



Federation Northern Ireland

RESPONSE TO

'HIDDEN CRIMES, SECRET PAIN'

**Consultation on a proposed
Regional Strategy
to address
Sexual Violence
in Northern Ireland**

Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland
129 University Street
BELFAST BT7 1HP

Tel: 02890 249041
Fax: 02890 239296

General Email: info@womensaidni.org
Website: www.womensaidni.org

24 Hour Domestic Violence Helpline - 0800 917 1414

Introduction

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

Women's Aid services across Northern Ireland include:

- 12 refuges with 300 bed spaces, playrooms and facilities.
- 1069 women and 1026 children sought refuge in 2005 - 2006
- 12 resource centres for women seeking information and support; groupwork and training.
- 24 Hour Domestic Violence Helpline 0800 917 1414
- Move-on houses for women and children leaving refuges.
- Floating Support for women staying at home.
- Training on domestic violence and related issues.
- Inter-agency work across Northern Ireland.
- Young Person's Development Project

The following response is based on consultation with Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland and our ten local Women's Aid groups. The term Women's Aid refers to the Federation and the local groups.

Women's Aid welcomes the publication of 'Hidden Crimes, Secret Pain' and the opportunity to comment upon it.

The discussions in the consultation concentrated upon specific aspects of the consultation and therefore not all of the consultation questions have been addressed.

Interrelated Strategies

We note the list of inter-related strategies, initiatives and reports listed in 1.6 deemed relevant to the strategy.

Women's Aid is working in partnership towards implementation of the '*Tackling Violence at Home*' strategy and are very keen that any overlap or duplication of work is explored rather than merely adding on more layers of bureaucracy. It is our view that a cross-departmental broad Violence Against Women strategy, incorporating domestic violence, rape, sexual assault, trafficking for sexual exploitation, etc. is required. This is preferable to a silo themed approach and would enable integrated policy planning and encourage joined-up implementation.

We are concerned also that the Gender Equality Strategy is omitted from this list. As the GES includes 'gender related violence' amongst its key action areas and has the strategic objective of the elimination of gender based violence, we would urge the inclusion of the Gender Equality Strategy in the strategies informing the development of the sexual violence strategy.

1. Definition of sexual violence

Women's Aid is concerned with the lack of attention to the gendered nature of sexual violence. Research proves that the majority of all sexual violence and domestic violence is perpetrated by men against women. Although this is acknowledged in the document it is not given the attention it deserves. Without an adequate understanding and analysis of sexual violence any strategy to address it will not be effective.

The definition is acceptable if it is intended to include forms of violence such as sexual harassment and stalking.

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

Campaigning and publicity should provide clear information on what constitutes sexual violence. The overall message must be that this is unacceptable behaviour. There appears to be a reluctance to identify women as the main victims of sexual violence. Explanation for such acts must include the imbalance of power between men and women. Public awareness campaigns must include a focus on the vulnerability of certain groups, such as the mentally ill, persons with learning disabilities and people with physical disabilities. Children also need to be given age appropriate information that enables them to understand what is happening and to access help and support. Resources need to be made available to follow up and offer support to victims of sexual violence who disclose.

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

All sectors have a role in this. The business sector should adopt a robust approach to harassment in the workplace and put in place domestic violence policies to help people whose work suffers because of this. Churches should be asked to contribute to building a zero tolerance to sexual violence of all forms, including within the home. The voluntary sector, in particular women's groups and centres, can play an important role in their local communities and in lobbying and advocacy work. Organisations such as ourselves should be given the resources to offer the levels of support required.

4. How best can children's attitudes to sexual violence be gathered?

This should only be undertaken with great care and sensitivity and under the guidance and direction of experts in the field of child development and sexual violence.

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

This is an area of immense concern to Women's Aid. We have long recognised the necessity to do preventative work with children of all ages if domestic violence and all forms of violence against women is to be eliminated within society. Access to schools with this message has been piecemeal with no commitment shown by the Department of Education. We would urge that this strategy when agreed must be taken on board and acted upon by all departments and relevant agencies.

We would advocate that education on sexual violence should ideally be included as part of

the school curriculum.

However Women's Aid has concerns about teachers lack of skills, knowledge, willingness and confidence in delivering such education material within the curriculum. This part of the curriculum should be delivered by specialist groups already working in this area, such as Women's Aid, and be supported by the Department of Education.

There was also concern about how those children who would be most at risk or in need of education on sexual violence might not access it if parents had the option of removing children from sessions as with religious classes in schools. It was felt, therefore, that any education on sexual violence could be integrated as part of the bigger 'safety and rights' issue/subject. 'Educators' could perhaps work on the issue as skills rather than subject.

