framework for Professionals* working with children and young people affected by domestic abuse (for the Safeguarding Board NI). A workshop facilitated on the 27th of July focused entirely on the young people's response to the EVAWG strategy, which will be presented later in this document.

The Social Action element of the workshops has been very powerful and young people have shared their views honestly and articulately and have evidenced their valuable role as agents for change.

We urge the Executive office to take these views of Women's Aid and the SAY group into consideration in relation to how the EVAWAG strategy is to be implemented and resourced. At WAFNI we believe these are the voices of experience and they are giving us the information we need to create the tools to build a fairer, safer, and more equitable society for women and girls. They are the children and young people of today, and the adults of the future. It is our responsibility to not only listen to what they have to say... but to act on their behalf!

...they have a voice; they want to be heard!



THE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S RESPONSE

First and foremost, we thought it would be useful if we presented, once again the 13 key actions children and young people called for in our previous children and young people's response to the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy, Call for Views in March 2022. These are powerful and remain key issues, which we believe need to be considered not just in relation to the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy.

They are equally relevant when considering the Ending Violence Against Women & Girls Strategy.

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S CALL TO ACTION

(Taken from Listen Up Government! Children and young people's response to the Call for Views. WAFNI: March 2022)

Dear Government,

We want to see...

1. Children and young people recognised as **equal victims of domestic abuse**.
2. A commitment from Government to invest in tailored age-appropriate **support for all children and young people** affected by domestic abuse.
3. More effective **partnership approaches** to address the needs of children and young people affected by domestic abuse.
4. Domestic abuse **training for all professionals** working with children and young people to increase awareness of impact and highlight the role they can play in supporting them.
5. **Healthy relationships education** in schools to ensure a greater awareness and understanding of rights within relationships.
6. Powerful **public awareness campaigns** that help to create a **change in attitudes** that perpetuate violence against women and girls.
7. Education programmes that **challenge toxic masculinity** and promote equality of rights.
8. More **"In school" support**, including one to one counselling for children and young people who have experienced violence and abuse within the home and more understanding from teachers for children and young people who are experiencing abuse in the home.

9. **Stronger sentencing** for perpetrators of domestic and sexual abuse and violence against women and girls.
10. **Programmes for perpetrators** of abuse, to challenge behaviour, encourage them to accept responsibility for their behaviour and support them to change.
11. A **review of child contact** arrangements in domestic abuse cases, to identify risk, consider the views and feelings of children and young people involved and promote their best interests.
12. **NI research** on children and young people's experience of domestic abuse which is informed and guided by children and young people themselves.
13. Children and young people **being believed** and having more of a **voice in matters concerning them**.



We extend an invitation to Government to visit us in our Women's Aid participation groups and hear directly from us about our experiences, our support needs, and our ideas for a safer future for everyone.

The below responses are a correlation of the 17 young people (13 girls, 4 boys) who took part in the Women's Aid Federation Youth Social Action Project (SAY), as discussed previously. It also includes the voices of an EA funded youth group from Foyle Women's Aid.

PREVENTION

- 1. Everyone in our community understands what violence against women and girls is, and works together to stop it.**
- 2. Everyone in our community is able to form healthy and respectful relationships.**
- 3. Women and girls are safe and feel safe everywhere.**

**Government listening to society...
and not government owning it**

**Education around 'red
flags' which are seen as
normalised behaviors
e.g. checking locations
on social media...
can be used in stalking
situations**

**Changing
individual attitudes -
changes society
overall**

We welcome the strong focus on preventative education within this strategy. With recent developments such as the announcement from the Secretary of State for NI in June of this year to update requirements for Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) curriculum in Northern Ireland, this is needed now more than ever.

The feedback from the children and young people within the SAY project demonstrates a need for significant efforts to be made to ensure consistency and regulation of RSE in secondary schools. Young people have fed back not enough information is being provided around healthy relationships, relationship abuse, toxic relationships, coercive control. What is currently being delivered is inconsistent and is often limited by the school's capacity and religious ethos.

