

Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Ending violence against women and girls in Northern Ireland, HC 840

Wednesday 18 June 2025

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Tonia Antoniazzi (Chair); Dan Aldridge; Claire Hanna; Simon Hoare; Katrina Murray; Dr Al Pinkerton; Gavin Robinson; David Smith.

Questions 1-41

Witnesses

I: Dr Siobhán McAlister, Senior Lecturer, Criminology, Queen's University Belfast; Detective Chief Superintendent Zoe McKee, Head of Public Protection, Police Service of Northern Ireland; and Sonya McMullan, Regional Services Manager, Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland [[here](#)]

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Siobhán McAlister, Detective Chief Superintendent Zoe McKee and Sonya McMullan.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee inquiry into violence against women and girls in Northern Ireland. We are grateful to our witnesses for coming today to talk about violence against women and girls in Northern Ireland. We understand that some people may find today's evidence session distressing and difficult to listen to, but there are several organisations that can offer support, including Rights of Women, Victim Support Northern Ireland and the 24-hour domestic and sexual abuse helpline. Could you tell us your name and why you are here?

Detective Chief Superintendent McKee: Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to be here. My name is Zoe McKee, and I am a detective chief superintendent. I head up public protection in Northern Ireland for the PSNI.

Dr McAlister: Good morning and thank you for the invitation. I am Siobhán McAlister. I am a senior lecturer in criminology at Queen's University, and I carried out the research with young women to inform the ending violence against women and girls strategy.

Sonya McMullan: Hello, I am Sonya McMullan, regional services manager at Women's Aid Federation. We lobbied and campaigned for a violence against women and girls strategy, so I am delighted to be here.

Q2 **Chair:** Thank you. I will start with a general but really important question: how prevalent is violence against women and girls in Northern Ireland?

Detective Chief Superintendent McKee: I will start specifically with domestic abuse. Obviously, violence against women and girls is the overarching term for a number of different offence types, behaviours and attitudes. Some 28% of all victim-based crime is domestic abuse-related. Four out of five victims in 2021-22 reported being victims of crime for sexual-related matters, and 71% of women of all ages reported sexual harassment in public spaces. Nationally, one in five women will be the subject of a violence against women and girls offence. It has been described as an "epidemic" nationally, and I would say it is similar to that in Northern Ireland.

Q3 **Chair:** On that point, is it possible to make accurate comparisons between VAWG in Northern Ireland and in other UK nations?

Detective Chief Superintendent McKee: I am basing my commentary on the strategic threat risk assessment that was done by the National Police Chiefs' Council, published in 2023, which said that one in 12 women would be the victim of VAWG-related crime and one in 20 people would be the perpetrator of VAWG-related crime. We have a similar picture, but we have gaps in terms of our data and insights specific to those similar comparisons. We know that this is not just a Northern Ireland-related issue; it is national and international.



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Dr McAlister: Prevalence is really hard to measure. We know generally that gender-based violence is highly under-reported. We can make use of other forms of data. Survey data, for instance, in Northern Ireland shows very high prevalence rates: 98% of women aged 18-plus have experienced at least one form of gender-based violence in their lives, and 73% of girls aged between 12 and 18 have reported at least one form of gender-based violence.

When we start to break that down, we see that young women experience particular forms of violence. Seventy five per cent of young women by the age of 16 have experienced street harassment—harassment in public spaces. Half of all young women report receiving intimate images or videos without consent, and worryingly—this is an area where we are perhaps lacking some official data—about a third have reported experiencing controlling or belittling behaviour by an intimate partner or family member. We see across this that young women experience violence in all places—public, private and online spaces as well.

Sonya McMullan: If we look at the statistics across the whole of Northern Ireland, in the last financial year there were 11,000 referrals made into Women's Aid services. We know that a lot of those women never contact the police. We know that crime is very under-reported for both domestic and sexual abuse, which covers all of domestic abuse. We had 7,637 women receive support while in their homes, through outreach services, and that is really important. Most importantly, there were 5,293 children and young people attached to those mothers. We have to remember them within this space as well. When we talk about sexual violence, it is also important to recognise that a third of rape offences recorded by the PSNI in that last financial year were domestic abuse-related.

Q4 **Chair:** That is interesting. Siobhán, you talked about there being gaps in data and insights. I know that Women's Aid Northern Ireland has some good data, because women and children are coming in and using your services. So you use real-life data, and Siobhán talked about survey data. From what you see, Sonya, has violence against women and girls in Northern Ireland increased or decreased in recent years?

Sonya McMullan: That is very difficult to quantify. With regard to police statistics, we have people who are choosing to phone the police and go down that criminal justice route when they feel their life might be in danger and they need to do that. But as I said, it is very difficult, because a lot of the women, children and young people coming into our services have not been engaged. Then we have other data coming through our Public Prosecution Service and social services as well.