Concern was expressed that nothing was aimed at the perpetrators of sexual violence and that they should also be targeted.

(b) Key influencers

Parents, teachers and community groups should be working together with specialist groups like Women's Aid to educate children. It was felt that any education and prevention work should also be targeted at all these people, a 'holistic approach' is needed to be taken in order for preventative work to have maximum impact.

6. Should government give a clear message ahead of public opinion, to stem the tide of normalising sexual violence in society?

Women's Aid are concerned that this question has even been posed, as if there is a legitimate option for government to do other than address vigorously the rise in sexual violence. We would also contest the assumption within the question - although sexual violence is being 'normalised' by media outlets there is a clear groundswell of public opinion aghast at it.

We believe that the government needs to show leadership on this matter and send a clear message of zero tolerance of sexual violence out to all sectors of society.

Government should provide clear information about sexual violence and should be direct and open in explanation. Sexual violence is a violation of a person's human rights. The overall message must be that this is unacceptable behaviour. In addition, government spending should be within a policy framework that is directed towards a more effective, integrated and preventative response to violence against women in general. Both the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the UN Beijing Platform for Action, which have been endorsed by the UK government, have specific clauses relating to the elimination of violence against women. It is stated that violence is one of the major barriers for achieving gender equality. This message should be included in government policy.

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

Media outlets should be included in the education drive to grasp the links between exploitative portrayal of sexual violence on screen / in magazines for titillation and the impact this has on everyday life.

A 'shaming' campaign such as that for drink driving, aimed specifically at young men, should be instituted. Reporting of sexual violence should be unambiguous in placing such acts of violence within the following context, as articulated by Kofi Annan, it is 'the most shameful human rights violation, and it is perhaps the most pervasive. It knows no boundaries of geography, culture or wealth. As long as it continues, we cannot claim to be making real progress towards equality, development and peace.'

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

Healthy relationships based on respect for self and others will encourage trust, dialogue, caring and resilience within relationships and so minimise fear, learned inappropriate behaviours and the desire to dominate and hurt the other.

A fundamental message must relate to women's right to equality and to respect, in a society where massive inequalities between men and women still exist.

Relationship and sexuality education in schools must be more than biology and the mechanics of sex. It has to include emotional education and age appropriate discussion of what makes for healthy relationships between people.

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

Women's Aid believe that the development of a cross-departmental, cross-agency approach to addressing all forms of violence against women would help integrated practical measures to emerge. For example provision of public transport, street lighting, timing of police patrols, use of community safety wardens, Helplines, and accessible places of safety and support could all be used more effectively if developed as part of an integrated approach.

14. (A) How can we stop sexual violence happening to children

Vigorously enforce child protection legislation and ensure that the rights of the child is always at the centre of any decision making.

16. How do we ensure that the legal system is better able to provide children with protection and justice when they have experienced sexual assault?

Women's Aid works with women and children and is very aware that the needs of children are very different from those of adults. Children should be covered under Child Protection. It is our belief that children are often let down at present by the legal system and this needs to be addressed urgently.

Perpetrators of sexual assault and abuse against women and children should be dealt with very severely under the law, at present there are too many loop-holes for offenders to make a mockery of justice eg the travesty of automatic early release.

However we are not convinced that including children within this strategy is appropriate as it may confuse the needs of adults and children.

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

There needs to be a clear undiluted message that this behaviour is unacceptable, and this needs to be reflected in prosecution and sentencing.

There is an urgent need to develop mandatory programmes for all sentenced offenders and prisoners challenging them to face their behaviour with the resources to carry this through, similar to the MODV programme (Men Overcoming Domestic Violence). In particular, there must be more resources for work with young offenders.

Indeterminate and extended public protection sentencing for the more dangerous offenders is vital. Perpetrators who remain a threat to women and children must remain under strict surveillance when released.

20. How can the policy and practices of the different criminal justice agencies be improved when addressing the needs of victims of sexual violence?

The responses of the different criminal justice agencies have vastly improved over the last number of years, however there is a long way to go to have a consistently professional, caring and appropriate response to victims of sexual violence. Ignorance of the devastating effects of sexual violence is still common and ongoing training is a key area that would help.

The paramount need to ensure the safety and security of the victim is vital and often becomes subjugated to the needs of an institution, for example victims being required to travel long distances to access a care suite and provide forensic evidence is potentially traumatising for the victim but just a 'logical' decision for an agency.

