

Response to Hidden Crimes, Secret Pain

Amnesty International is the world's largest global human rights organisation. In March 2004 we launched a worldwide campaign to stop violence against women.

Amnesty International bases its work on the definition in the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, which states that violence against women is:

“Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts.” Gender-based violence against women is violence: “directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately”.

It is within this context that this response is written.

There are several elements of this document with which we are somewhat concerned. These elements may be highlighted by reference to HM's Government's document a Cross Government Action Plan on Sexual Violence and Abuse, which seeks to deliver a strategy to tackle sexual violence and abuse in England and Wales and which is also currently the subject of consultation.

The background to this document states that the plan “recognises the continuum of gender-based violence, which represents a major cause and consequence of inequality, particularly for women.” It also states clearly that “the majority of victims of sexual violence and abuse are women.... Although sexual violence perpetrated by women does happen, most sex offenders are male.” It acknowledges that “it is important that sexual violence and childhood sexual abuse are not considered in isolation from other forms of gender-based violence, all of which represent a major violation of an individual's human rights” Quite starkly, it explains that tackling sexual violence and abuse is a priority because “it represents a form of gender inequality. Most perpetrators are male and most victims are female. It is both a consequence and cause of gender inequality.”

It is strange that the Northern Ireland document, by contrast, fails to spell out this reality. Hidden Crimes, Secret Pain is characterised by a reluctance to identify women as the main victims of sexual violence. This is a fundamental flaw and represents a major obstacle to really tackling

the attitudes which underlie this violence and allow it to continue at the epidemic levels we are currently experiencing.

We do not believe that attempting to address the needs of both child and adult victims of sexual abuse in the same document is the best way forward for either population.

We are concerned that there is insufficient emphasis on prevention and education. A poll by Amnesty International, published in 2005, found that around a third of people in the UK believe that a woman is partially or wholly responsible for being raped if she has behaved in a flirtatious manner, worn revealing clothing or has been drinking. The perpetuation of such myths can create a culture where the unacceptable actions of sex offenders are seemingly legitimised and allowed to continue. This can also make it difficult for victims to reveal what has happened to them and can influence the way in which juries respond in such cases.

We do not believe that the strategy in its draft form is properly victim focused. Greater emphasis should be given to the responsibility of the perpetrator and the needs of the victim. There is a particular lack of attention to proposals designed to address the long-term consequences of sexual abuse, especially to the mental health of survivors

Education is obviously key. To date in Northern Ireland there has been minimal work with children and young people to challenge attitudes that tolerate and normalise violence against women and we are disappointed that the strategy document does not begin to address this omission by suggesting that education on sexual violence should be included as part of the school curriculum. It would seem most sensible for such education to be integrated as part of the wider “safety and rights” theme.

There are clear links between sexual and domestic violence. Both are experienced primarily by women. According to the British Crime Survey Interpersonal Module 2004-05, over half of adult rapes are committed by the current or former partners of the victim, and 55% take place in the victim’s home. As is the case with domestic violence, it is common for victims to experience multiple incidents, sometimes over long periods of time, before they seek support or report to the police. Both are characterised by low levels of reporting and a help seeking process which can be very complex. In each case there is often an obvious disparity between the gravity of the crime and the length of custodial sentence which is imposed.

Amnesty International is clear that it is not possible to look at any one form of violence against women in isolation. While we welcome such initiatives as Tackling Violence At Home, we believe that good initiatives are being undermined by the lack of a strategic approach, with many gaps in policies and practices and a lack of communication between agencies and between and within government departments.

The benefits of a strategic approach are increasingly being recognised elsewhere in the United Kingdom. The CPS and Metropolitan Police are both developing strategies on violence against women and other public bodies are likely to follow suit. The Scottish Executive is developing a strategic framework on violence against women. Integrating all work on all forms of violence against women into a single, coherent, joined up and properly resourced strategy seems to us to be the most effective way forward. This would also have the advantage of avoiding duplication but ensuring that there were specialised resources and services for women who need them.

We welcome the proposals regarding sexual abuse referral centres but would point out that such a centre should only be one element of a coherent victim-centred approach to sexual abuse and will not be the option of choice for many survivors. The lack of an independent voice able to advocate and campaign on behalf of such survivors concerns us greatly.

There is one proposal in the document which we very much welcome. This is the proposal to commission research, which we regard as a potentially very exciting opportunity. We believe that this could represent a powerful mechanism for the profound change in social attitudes which is required if we are to really begin to address the causes and consequences of sexual violence. Research into the true extent of these abuses in Northern Ireland would provide us with a useful benchmark overview of the situation. Robust examination of how the issues of power and control underlie these crimes could provide us with powerful tools with which to begin to challenge attitudes and bring about transformation.

Amnesty International