



# **The Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network**

## **Response to Consultation on A Proposed Regional Strategy for Addressing Sexual Violence in Northern Ireland**

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## **1. Introduction**

1.1 The Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network [NIRWN] is regional network established to articulate the voices of women in rural areas at a more strategic level. It is jointly funded by DARD and DSD. NIRWN has four key objectives:

- developing weak community infrastructure in areas where little or no community based rural women's groups exist,
- increasing rural women's capacity and opportunities to influence decision-making and policy formulation,
- running Northern Ireland wide communication campaigns with a local focus, highlighting the value of rural women's contribution, and
- offering a training and capacity building programme to rural women across the region.

NIRWN works towards highlighting the valuable contribution rural women make to the rural development agenda through the existing six rural women's networks and women's centres.

1.2 This response is written in support of the submission by the Women's Resource & Development Agency and draws on both WRDA's response and the consultation they held with a range of different organisations.

### **General Comments**

The Gender Equality Strategy should be referred to in the list of inter-related strategies identified in 1.6 as 'gender related violence' is one of its key action areas. In addition, the Rural Development Strategy should be noted in this list with particular reference to rural areas as identified in 1.23.

### **Q. 1 Definition of Sexual Violence**

There should be a separate paragraph that clearly states that most perpetrators are male and most victims are female as acknowledged in 1.22 and that it is a both a consequence and a cause of gender inequality.

The strategy should incorporate all forms of violence including domestic violence, forced marriage, rape, sexual assault, trafficking for sexual exploitation, female genital mutilation etc... We feel that the domestic violence and abuse strategy and the sexual violence strategy should be combined to ensure a better coordination of services and targeting of resources as the evidence highlights that most perpetrators are known to the victim and many are partners or family members.

### **Q. 2 Effective ways to increase understanding of sexual violence amongst the general public, including children.**

Public education campaigns should raise awareness that the majority of victims are women and the majority of perpetrators are men. 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 totally responsible for being raped if she has behaved in a flirtatious manner, worn revealing clothing or has been drinking. Campaigning and publicity must strongly challenge these attitudes and think creatively about where to place this message such as men's magazines, pubs, radios, internet sites, the Balmoral Show, public transport, GP surgeries as well as a TV campaign. The campaign should be coordinated by the government, community & voluntary sectors, youth clubs, churches, trade unions, farming, schools and business sectors. The printing and free distribution of leaflets and posters would ensure a wider reach.

There needs to be recognition that Northern Ireland is becoming and will continue to become a much more culturally diverse society and this needs reflected in how the messages around sexual violence are developed and how they will be effectively distributed to all ethnic communities in Northern Ireland.

There needs to be thought given to rural areas as victims are often much more isolated with the costs of disclosure sometimes much higher, particularly in tight knit small communities. Acts of sexual violence often remain hidden with conversations around the issue that much harder in most community settings.

It is important that the personal, community and societal costs of sexual violence are clearly identified, the links with alcohol intake and that it is those who are most vulnerable in this society who are most likely to be victims including those with mental illnesses, young people and children, people with learning disabilities and people with physical disabilities

Ultimately campaigns should be about preventing the sexual violence and giving confidence to victims of sexual violence to report. For campaigns to be effective, sufficient resources must be available to provide an effective response to those requiring support.

**Q.3 Which key target groups could contribute to supporting the process of increasing public understanding of the realities of sexual violence?**

Community and voluntary groups, trade unions, local government, farming, rural development organisations, churches, education and business sectors are vital partners in supporting increased wider public understanding. It is important that the costs of sexual violence are clearly identified and that those in leadership positions across all sections of this society are clearly seen to be behind public campaigns.

There is a distinctive role for women's groups, organisations and networks in developing lobbying and advocacy work in local areas and being seen as a credible and effective advocate. This however, requires consistent and constant resourcing.

**Q. 5 Effective ways to (a) encourage the development of social attitudes that will support the prevention of sexual violence;**

An important dimension to the inclusion of education on sexual violence in the school and formal and informal youth work education curriculum which reinforces the message that relationships should be based on respect and sexual activity should be consensual.

**(b) which key influencers could contribute most effectively to the process of dispelling myths and changing social attitudes.**

There is concern that there is a lack of skills, confidence, knowledge and commitment to developing such education material within both the school and youth work curriculum. Specialist groups should be supported in different localities driven by the community and voluntary sector to deliver this work supported by the Department of Education.

However, prevention work should not just be focused solely on young people since young people often take their lead from the behaviour of adults around them. A specific fund should be established which the community and voluntary sectors, churches, trade unions could access to work with adults and the wider population.

Programmes that are currently being run by the Probation Board focused on perpetrators of sexual violence should be expanded with adequate long term resourcing.

**Q. 6 Should government give a clear message to stem the tide of normalising sexual violence in society?**

Yes. All political parties in Northern Ireland should clearly sign up to the statement that 'sexual violence is a violation of a person's human rights' with the NI government underpinning this commitment by allocating appropriate resources within a clear and accountable policy framework. The UK government had endorsed both the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the UN Beijing Platform for Action both of which carry specific clauses relating to the elimination of violence against women.

Local government needs to take an active role using the Women in Local Council Initiative developed by the Local Government Staff Commission whereby each local Council now has a 'Gender Champion' and a Gender Equality Action Plan.