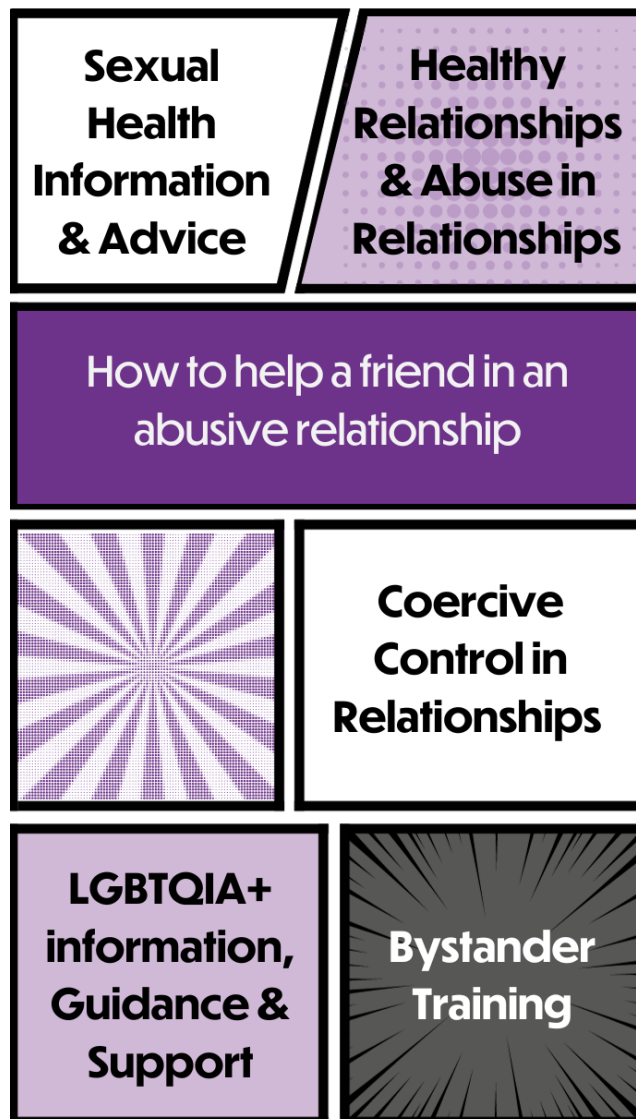
There was a consensus among the children and young people that education around relationships need to start earlier in primary schools. Children and young people need to first explore their relationship with themselves before they can start to understand how to manoeuvre relationships with others. If children are not experiencing healthy relationships at home, this may be the only opportunity they have to create healthy foundations in which to build their understanding and expectations of boundaries within relationships. Patterns of behaviour are set and reinforced at this early age. If a child is only exposed to unhealthy, toxic, or abusive experiences of relationships, and if they are not given appropriate support and guidance, they will develop ways to cope with this on their own. This will be more difficult to challenge or change by the time they reach secondary school and start entering intimate relationships with peers.

Young people need a safe environment to explore what is acceptable behaviour and how to challenge behaviour that is not acceptable. Bystander training for young people was discussed several times within the SAY group. The children and young people highlighted the question "How do you call out your peers for behaviour that is inappropriate or for using inappropriate or offensive language?". Bystander training is not a new concept, though has not been explored in Northern Ireland in relation to young people accessing it in schools.

The children and young people involved in this response expressed their frustration with the people they felt 'had the power' in relation to making decisions on issues that effected their lives. They discussed how they felt political leaders and policy makers don't understand the current social landscape for children and young people, and as a result put systems in place that at their best hinder freedom of self-exploration and expression, and the creation of healthy identity development, and at their worst feed a mental health pandemic. The young people within this group believe this can be turned around by providing the space to explore complicated issues in a safe, non-judgemental environment.

Young people believe they have a role to play in system redesign, as experts by experience and change agents. The children and young people expressed an understanding that some policies, resources, or systems may be put in place with good intentions, though without appropriate and considered consultations with the demographic that they are intended to support, these policies, resources and systems can be unhelpful, challenging and potentially ‘toxic’ in themselves. This view of co-design is shared by DoE Permanent Secretary Derek Baker, in reference to the NIC&YP Strategy 2020 *“It stresses the importance of allowing children and young people opportunities to participate in society and to have their voice heard and their views respected, especially on issues which affect them.”*

Topic areas discussed by the young people and that they believe need to be included in a preventative education model to keep women and girls safe included (but are not limited to):



The group also discussed the need for mixed gender and same gender topic discussions, this fell under creating a safe environment to discuss intimate and complicated issues. The group felt that although children and young people needed to receive the majority of the information as a mixed gender group, to provide opportunity for discussion and expression of conflicting views, a same sex space to explore certain concepts might be helpful in creating a safe environment, for example 'toxic masculinity'. The group discussed this from the point of view of young boys potentially feeling 'judged' or 'alienated' or not feeling they have a right to contribute to the discussion.



