

British Association of Social Workers response to the Department of Health and Department of Justice consultation on the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy 2023 – 2030

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Department of Health and Department of Justice consultation on the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy.

The British Association of Social Workers Northern Ireland (BASW NI) is part of the British Association of Social Workers (BASW), the largest professional body for social workers in the UK. BASW has 21,000 members employed in frontline, management, academic and research positions in all care settings.

BASW NI appreciates that this strategy needs to be as inclusive as possible and recognise that anyone can be victim of domestic and sexual abuse regardless of age, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, or any form of disability. We believe that every experience of domestic and sexual abuse must be taken seriously, but we wish to acknowledge this whilst also highlighting that most victims/survivors are in fact women and domestic abuse is a gendered crime which emerging evidence shows is on the increase in Northern Ireland. This is widely accepted within the established evidence base that exists and helps to remind us at the outset of considering this strategy that we cannot minimise women's experiences and that women and girls should be at the heart of this strategy.

BASW NI advocate for a gendered specific understanding of domestic abuse and it should be seen within the context of all forms of gender-based violence and violence against women and girls (VAWG). VAWG encompasses rape and sexual assault, sexual abuse and exploitation, sexual harassment, trafficking and exploitation in the sex industry, female genital mutilation, forced marriage and so called 'honour crimes', and is described by the United Nations as "a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women" (CEDAW, 1999).

BASW have frequently emphasized that the key distinctions between male violence against women and female violence against men are found in the frequency, severity, and impact. Research highlights women are likely to be repeat victims and are “much more likely to be seriously hurt’ or “killed than men” (ONS, 2018). Domestic abuse is embedded in systemic gender inequality which is deeply rooted into the human psyche (Stark, 2007) and to deny this would be an injustice.

BASW NI also recommend that this strategy should be approached through the lens of intersectionality. An intersectional approach is rooted in an understanding of the lived experiences of those who face multiple forms of oppression – for example relating to their gender identity, race, class, sexuality, disability, age, immigration status and religion; and how these experiences intersect and create distinct experiences which require distinct responses and support. Understanding and responding to domestic violence here also requires a context specific approach as Northern Ireland is as a post conflict society with a high level of political, religious, and ethnic contestation at a societal level, a patriarchal social structure, and conservative attitudes, each of which influence experiences of and responses to domestic violence (Doyle and McWilliams, 2019).

Prevention

We welcome that the strategy includes a focus on prevention of domestic and sexual abuse. BASW NI members have highlighted the importance of aiding the prevention of domestic and sexual abuse via a coordinated, and comprehensive approach to counter gender-based stereotypes and prejudicial attitudes from an early age. This needs to be implemented across all areas of life including school, workplaces, youth settings, further and higher educational settings. The inclusion of a comprehensive Relationship and Sex Education at schools is also recommended so young people are informed and empowered to navigate personal relationships.

Bullying of a sexual nature and gender-based bullying across all areas of education, including in schools and further and higher education institutions has been highlighted as an area of need by our student social worker members. Student members also

asked for more action on tackling online abuse and hate speech experienced particularly by women and girls, in Northern Ireland.

Support

The current impact of poverty in Northern Ireland is unprecedented. Research has consistently found that vulnerability to domestic abuse to be associated with low income, economic strain, and benefit receipt (UNFPA, 2020). Social workers are carrying out the critical work of supporting domestic and sexual abuse victims and survivors which includes children daily in Northern Ireland and as a profession we understand that without meaningful interventions and support services, there will be a long-term impact on victims/ survivors lives, including children.

The impact of recent cuts to services which children and families depend upon will have a direct impact on those most at risk and as professionals working closely with children and their families, social workers are conscious of the effects they will likely observe in the months and years ahead.

Impact on Children - Children as Victims/Survivors

It is a commonly held misconception that children witness rather than experience domestic abuse. As social workers we understand the impact of domestic abuse on children and see children as victims and survivors rather than mere bystanders. It is critical to understand that this impact is not only in relation to living in a physically abusive home, but also the impact on children of coercive and controlling behaviour.

It is far too common that perpetrators can feel invisible in the work of children's social care, with the non-abusive parent held responsible for the abuse e.g., problematically framed as 'failure to protect', or the abuse is denied or minimised. These responses are often upheld by many damaging myths about domestic abuse and victim blaming attitudes, and a lack of awareness of the risks and challenges of leaving an abusive relationship.

Many women will remain in a relationship because of the very real fears of what will happen if they leave, and it is vital to recognise that they are the experts in managing their own risk and safety. Social workers consider the complex barriers to leaving relationships or engaging with services in their practice. For example, understanding the impact of trauma, shame, and low confidence; the lack of support that is responsive to a survivor's unique needs; and practical barriers such as housing and finances.

Unpicking these myths and victim blaming attitudes, alongside an awareness of the different barriers that survivors face, are essential to ensure that social workers along with other health and social care professionals are supporting and empowering the non-abusive parent and holding the perpetrator to account.

Understanding trauma

Living with domestic abuse is traumatic and exhausting. The impact of coercion and manipulation is exacerbated and reinforced by the body's emotional and physiological response to trauma. Survivors may also have experienced other forms of trauma, including trauma caused by other forms of oppression such as racism, homophobia and/or been (re)victimized by services or state systems.