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

The media could clearly place sexual violence as a legitimate topic of conversation within the public arena and that the sustainable development of Northern Ireland will be undermined by the impact of and the personal, community and societal costs of sexual violence. We need to 'normalise' the conversation around this issue and make it ok for people to talk about beyond the confines of those who specifically work in this area.

**Q. 8 What key messages should be promoted in relation to how healthy relationships and respect can help prevent sexual violence?**

The most critical message is that the sexual violence of human beings, and specifically of women's bodies, is a fundamental denial of basic human rights and that it is not only a private, domestic issue but a political and economic one that will impact on Northern Ireland's development as a prosperous and good place to live for all.

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

Trade unions, local government, farming, rural development organisations, political parties, churches, education and business sectors are vital partners in supporting increased wider public understanding. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in developing its role as a 'Rural Champion' could play an important role in challenging attitudes within rural communities.

There is a distinctive role for women's groups, organisations and networks in developing lobbying and advocacy work in local areas and being seen as a credible and effective advocate for victims and survivors. This however, requires consistent and constant resourcing.

Key equality organisations such as the NI Human Rights Commission, the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland and to a lesser extent, the Community Relations Council, have a critical role.

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

The government could insist that no school or youth service provision in receipt of public funding can opt out of personal and sexual education programme due to religious or other considerations.

**Q. 11 What mechanisms could be used for the ongoing collection of data?**

It is important that there is data on the specific groups identified in 1.23, and that these are not just mentioned as part of a list with no further information provided.

**Q. 19 What are the key messages to be developed with (a) adult perpetrators and potential perpetrators;**

The unacceptability of the behaviour needs to be reflected in prosecution and sentencing. It is important that those concerned about their own potential behaviour or those concerned about the behaviour of friends or family have somewhere they can turn to for confidential advice and guidance to stop escalation.

**And (b) with young people who display sexually harmful behaviour?**

The principle has to be intervention at an early stage.

**Q. 20 How can the policy and practice of the different Criminal Justice agencies be improved when addressing the needs of victims of sexual violence?**

There needs to be better access for victims whose English is not their first language and that interpreters and translators are provided as of right rather than fought for.

Resources need to be provided for bi-lingual advocates who support a victim throughout their case and who have knowledge of the criminal justice system and the issues around sexual violence.

The principle must be that the agencies need to work in such a manner that the victim is always placed first rather than the different bureaucratic and operational demands of different agencies.

**Q. 25 What key services would contribute most to victim/survivor care and support?**

We would support fully the recommendations of the WRDA's submission as stated below and would underpin the point that a SARC should not be limited to one geographical area as is hinted in the consultation document, determined by population density. This would impact particularly on women in rural areas. We would also support the need to think clearly the distinct roles of community and voluntary sectors organisations and statutory bodies and the most effective working relationships. For example, many community and voluntary groups provide vital support in 'walking alongside' a victim through the criminal justice process but often do not have the expertise to provide longer term needs around mental health issues. There needs to be proper resourcing of both.

*"The proposal to establish a SARC has a number of elements that require greater elaboration and consideration. A SARC should not be confined to a medical model. SARCs are regarded as being effective only at the time of the crisis. Emphasis also needs to be given to the need to develop a relationship of trust and support for the victim/survivor. SARCs are a one stop shop for those affected by 'stranger' rapes. They are not a solution for women who are victims of all sexual violence, particularly in a domestic situation.*

*Many women would not regard SARC as an option because it would involve travel, and possible stigma or danger if being seen entering a specific venue housing a SARC.*

*It was felt very important that a SARC would not be limited to one geographical location, probably Belfast. This would raise considerable difficulties for women in rural areas in particular. Of more value would be an outreach service with a mobile unit to bring the service to the victim/survivor. If a SARC was to be in one area, then there should be free, unidentified transport to bring people to it.*

*A SARC would need to do more than provide help at one particular crisis point. What access to services would be available following the SARC visit? Would a SARC service take into account the psychological needs of those presenting themselves? Could access to free, long-term counselling be made available at the SARC stage?*

*If the voluntary sector is to be involved in the provision of services, then more funding must be directed at the sector to ensure that it can deliver services."*

**Q. 26 Is there a need to develop different services for different cohorts of victims/survivors, due to gender, age, or sexual orientation?**

It is important that those delivering the services have the capacity, knowledge and skills to engage with different needs. This is particularly relevant when supporting victims/survivors whose first language is not English or who are coming from different cultural contexts, many of whom have lost the extended family support and are very isolated. There can be a dangerous combination of cultural ignorance with sexual violence as a taboo subject leading to the victim/survivor being unrecognized and unsupported.

It is important that geographical location does not determine quality and level of access to services.

**Q. 30 Is a 24 hour sexual violence regional help-line needed in Northern Ireland?**

Support must be provided on a 24 hour basis, particularly now the Rape Crisis Centre is no longer operating. Consideration should be given to supporting and growing the service provided by some women's centres who are currently struggling to survive.

**Q. 38 Have the needs of s75 categories of people been fully addressed in the proposals?**

It is vital that the specific needs of groups listed in passing in 1.23 [children, people with disabilities, people with sensory impairments, people with learning difficulties, people with mental health problems, homeless people, the elderly, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people, people living in rural areas] are clearly identified and worked through in close consultation with people who can speak out of those experiences. It is not sufficient to list the groups; the specific needs and how this strategy will address these needs must be detailed.