**The cycle of violence
needs to be broken**

Comments from children and young people in relation to prevention included:

"We agree everyone should be equipped and empowered to enjoy healthy relationships."

"More education around 'Red Fags' which are seen as normalized behaviour e.g., checking locations on social media. Can be used in stalking situations."

"More focus on the negative effects coercive control in relationship- using real life examples."

"Workshops etc. as part of curriculum like history, math etc."

"Disconnection between genders/people/gender identity... politicians and policy makers don't fully understand the experience of young people."

"How do we communicate experiences?"

"Calling out behaviour without going to extreme/attacking."

"Respectful conversations and constructive criticism."

"Taught from a young age – age appropriate."

"Breaking the cycle."

"Understanding abuse, trauma and toxic-ness."

How to call out and challenge in a safe way."

"Give people the language to use."

"Youth clubs, sports clubs, spaces outside of school."

"Impact of social media being used to intimidate."

"Having control of your digital footprint especially with photos of you are taken by others."

"Photos being taken/recorded without consent – having your own say in these images being shared."

"How can you set a boundary if your image is being shared – responsibility needs to be with social media companies."

"It's an achievable goal. However, it will take time because of changes in generations and their attitudes."

"The cycle of violence needs to be broken."

"Criminalized stalking on social media is considered as 'normal'."

"Misogyny – massive issue – influencers such as Andrew Tate."

"Other issues need to be addressed such as sexism."

"Combination of single and mixed sex preventative education sessions"

"Safe spaces for uncomfortable conversations"

"The role of arts as an outlet – Barbie movie."

PROTECTION & PROVISION

4. Women & girls who experience violence are well looked after by support systems.

The support systems surrounding children and young people discussed at workshops included mainly school, statutory children's services, and voluntary organisations. Feedback on PSNI and court services (including CCO's) are presented in the next section under The Justice System.

The feedback from the SAY group around support offered in school varied, with some children and young people relaying positive experiences with individual teachers or support staff. These experiences were mainly due to the personal response of the individual as opposed to the existence of appropriate systems or services. While children and young people in workshops provided examples of occasions when they felt supported by an individual going 'above and beyond' their role to reach out and support them, they described an overall feeling of being 'let down' by the systems and access to appropriate on-going support. They highlighted the need for additional training for teachers to support their understanding of domestic abuse, which they felt would in turn result in a more 'empathetic' and 'compassionate' response overall.

The children and young people empathised the point that they were not looking to be treated differently, but that systems need to be in place to support all children and young people experiencing adversity outside of the school setting. From their experience, the education system is set up to provide a service that is purely based on academic needs and is not flexible in meeting the social and emotional needs of the children and young people within it. This type of system is not concurrent with providing a safe environment in which all children and young people feel able and supported to reach their full potential.

The children and young people taking part in the workshops (all of whom have lived experienced of domestic abuse) were very vocal in their opinion that school was often their 'safe space' and that more needed to be done to recognise their needs and support them within this environment.

The children and young people within the group who had experience of statutory children's services once again had similar feedback regarding their experience with individual staff. Some discussed building positive relationships with social workers only for them to be changed and allocated a new social worker. Some reported having multiple

social workers allocated over short periods of time, which lead to them becoming withdrawn as they did not want to continue retelling their story. This often led to a lack of trust in relationships with Social Workers. They also fed back a lack of transparency within the system in general, and a feeling of not being listened to or believed. This was particularly apparent in cases of contact, where some young people discussed being placed in situations where they felt 'unsafe' because the Social Worker had not listened to them or did not believe what they were saying. The children and young people once again discussed the need for additional training for social workers and social care staff, to ensure adequate standards of competence, and an ability to understand the often-complicated issues that children and young people face.

Regarding their experience of voluntary support services, the children and young people's feedback was mainly positive. One young person discussed how the first time she had a conversation around 'safe or healthy boundaries in relationships' was in the project she attended at Women's Aid. She pointed out that this topic should be discussed in school or at least by one of the several social workers that supported her family.

The other young people concurred that the youth groups and Women's Aid groups they attended provide a safe space for them to explore complicated issues which is vital for their emotional well-being, as well as keeping them safe. A young person within the group discussed the current landscape of toxic masculinity, and how the first place he felt safe to explore this (as a young male) was in the Women's Aid youth group he attended.

The one issue all the young people experienced in relation to voluntary sector youth services was their availability. Either they were time limited e.g., 6 – 10 weeks or they were at full capacity. Some young people talked about local youth centres that were either closed or only open one evening per week.