It is essential to understand the impact of trauma and be able to recognise the different ways trauma can manifest as well as different coping strategies. This is particularly important regarding how survivors may 'present' in the safeguarding context, and how social workers interpret or frame their actions. For example, there are a range of reasons why victims in abusive relationships may not report abuse, may not support action against the perpetrator, or may even defend the perpetrator. Victims of coercive control may have developed coping and survival strategies within their relationships which impact their behaviour and the way that they respond to professionals. Repeated exposure to coercive control has significant implications for how victims 'present' to statutory services.

The range of victims

Abuse can be experienced by people irrespective of their gender and gender identity and/or sexuality. This is reflected in the growing body of global literature which explores the nature of domestic abuse as experienced by lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans communities.

There is evidence that people with disabilities experience disproportionately higher rates of domestic abuse. In addition, women with learning disabilities are at a higher risk of more frequent and prolonged domestic abuse than non-disabled women and disabled men (McCarthy et al., 2015).

Women with learning disabilities are more likely to experience domestic abuse as they do not receive adequate sex education, often lack the knowledge of what is appropriate within a relationship leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and less likely to report abuse. There are other barriers to making disclosures and accessing appropriate support for women with disabilities, such as, the availability of safe and accessible accommodation, or a lack of accessible information in easy-read format for women with learning disabilities. Additionally, making a disclosure brings risks including the loss of care and support, or the fear of losing their children.

Many young disabled people have not had the right help to recognise abuse and harm; they face far higher risks, are less likely to be able to express it or be heard and believed.

Minority ethnic women in Northern Ireland experiencing domestic and sexual abuse face distinct barriers which often inhibit them from seeking support. Structural issues in relation to immigration and access to public funds contribute minority ethnic women's economic dependency on their partner thereby reducing the women's potential to leave.

Older women in Northern Ireland are less likely to seek help due to social expectations, in addition to a lack of specialist services for older victims.

There are increasing levels of domestic violence being experienced by men and they face added stigma and stereotyping. A gender specific approach to tackling the specific nature and impact of domestic and sexual abuse for male victims is needed.

Specialist training on the specific needs of different groups of victims to understand additional vulnerabilities is required however a victim may fall into more than one group and one size does not fit all when it comes to service provision.

Partnership

Domestic violence and abuse is a complex issue that requires sensitive handling by a range of professionals including social work. The strategy must put the lived experience of victims/survivors at the heart of its implementation as they are the experts in our own lives.

There needs to be better understanding of the dynamics of domestic abuse especially coercive control, and how perpetrators can manipulate the system and professionals. Perpetrators need to be at the heart of interventions, the perpetrator is responsible for the abuse, not the victim/ survivor.

Professionals involved in supporting victims/survivors need to be trained and skilled in communication with adults and children and able to take a collaborative and empowering approach. Social workers understand the importance of focussing on well-being not just risk and physical safety and work hard to support victims/survivors to improve self-esteem and support them to connect to others in their communities.

Therefore, a whole system approach to the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy, working across government departments in partnership with the statutory, voluntary and community sector to deliver joined up solutions is needed to address the specific needs of all the victims affected.

Justice

Domestic abuse continues to be one of the key factors in many of the cases which come to the attention of social workers. However more needs to be done to improve recognition and disclosure of domestic abuse. In cases of emotional or financial abuse, many victims don't always know they are being abused. Victims face emotional and practical barriers to disclosing abuse, and this can be more pronounced for some individuals.

After a disclosure many victims face barriers to gaining access to legal advice particularly those for whom legal aid is not available, in addition to the practicalities of leaving a relationship. Escaping abuse is not simply an act of will, victims need the financial independence and practical ability to leave or act.

Committed funding needs to be in place at the sharp end of services for victims/survivors of domestic and sexual abuse including specialist refuges, alternative housing, social services, policing, and justice.

However there also needs to be more consideration given to enabling early disclosure, recognising the early warning signs, and providing victims with easy access to support options.

Historically survivors of domestic and sexual abuse were often shamed, penalised and in cases where they were parents held solely responsible for their children's welfare after being victims of abuse. It has been clear for some time that a different approach is needed.

As social workers we seek to understand the complexity of children's and parents' experiences and identities that can act as barriers in terms of how they access support and how professionals relate to them. For example, it is important to recognise the experiences of racism or homophobia that can create barriers to reporting to the PSNI or seeking support from statutory services.

We must recognise victims/survivors in the context of their abuse, hold perpetrators to account, whilst also ensuring that interventions remain child focused, and in their best interest.

There is a clear need for long term funding across governmental departments to ensure full implementation of the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy, its workstreams, actions and associated legislation. Investment in services where social workers will be working with victims/survivors across health and social care, education, criminal justice, and the voluntary sector is required if we are to meaningfully address domestic and sexual abuse.

BASW NI looks forward to continued engagement with the Departments on these issues. If you would like any further information or to arrange a meeting to discuss this response, please contact Noeleen Higgins, Registered Social Worker and BASW NI Professional Officer, noeleen.higgins@basw.co.uk / 07435289912.