It would be wonderful to have a robust piece of data around the children and young people experiencing domestic abuse, for example. In terms of data collection and monitoring, I suppose this has started to be looked at through a gendered lens only since the strategy in September last year. We need better data through our Courts Service and our Public Prosecution Service.



Q5 **Chair:** Who should be doing that?

Sonya McMullan: The Public Prosecution Service needs to get better at that, and the police as well. Not everyone collects the same data or talks to each other. The Courts Service, for example, is implementing a new database at the moment. We welcome that and will feed into it, hopefully, with regard to how they can do that better.

Q6 **Chair:** That is interesting. Siobhán, with your academic lens, who should be collecting that data and have that oversight?

Dr McAlister: Again, it goes back to the point about everybody collecting accurate data, and also recognising that official data will tell only part of the story, so we do need to look to those other sources. There are huge issues about why people do not report gender-based violence; there are very specific issues why young women do not report. We need to look not just at the data but at the reasons why people may not report, for it even to get into the data, and to tap into some of that.

Q7 **Chair:** Zoe, do you have any comments?

Detective Chief Superintendent McKee: When looking at the official police statistics, we have seen in the year to May a downward trajectory of 8.7% in relation to domestic incidents, and similar for other crimes. You are seeing a bit of a downward trajectory there, but the more serious sexual offences are going the opposite way. There is something more going on in the sexual crime arena, in terms of seriousness and prevalence within a domestic setting.

There is also how crime is recorded and the Home Office counting rules. To get into the minutiae of that, data can be really complex, so we also need to look beyond just the data. There are huge gaps as well—for example, for under-16s.

The qualitative piece should not be underestimated. We need to look at the actual people and the individual experiences behind each of those stats. Then we can better unpick the under-reporting issue, which we know is a significant and stubborn challenge for us—certainly for policing and for wider sectors as well.

Q8 **Simon Hoare:** Just to establish some baseline understanding, I have three quick questions. You mentioned that there is often under-reporting or non-reporting among young women. Is it your assessment that there are too many women who do not actually recognise what violence against women and girls is, leaving an information or understanding gap that could be filled?

In order to better understand the prevalence, can you say anything about the comparison of statistics, per size of the population, with other parts of the United Kingdom? Then we could see if there is any stand-out data that we should look at.

Does the data lead us to any form of meaningful analysis as to whether violence against women and girls is disproportionately high or low in the



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Unionist and Nationalist communities or among the ethnic minorities who have recently settled in Northern Ireland?

Dr McAlister: I will start with the under-reporting by young women. Again, the intersectional lens is important for all of your questions. Our research with young women clearly shows that the main reason they do not report is that they do not recognise behaviours as violence. When I say they do not recognise them, I mean that on two fronts.

Some behaviours are so commonplace and every day. The quantitative data shows us one thing, but the qualitative data shows us that there are high levels of young women who experience harassment and misogyny in public spaces, such as being touched without their consent and having slurs against them. Those have become so commonplace and feel so trivial that they do not seem worth reporting. Who would you report them to? They are not serious enough. That is one part of the recognising piece.

In terms of other forms of violence, such as intimate partner violence or sexual violence, young women make it clear that if you do not have the language and knowledge to recognise your experience as wrong, you will never know they are abusive until you are older. The recognising piece is very important with young people, but age also intersects with that, because young people feel that they will not be believed and that adults will be believed over them.

In the survey data, there are real differences in the reasons why young men and young women might not report gender-based violence: not being believed and actually being held responsible—that in some way it was your own fault. We see those consistent messages in society about vulnerability and responsibility feeding into young women's lack of reporting. The other thing is that reporting is also very difficult. It can be a very harmful experience.

Sonya McMullan: Reporting is very difficult especially in relation to domestic abuse, because people are challenged. They think, "You are going to prosecute and take my dad." That is really difficult. When we are looking at any violence against women and girls strategy, or domestic or sexual abuse, we need to be Northern Ireland specific, because we have a history and we have a lot of intergenerational trauma that still impacts many people. There is the legacy; there are the issues of the past that we cannot forget. Very often, services and things in the rest of the UK do not necessarily fit within Northern Ireland.

We also have to think about the rurality piece: for many people who live locally in Northern Ireland, there is isolation with regard to access to support and everything. There is a huge issue with regard to inclusion. Court delays are a big thing too. People are seeing that the criminal justice process is taking a long time. That is really important.

In our services, we have survivor engagement groups for children and young people and for adults, and they really guide our services. Their experience of services across the board guides all our policy, lobbying and



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campaigning. But we have to be very Northern Ireland specific. People not coming forward and recognising that abuse comes back to our lack of education in this area—RSE. We need to look at and examine that area further.

- Q9 **Gavin Robinson:** Claire wants to pick up on some of those legacy issues, so I will not touch on them. DCS McKee, you mentioned Home Office statistics and how they change their counting rules, which can make a material impact on how you track trends. Even though the counting rules may have changed, does the PSNI continue to record data as it was being recorded, so that you can track trends, even if that is unofficially recorded?