One young person explained:

"If we don't see healthy relationships or respect shown at home, if school won't talk about these issues and there are no groups to go to talk about them... how are we meant to figure this stuff out."



**“BE MORE AWARE OF
HOW SILENCED PEOPLE
WHO EXPERIENCE
DOMESTIC ABUSE ARE”**

Comments from children and young people regarding support system included:

“More training for mental health staff.”

“More teacher training into being able to identify underlying certain issues in young people.”

“Get other organizations involved in the school curriculum. Keep the information relevant and up to date for different age groups.”

“More funding in Women’s Aid for more funding for kids’ stuff – workshops, groups and refuge.”

“More funding in police services. Police need specialized training in gender-based violence and towards kids too.”

“Be more aware of how silenced people who have experienced domestic abuse are.”

“Faster mental health services, less of a wait time for a referral.”

“School is a safe place – one of the few places I can name a safe place.”

“You can feel unsafe anywhere.”

“Fear of speaking out.”

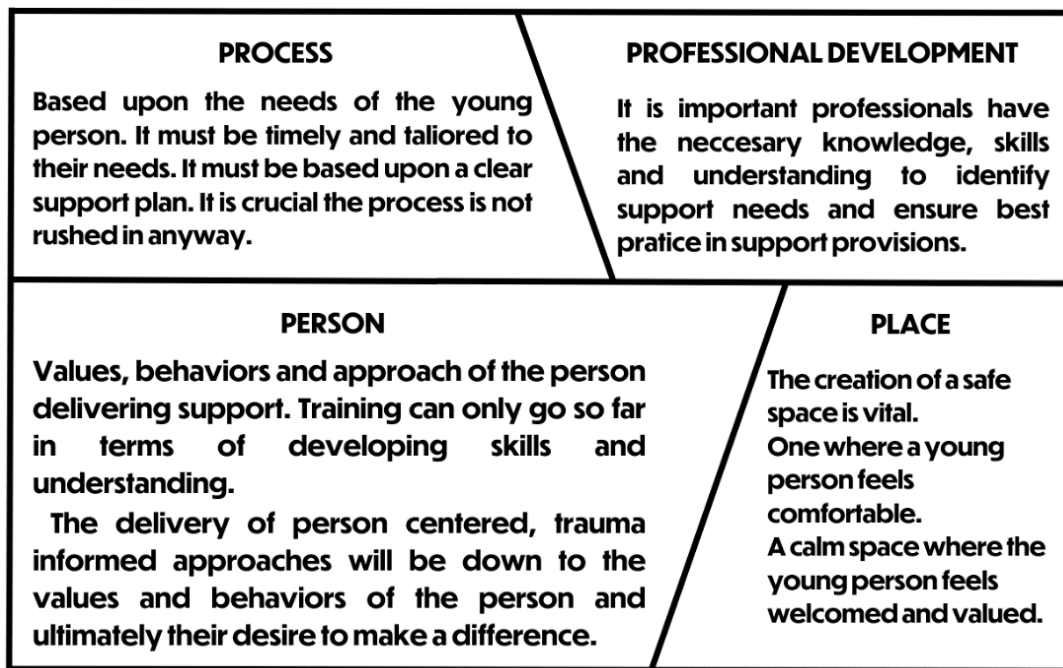
“You can be surrounded by people and still be unsafe – we need more bystander awareness.”

“Training for teachers: not making it obvious when going for support, all trained with an individual plan, and they know who needs to know.”

The experience of the children and young people within the SAY project (made up from C&YP from across NI) demonstrates a strong need for quality mandatory domestic abuse training provision for all professionals working with families on a regular basis to enable them to intervene at the earliest stage to promote children and young people’s safety and stability.

Though, as the children and young people have clearly vocalised, professional development needs to go beyond formal training, to include promotion of effective interpersonal skills and value-based approaches. Several issues and factors need to be taken into consideration by organisations when considering professional development and support for practitioners to understand and respond appropriately and compassionately to children and young people experiencing adversity, or those at risk. Alongside professional and personal development for practitioners, organisations need to provide an environment that encourages genuine engagement and facilitates the complex and often diverse needs of children and young people. This environment should include processes and systems that enable and empower both the practitioners and families within it.

The diagram that follows presents a model for thinking for the creation of ‘safe spaces’ for children and young people.



THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

5. The community trusts the Justice System to help women and girls who are victims of violence against them.

**They didn't
tell us he was
let out of
prison...**

**The Courts make you
feel like a liar...
why would you want to
keep telling your story
to people who don't
believe you**

**It can be really scary when the police come
to your house, you feel like you did
something wrong...maybe they could come
into schools more or something...
so they didn't seem so intimidating**

The young people within the SAY project described often feeling 'let down' by the Justice system for several reasons, as laid out below.

