

# The Bahá'í Council for Northern Ireland

## A response to “Hidden Crimes Secret Pain”

The Bahá'í Council for Northern Ireland would first like to thank the Sexual Violence Unit of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for undertaking this extremely important piece of work.

### **Introductory remarks:**

We fully support all proposals which will apply legal, sociological, medical and technical expertise to the existing problem. Likewise we fully support anything which will raise and maintain the dignity and privacy of the victim and assist her/him towards a process of healing. This would apply to the perpetrator as well.

We will comment on the aspect of prevention.

### **Part 2 – PREVENTION.**

We feel prevention is the key to long-term success. However many programmes are implemented, the problem of sexual, as well as physical, violence will continue to exist as long as mores, prejudices and societal traditions, as well as a general lack of spirituality, continue to exist in our society.

We would like to mention something about the word **spirituality** as it appears to have many definitions in society. To Bahá'ís this is not a vague feeling of other-worldliness. It is down-to-earth and essential for the smooth and peaceful running of society. In essence it means, respect for others, men and women alike, at all times and under all conditions. There are many words to describe the spiritual qualities involved in this process. Courtesy, trustworthiness, honesty, respect, dignity and kindness are but a few.

Development of these qualities is the basis of all religion.

### **ANNEX B Issues on which the government would welcome views.**

#### **Definition of sexual violence**

‘Any behaviour perceived to be of a sexual nature which is unwanted or takes place without consent’

#### **Q.1 Is this definition of sexual violence acceptable?**

#### **Comment:**

While we would be content with the definition given there may merit in considering the following:

“Behaviour of a sexual nature by anyone which violates the trust placed in or expected of that person”.

**Q.2 What will be the most effective ways to increase understanding of the realities of sexual violence among the general public including children?**

**Comment:**

- a) To systematically and persistently inculcate carefully planned and tested programmes of moral education in every school in Northern Ireland. This should be detached from any one church or faith and involve defining spiritual qualities, making sure that each and every child, appropriate to its age, understands what they are. To role play concepts of human dignity, moderation, respect, truthfulness, trust, treating men and women equally, and elimination of prejudice of race, class creed and colour.
- b) To seek the full support of all schools, clubs, Scouts, Cubs, Girlguides, Brownies etc, as well as adult groups, for the implementation of this programme.
- c) To provide for the training of school teachers and those who wish to specifically train to deliver the moral-training programmes.
- d) Seek the support of the media, both radio and television, to develop programmes for children and adults on the qualities necessary for the smooth running of society and especially on reducing sexual and physical violence. We feel this must be a holistic approach and cannot be restricted to sexual violence alone.

**Q.7 What steps could the media take to support the process of increasing public understanding and awareness of the realities of sexual violence?**

**Comment:**

- a) We feel that the internet must be considered as one of the mass-media communicators. Stronger action must be taken to reduce the availability of all sexual materials via this medium as well as eliminating the possibility of grooming taking place.
- b) We feel that advertising is not necessarily the way to go. It may in fact increase fear more than promote understanding and permit the public to think that sexual violence is even more widespread than it is. It may be better for the media to present educative-type programmes. The same goes for cinema owners. Many films screened are of such a nature as to add to rather than lessen the problem.

**Q.9 In addition to the education and training sectors what other sectoral groups and influencers have a role in delivering relevant messages?**

**Comment:**

- a) We suggest you enlist the support of all churches and faith based groups. In particular we suggest you contact the Inter-Faith Forum with reference to this matter.

**Q.10 What more could the government do to promote the importance of healthy relationships in society?**

**Comment:**

The phrase ‘healthy relationships’ is used from time-to-time throughout the paper. We feel this may be understood differently by different groups of people.

For example, most religious faiths, if not all, teach that sex before marriage is forbidden. It is, from their standpoint a ‘healthy relationship’ where there is mutual trust, caring and friendliness with mutual respect for each others privacy and modesty. This relationship grows until, marriage results, or not, as the case may be. This is seen as healthy and no sexual intercourse takes place.

Today there is a tidal wave of sexual material from all quarters washing over youth and adults alike. It might be seen in this context that having sex, mutually agreed, after the second or third date may be considered ‘healthy’. This normally includes advice on prevention of pregnancy and protection from sexually transmitted disease.

Bahá’ís would support the general teaching of all religions.

**Q.13 What practical measures could be developed to promote personal safety, generally, and to protect those most at risk, in particular?**

a) We feel that any carefully thought out methods of educating society on the abuses of drugs and alcohol will help significantly to reduce all forms of violence but especially sexual violence.

The whole subject of the dire consequences of loosing control should be aired.

**Final comment:**

It is increasingly recognized that all behavior - aberrant or otherwise - is primarily learned through family and other close relationships.

This recognition, however, does not address who is to prescribe and teach behavioral codes. We have a paradoxical situation where people expect “others” – teachers, social services, the Churches – to be responsible yet object strongly if they try to exercise any real authority.

The Bahá’í approach towards social issues is grounded in the belief that women and men are, in essence, spiritual beings located within the material creation. Bahá’ís believe that most of the dysfunction found in community and family life stems from the rejection or failure to recognise the frequently unconscious ‘*yearning for a life that satisfies the soul as well as the body*’.

We welcome the fact that human development is increasingly seen as more than economic development and welfare as being more than benefit provision. But, without an educational programme that focuses on moral and ethical education, and regards humankind as more than a social animal, it is doubtful whether we will see any real progress in elimination of sexual violence or indeed violence in general.

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