



A submission to the consultation on -

“Hidden Crimes, Secret Pain”

A Consultation Paper on a proposed Regional Strategy for addressing Sexual Violence in Northern Ireland

April 2007

(on behalf of)
Women's Support Network
Floor 2
109-113, Royal Avenue
Belfast
BT1 1FF
Tel: 02890 236923
E-mail: policy@womenssupportnetwork.org

The Women's Support Network (WSN), established in 1989, is an infrastructural umbrella organisation, which provides support and services to, and represents over

30 groups (mostly in the Greater Belfast area), including community-based women's centres, women's projects and women's infrastructure groups.

WSN aims to achieve social, political and economic justice through the promotion of the autonomous organisation of women. The Network aims to strengthen the collective voice of women's groups and to promote and develop networking opportunities, to enable collective action and to impact upon policy and decision making processes. We provide an accessible, relevant and high quality support service and resource for member groups. The Network is also an important information provider on issues relevant to community-based women's organisations and for other infrastructure groups, nationally and internationally.

The Women's Support Network welcomes the opportunity to respond to the NIO and DHSSPS proposals on a Regional Strategy for addressing Sexual Violence in Northern Ireland - 'Hidden Crimes Secret Pain.' As a Network of women's centres and other organisations working with women, we are obviously very keen to ensure that women feel safe and protected in our society and where such violence occurs that proper supports and services exist for victims of sexual violence. This response has been informed by our attendance at a consultation workshop on the proposed strategy hosted by the Northern Ireland Women's Aid Federation and the Women's Resource and Development Agency in Belfast on 29th March 2007 and also a workshop we recently attended hosted by Amnesty International addressing the need for and the potential framework of an integrated strategy to address all forms of violence against women. While WSN may not have expertise in the specific area of sexual violence, we have a keen interest in the elimination of gender – based violence; violence against women and girls that for many in society remains acceptable and is scandalously prevalent within our society. Please find outlined below some of our reflections on the proposed strategy:

1. Firstly, we are very disappointed at the lack of gender analysis that is employed in the development of this strategy. We would strongly contend that the establishment of a firm evidence base is a crucial step in successfully building an effective strategy and

action plan. It is no secret that women are the vast majority of victims in terms of sexual violence and men are the majority of perpetrators. As well as needing robust data, disaggregated by gender, it is crucial that government and the public acknowledge the reasons why sexual violence occurs in societies all over the world; specifically why men are disproportionately the perpetrators and women, the victims. We strongly concur that all victims of sexual violence, regardless of gender, receive proper services and supports and that all perpetrators of sexually violent crimes be subject to the full rigours of the law. Essentially, this important strategy is gender neutral and is therefore, we believe, of disservice to women. We believe it is disingenuous for the NIO and DHSSPS to fail to acknowledge the gendered nature of the vast majority of crimes of a sexually violent nature.

2. Following on from the above, the Women's Support Network strongly supports the creation of an integrated strategy that would address the myriad of issues around violence against women including sexual violence. An integrated strategy would examine the prevalence and reasons for gender-based violence and include actions that would address sexual violence, domestic violence, human trafficking etc. WSN would contend that the causes and reasons for sexual violent crime perpetrated against women are different than those perpetrated against men. Similarly, the motives and reasons are generally not the same for sexual violence perpetrated against children.
3. WSN therefore does not believe that that this strategy should address sexual violence against children. We believe that this dilutes what should be the prime focus of the strategy – eliminating violence against women. 'Child' victims of sexual violence will need tailored supports and services. A strategy to address sexual violence against children would focus on the particular dynamics of sexual crimes perpetrated against children and ensure that services and supports are adequately tailored to the needs of child victims of sexual crime. We do not believe the approach taken in the proposed strategy – that one size fits all – is useful or will be effective for the victims.

4. We generally agree that key areas that need to be addressed by a strategy are: Prevention, Protection and Justice and Support. All of these are important factors to address in terms of tackling sexual violence. However, we strongly believe that educating and informing the public to affect 'attitudinal change' on issues surrounding (sexual) violence against women must constitute a significant and important aspect of any strategy created to tackle such issues.

5. Some of this is dealt with in 'Examining Social Attitudes' pg. 22. WSN agrees that myths and stereotypes must be challenged with vigour. However, we would contend that government and other relevant agencies/bodies need to place much more attention and effort on changing social attitudes. It is clear that violence against women, including sexual violence is deemed 'tolerable' in many parts of the world. Even in Northern Ireland, we raise our young girls in 'fear' as they must be made aware at an early age of the violent dangers that could befall them. We do not raise our young boys in quite the same way as they are less likely to be victims. WSN believe that it is unacceptable in 2007 that young girls and women live in fear of assault, often unable to leave the confines of their home alone after dark because of fear of attack. We would like to see this simple and shameful fact of life acknowledged in this strategy. There must be a comprehensive programme that will change social attitudes to violence and sexual violence against women. This should include addressing such issues in our schools and running a hard-hitting media campaign. A media campaign could involve shaming perpetrators, similar to the current 'drink-driving' campaign aimed at young men.

6. Subsequent to a comprehensive campaign to change 'social attitudes' there will be a need for resources to deal with the aftermath. Many women victims of violence do not come forward, press charges or seek help and support for numerous reasons, one of which is shame. If such a campaign was successful, it would be important

that adequate and tailored services existed to deal with the numbers coming forward, particularly in the short term.

7. The legal system also needs to be overhauled. Again, WSN would not claim to have any expertise in this particular area, but it is clear from the media and from the very low numbers of successful convictions for sexual violence that there is a problem with the legal framework through which these issues are dealt with. We would urge that this obvious anomaly be examined and addressed.
8. There are a number of issues in terms of support for victims that we would like to see. These are:
 - generic and easily accessible information on services and supports for victims;
 - ensuring services are suitable to the needs of victims
 - support outside of the hours of 9-5
 - acknowledgement that support may be long-term and not just short-term
 - WSN are very concerned at the recent closure of the Northern Ireland Rape Crisis Centre. It is essential that an independent service such as this one exists for victims of sexual violence.
9. Finally we are pleased that such an important issue as Sexual Crime and Violence will be addressed by the Northern Ireland Assembly through the development and implementation of a strategy. However, as mentioned earlier we are very disappointed that the strategy is 'gender-neutral' and therefore not acknowledging the reality of and motives behind gender-based violence. Moreover, failure to properly acknowledge that gender plays a huge role in terms of who perpetrators and victims are, only serves to feed the myths and stereotypes around sexual violence (mostly) perpetrated against women in Northern Ireland.

It is because of this that we are asking DHSSPS and NIO to give consideration to an integrated strategy to address violence against women to include sexual violence, domestic violence, human trafficking for sexual exploitation. We would also ask that 'Hidden Crimes Secret Pain' takes cognisance of and links with the recently completed Gender Equality Strategy which has as a strategic objective – the elimination of gender based violence in society.

WSN Members

Full Members

Ardoyne Women's Group
ATLAS
Al Nisa Women's Group
Ballybeen Women's Centre
Ballymurphy Women's Group
Belfast Travellers Support Group
Carrickfergus Women's Forum
Carew II & Newtownards Road Women's Group
Clan Mor Women's Group
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