- They described the first response from the PSNI as 'intimidating' and 'scary'. They described a general fear of PSNI. They felt if officers could relate to them 'as humans' and make an effort to explain the situation to them (at their level), it would have a significant impact on their experience.

- The young people explained they are already scared and feel a sense of powerlessness due to the presence of the domestic abuse, if PSNI officers took the time to have a calm, reassuring conversation with them, it would support them to be able to process their experience in a less frightening way.
- Young people described experiences of being 'ignored' by PSNI officers or asked to leave the room (away from their mum). Although they understood the reasoning for being separated from their mother, they also thought PSNI officers could approach it differently, suggesting that one officer might stay with the child and calm them, whilst the other talks to their mum.

The children and young people within the group were extremely vocal regarding their experience of the courts. Unfortunately, what they had to say was not easy to hear. They described being 'invisible' within the family courts, not having their voice heard by the professionals who were there to support and protect them, and act on their behalf. They discussed not being believed, and their experience of having the perpetrator's voice listened to over theirs. They described their experience of witnessing the perpetrator 'work the system' and discussed their frustration and anger at being left 'powerless' in these instances.

Probably the most worrying response was a group of young people who believed the justice system itself is 'unsafe' for them. They felt they were 'let down', 'exposed' and made even more 'vulnerable' by the people and systems that were meant to protect them. They felt there were often opportunities for their voices to be heard, though instead of the people involved (PSNI, Solicitors, Barristers, Judges and Court appointed Social Workers) listening to them, they choose to ignore them and instead enable further avenues for them to be re-abused by the perpetrator.

One young person discussed his experience of not being believed, which created a space for the others to share their experience of this and of victim blaming throughout the whole process. With one young girl saying, *"I know my story is hard to hear... but that shouldn't give you the right to ignore me".*

If there is one thing to be taken away from what these young people with lived experience have said, it is that we need to listen, really listen to them! To uphold their dignity, protect their human rights, ease their trauma and above all, to keep them safe. They are the ones living the experience!

We need to build in mechanisms to current structures, that ensure the voice of the child is informing the process and outcomes, not systems and structures that are silencing and re-abusing them.

We need systematic changes within the Justice system that allow the voice of the victims to be heard as opposed to what these young people have described.

This needs to be addressed as a key priority.



Children and young people's comments on the justice system:

"Proactive victims do not have to do their own research."

"Take children/young people into account."

"Train officers to look for signs."

"More background checks."

"Confidence in the justice system."

"Police not pushing victims on the spot to make decisions."

"Police can be seen as a threat or intimidating."

"Governments, court and police have failed many women and families due to the unfair sentences against the perpetrators. Drug dealers get more of a sentence than rapists and pedophiles."

"More police should go into schools for kids to get used to such authority as it can be very vulnerable."

"Having more of a fair sentence – minimum 5 years."

"Speed of court case – more communication between the police and court (in relation to) the victim's bail."

"During cross examination/court hearing (victims) are left with (no) option to avoid the perpetrator or unfortunately have no choice. This is wrong as it can trigger the victim and scare them."

"The police didn't tell us he moved prisons."

"(The perpetrators) still can contact them online or (through) others."

"More background checks on people who deal with children – more extensive."

"Police need to engage friendlier."

"Trained female officers."

"Police need to engage with the children who are in situations and women."

"Police need to listen."

"Police need more training in these areas."

"No more victim blaming."

"More awareness about indicators of abuse."

"Being believed < proof of abuse/assault."

"Police presence training."

"Court reform – so hard to go to the police. When you go you must have all the evidence, face the person in court and what are the chances of them being charged."

"Understanding of power dynamics, gimmicking, the perpetrator knows how to cover it up and awareness of this creates understanding leading to empathy and a better response."

Women's Aid NI are proud of the strong collaborative partnership with the PSNI. Over the years we have worked collaboratively to develop and deliver training, inform policy and practice and share learning. We have worked with PSNI to highlight a need to respond more proactively to children and young people. Again, this is an issue which has featured strongly with our SAY group, many of whom have had experience of police intervention.

We will work proactively with PSNI to address this need and seek to influence more proactive child centred approaches.