21. What areas should the criminal justice system prioritise when addressing cases of sexual violence?

The overlap between domestic violence victims and victims of sexual violence is enormous. The myth that sexual violence is mostly perpetrated by the 'stranger in the alley' is still alive as is an ambivalence to accept that rape occurs within marriage and intimate relationships. These facts need to be fully recognised within all branches of the criminal justice system and in turn be reflected in their practices.

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

Women's Aid has a real concern that there is no longer an independent, funded Rape Crisis Centre advocating for the rights of women and children who are victims of sexual violence and providing services for them. We believe this is a situation that cannot be allowed to continue and would urge that this strategy incorporates the need to address this gap and provide adequate funding to resource it. Women's Aid would be willing to work with other women's sector organisations and government agencies to develop a plan to address this gap and incorporate it within the overall sexual violence strategy.

The urgent need for victims/survivors was access to free, secured, long term counselling available immediately after experiencing sexual violence and also

accessible to those who disclose after many years of silent suffering.

The proposal to develop a SARC was discussed in depth and the following key points emerged:

- **Any best model for a SARC, should not be based on a purely medical model and it should not be geographically limited.**
- SARCs were a one stop shop suitable for victims/survivors of 'stranger' rapes, not a solution for women who were victims of all sexual violence, particularly in a domestic situation.
- For most women Women's Aid work with, particularly in a refuge situation, SARCs would not be an option as it would involve travel, acceptance/naming and identifying the type of abuse, ie. sexual and possibly the danger involved with being seen entering a specific venue housing a SARC.
- SARCs are only effective at the time of the crisis, there was no emphasis on building and developing a relationship of trust and support for the victim/survivor.
- What sign posting or access to services would be available for women after a visit to a SARC? this would be an important factor in women using the centres and referral.
- SARCs did not look at the bigger issue of the long term effect of sexual violence- it is imperative that a SARC should take into account the psychological needs of the victim/survivor.
- There should be some model of group support available, (similar to the 'Journey to Freedom' programme, available through Women's Aid) through a SARC.
- The emphasis should be on support for the victim - prosecution is not always an option. However, if forensic evidence could be submitted anonymously, that was encouraging and adequate support may lead to prosecution.
- It was felt that a SARC should cater for adult victims/survivors as children's needs were very different and should be met accordingly. There was some debate about the age from which a SARC should provide services for and there was a suggestion that it should be 17-18 plus.
- It is important to include the voluntary sector in the SARC, however this could stretch already scarce resources. It would therefore, be imperative to secure more funding to ensure the voluntary sector can meet the needs of victims/survivors that use the SARC.
- Ideally the SARC should be provided through an **outreach service**, with a mobile unit to bring the service to the victim/survivor.
- There was some concern that there might be a duplication of existing services and that any mobile unit should enhance and compliment services already operating.
- Research was needed to ascertain what needs there are for victims/survivors of sexual violence, to review referrals, ensuring their needs are met through a SARC.
- There are gaps in the current services for ethnic minorities and a SARC needs to cater for all victims/survivors to provide equality.

26. Is there a need to develop different services for different cohorts of victim/survivor, due to gender, age or sexual orientation?

All services need to be developed in consultation with people who have experienced sexual violence otherwise the needs of victims will never truly be met.

There are clearly gaps in current services for ethnic minorities and gay / lesbian people and attention needs to be given to addressing those gaps and ensuring equality of

treatment within all services.

28. Which organisations could benefit victims/ survivors by having clear protocols for joint working?

If any strategy is to be effective it must harness the efforts of different agencies to whom victims will be referred. Without this integrated approach agencies can end up adding to the trauma of the victim. Clear protocols are essential and Women's Aid would welcome them and be willing to contribute to their development.

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

The success of the 24 hour Domestic Violence Helpline managed by Women's Aid must be considered as evidence in support of establishing a 24 hour Helpline on sexual violence. Sexual violence, like domestic violence, does not only occur in office hours.

Women's Aid would be very willing to help support the establishment of such a Helpline by sharing our experiences and good practice. Consideration of issues of gender are also critical to any potential success eg many women will be totally unwilling to discuss such matters with a male Helpline worker.

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

There are gaps in the current services for ethnic minorities and more should be done, in consultation with representatives of minority ethnic groups, to ensure that these gaps are addressed. The needs of those from the lesbian, gay and transgendered communities have also to be taken into account, in consultation with representative groups, so that services can be provided that sufficiently address all needs. The specific needs of older people, who are often overlooked in respect of being victims of sexual violence, also need to be addressed.

Women's Aid Federation
'Hidden Crimes, Secret Pain' response - 2007