Women's Aid NI strongly believes that contact with a perpetrator of domestic abuse should never be presumed to be in the best interests of the child. Over the years we have witnessed the physical and emotional distress of children before, during and after contact visits with many demonstrating behaviours such as, crying, being physically sick and other stress symptoms. Many children and young people clearly do not want to have contact and do not feel safe attending contact visits but have been forced to do though through court proceedings. Many children and young people in Women's Aid talked about feeling forced to go to contact visits against their wishes and how their feelings of fear, stress and in many cases absolute terror were not acknowledged or taken on board.

Contact where there has been a history of domestic abuse can be extremely dangerous. This can be evidenced by the Child First campaign launched by Women's Aid Federation England and the accompanying report, *Nineteen Child Homicides*³⁷ which reported 19 child homicides between 2005 – 2015 across 12 families, additionally two children who were seriously harmed through attempted murder. What was seriously concerning in this study was that for 7 of the 12 families, contact was ordered through court. This is an area which definitely requires further research to fully identify the best interests of children in these situations and to identify best practice, safe guidelines and robust risk assessment for assessing and granting contact.

Women's Aid NI seeks a complete review of the family court system in Northern Ireland with a panel of experts to see how we can transform our family court system to reduce the continued hardship to children and young people together with their parent (often the mother) who is being dragged through the court system and experiencing further trauma. This needs to be urgently addressed as part of the new strategy. It should be chaired by a panel of experts and aim to ensure the courts work in a more trauma informed way and has the best interests of the child at the heart of the process



³⁷ Women's Aid, *Nineteen Child Homicides*, Bristol: Women's Aid, 2016

WORKING BETTER TOGETHER

6. All organisations and government should work together to end violence against women and girls

Although the children and young people within this group may not have an in depth understanding of the complexities of collaborative working with regards to strategic approaches, they had strong views on organisations working together with a collective goal of supporting them and keeping them safe. Each of the children and young people had experience of being involved with several organisations at once who had differing priorities for example the courts, statutory children's services, and schools.

Children and young people often experienced the impact of these organisations pulling them in separate directions and having little understanding of the expectations that the others were placing on them. They felt information was not passed appropriately between the organisations working to support and protect them, and as a result this placed further pressure on them and their family.

Transparency was a key factor in this, the children and young people felt, not only did the professionals in their life not communicate enough with each other, they did not communicate effectively with them. This was particularly relevant within the court and child protection arena. The young people described confusion and frustration as to how their father could be prosecuted for domestic abuse (or other offenses) and then been allowed access to them, whether this be formally arranged or through unwanted communication from their father. The children and young people felt strongly about the lack of transparency and communication within the systems that are intended to support and protect them.

Recent initiatives such as Operation Encompass, which has been welcomed by teachers across NI, has shown us this type of collaborative approach is possible if the commitment is there.

Additionally, the young people engaged in the SAY project strongly believe that violence against women and girls is an issue that needs to be addressed by all members of society. Everyone has a role to play. They were clear, this is not a woman's issue, or a girl's issue, it is an issue that affects society as a whole and all members of society will benefit, when we work to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls.

Finally, we cannot continue to work within our own silos. Ending violence against women and girls requires a coordinated approach across all Government Departments, statutory

and voluntary agencies. We need to share information, knowledge, and evidence across sectors to ensure children and young people within our society are heard, recognised and responded to appropriately. The need for collaborative cross departmental working is highlighted in key NI legislation and government strategy such as Children & Young People Strategy 2020-2030, Children Services Co-operation Act 2015).



Children and young people's comments on working better together:

"Treat every individual with respect."

"Better understanding when working together."

"Get talking."

"Get it stopped."

"Collective work - not just one groups views."

"Change society."

"What men can do to create change."

"Stop it from just being a women's issue."

"Taking stigma away from men's experiences."

"Women are not the only people to be affected by violence against women."

"Not assigning blame."

"To make young people feel comfortable. "

"So that young people feel heard."

“It will happen less - violence against women and children.”

“The law will be stronger to protect women, girls, and young people.”

“Everyone will be safer.”

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this consultation was to give a voice to children and young people, an opportunity for them to be heard by the people they deem to be ‘in power’. We feel privileged to have been able to facilitate this process and hope the information they have so courageously provided is heard and responded to with a genuine desire for change. It is our vision that all children and young people in Northern Ireland live in a society where they feel safe, respected, and have their rights upheld.

The young people involved in this response have spoken with one voice regarding their view that ending violence against women and girls is **every one’s responsibility**. It needs to be a priority across all government departments and all organisations that support and protect children and young people. This consultation process has clearly demonstrated that this is currently not the case. There are failures evident across all sectors that need to be prioritised for investigation and addressed urgently.

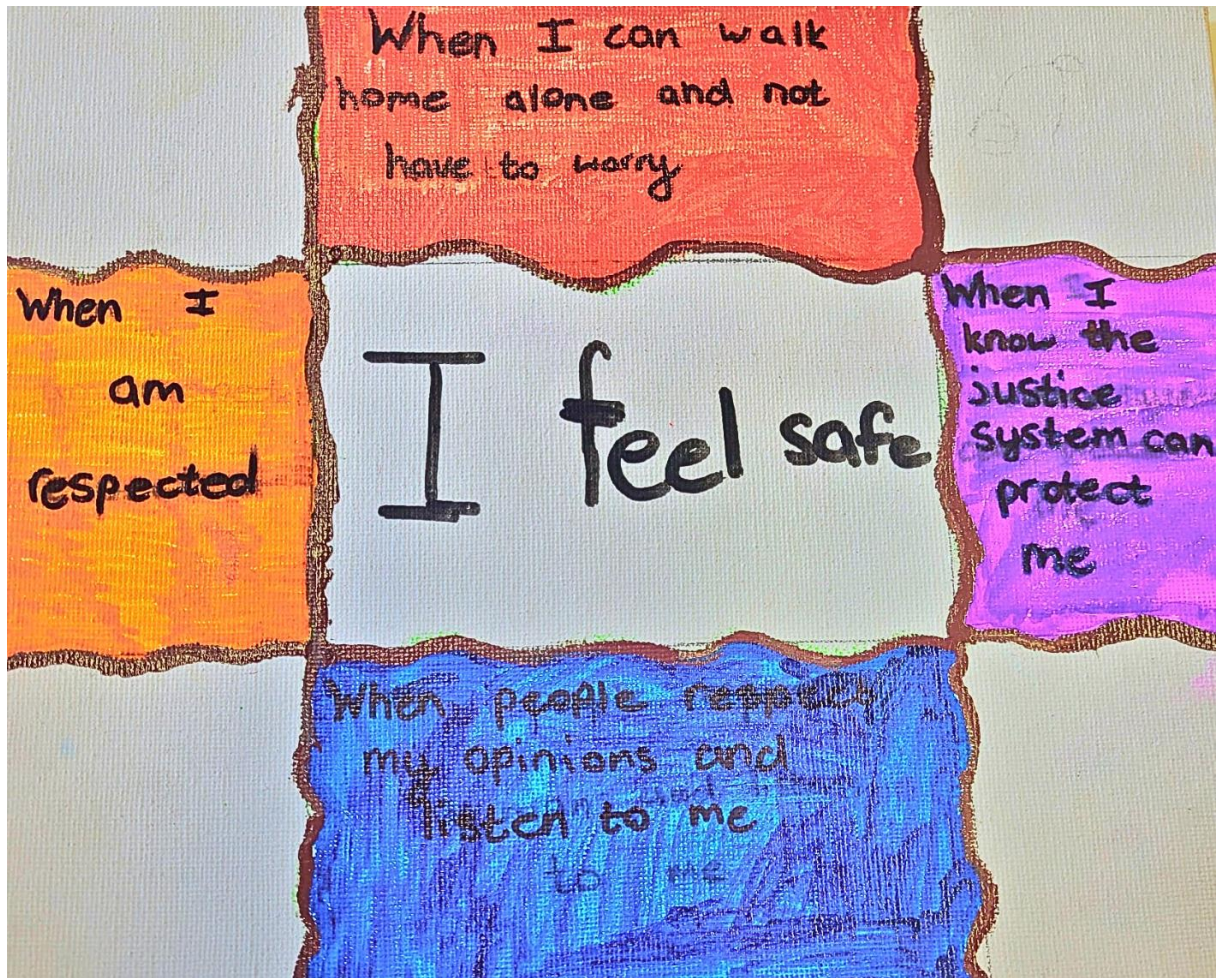
As stated initially in this strategy response, we very much welcome the emphasis on prevention. Though, this needs to be resourced appropriately with genuine co-design at its centre. The children and young people who have contributed to this response have cautioned us on the outcome if this is not the case... again, we need to listen!

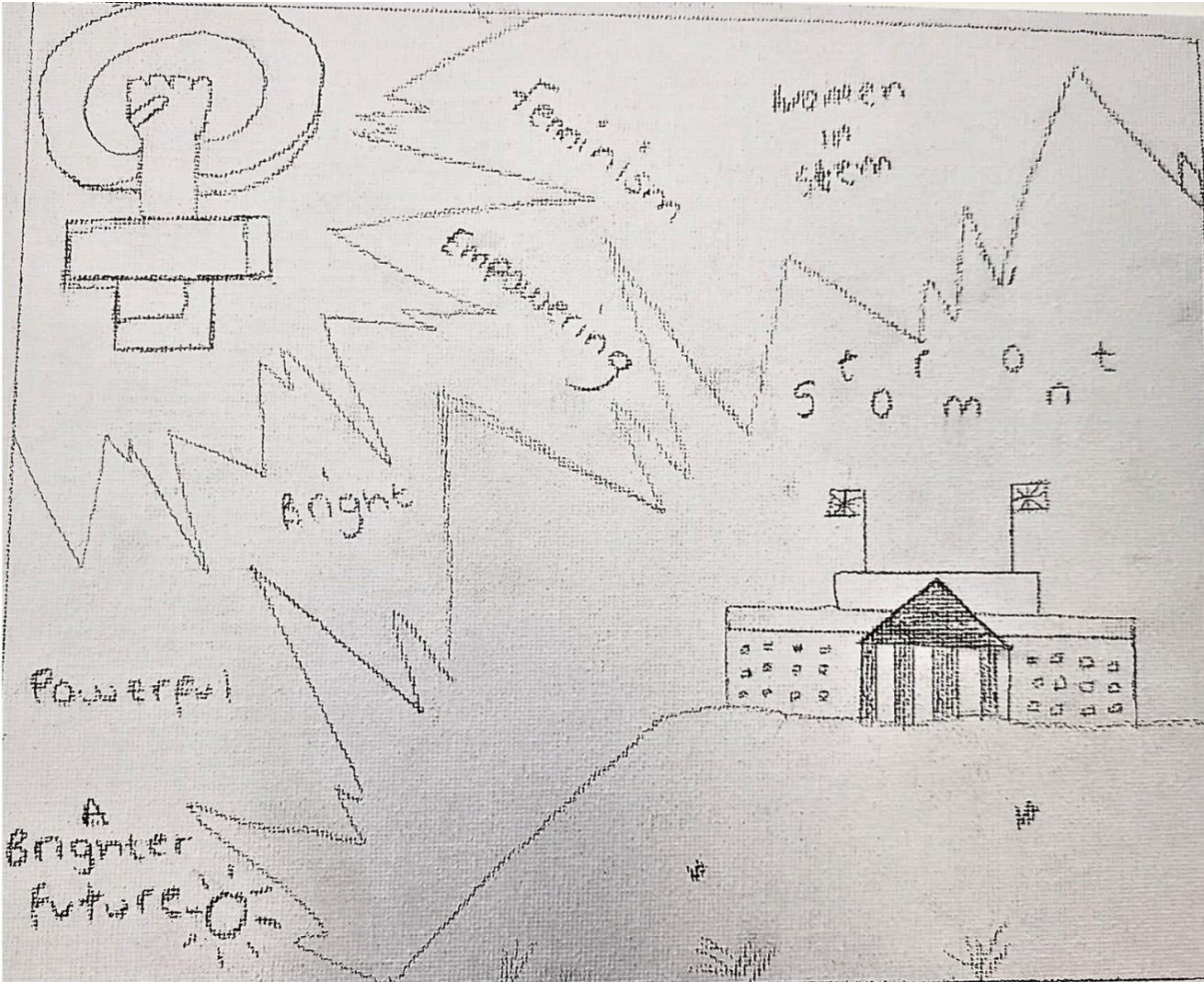
Finally, WAFNI would like to take this opportunity to thank all the children and young people who contributed to this strategy response. You have been insightful, courageous, and inspirational. It has been our absolute pleasure and privilege to have been involved in this process with you. We have taken the task of presenting your words very seriously and we hope we have done them justice.

“There can be no keener revelation of a society’s soul than the way in which it treats its children.”

- Nelson Mandela

ARTWORK BY CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE





ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland would like to extend our sincerest gratitude to all the women, children & young people who gave up their time to share their thoughts and gave us their opinions that helped to form this response.

We also wish to especially acknowledge the staff of Women's Aid across Northern Ireland for their dedication and expertise in supporting women, children and young people affected by domestic abuse. We are thankful for all that you do, and we sincerely thank you for taking the time to speak to us for this research with your very busy schedules.

Your voices are all incredibly powerful and they deserve to be heard loudly.

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