Detective Chief Superintendent McKee: No, we adhere to the Home Office counting rules.

- Q10 **Gavin Robinson:** I know you will, but do you keep a separate column to show how it would have been counted, and then track trends, or do you not have any ability to track them when the counting rules change?

Detective Chief Superintendent McKee: No, it is focused on the specific Home Office counting rules. For example, if you have a victim who is the subject of a serious sexual assault and there are other domestic-related assaults within that incident, the serious sexual assault will be the main crime that is recorded against that. Then you would have to track the outcome of the case through the PPS to get a better picture of all the things that they were convicted for. But on how we count crime, it will be the most serious. We are compliant with the rest of the UK on that basis.

- Q11 **Gavin Robinson:** I understand the compliance and why you should and why you must—

Detective Chief Superintendent McKee: We don't.

Gavin Robinson: I could see there being some utility if you also had an extra column so you could see what was actually going on.

Detective Chief Superintendent McKee: That is a good point.

- Q12 **Claire Hanna:** I think we are trying to understand why this is so much more prevalent in our region than elsewhere across these islands. I know this is a big question, but what part does the legacy of the past play in rates of violence against women and girls?

Detective Chief Superintendent McKee: To pick up on a couple of points that Sonya has mentioned, we have a unique political and social operating environment in Northern Ireland, as everyone in this room will know. With that comes historical mistrust and divide in local communities. There will be some who, due to the historical nature and the issues with legacy, will not naturally want to come forward to the police. That will account for some of the under-reporting.

We also have coercive control within local communities by paramilitaries, which affects the engagement with policing and, as Sonya has mentioned, rural communities that are difficult just due to the geographic context.

But what is important about that uniqueness is that with those challenges come opportunities. We are looking in that space; we are much more aware of those particular challenges and how we can harness and make inroads into those. I know Siobhán has done work around paramilitarism and coercive control and the impact for women and girls. The overarching Executive strategy on violence against women and girls, especially the prevention strand, is something that we welcome; it co-aligns with our own VAWG action plan, which we launched a number of years ago, even before the Executive programme launched the violence against women and girls strategy.

Q13 Claire Hanna: Dr McAlister, have you picked out anything else on that same question from your research?

Dr McAlister: I think you are right; we cannot really look at behaviours such as violence without looking at the context within which they occur. We lived with a backdrop of violence for decades in Northern Ireland; political violence was prioritised in all discussions and responses, and gender-based violence really was not a topic at all. That has led to delays in having a strategy. We were the last jurisdiction to have a strategy and some of our laws around coercive control and so on have been delayed.

In some respects, some forms of violence have become normalised and others have not even been recognised. It almost feels as if we are at the start of a journey here with the strategy; that is why I think it has been a long road, but we really do welcome it.

Sonya mentioned the psychological legacies of the conflict that we need to take into account: high levels of mental ill health, trans-generational trauma and structural legacies such as lack of investment in our communities and our frontline services. Those have been related to domestic abuse and the high numbers of children in our care system.

Paramilitaries, or quasi-paramilitaries, is another issue. Women and young women have come on to the agenda now, at the beginning of that strategy, but what we tend to see is that women, particularly young women, are not recognised until there is a push for it. We need to recognise that young women live in these communities with high levels of coercive control.

In 12 out of 14 focus groups with young women, the young women mentioned paramilitaries in their community. When we talk about paramilitaries, we often think about men and young men, so they experience violence in many ways, and we have increasingly seen discussion around sexual exploitation of girls and young women as well.

Q14 Claire Hanna: I do not want to put words in your mouth, but is there an overall high tolerance, or just a prevalence of violence and a macho culture that feeds in to homes and communities?



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Detective Chief Superintendent McKee: My sense is that it just has not been named or challenged. If you do not name something, you do not see it. This is the start of the process of naming things so that we can recognise them and respond to them. I am cautious about saying that we have cultures of violence.

Claire Hanna: I know we have all seen that map of the island of Ireland, which I shared with the Committee, and we know there is a preponderance of violence in the north in certain counties, but it is across the board, isn't it? There is no part of Northern Ireland where it is higher or lower. Sonya, can I put that same question to you?

Sonya McMullan: We have that legacy in our past, which has been well referenced by Zoe and Siobhán. At Women's Aid, sadly, we see women returning to refuge services who were in refuge as a child, so we have not broken that cycle. Within certain areas, we still have that control that certain organised crime paramilitaries have—that environment of fear and coercion, and a fear to access support services within their own community as well. We see women who are really trapped and cannot get out of that community because of who they are connected to or have a child with, and that kind of thing. We need to understand that.

We are and have been so far behind because I think our politics have always taken precedence, and we have had our stop-start Government as well. All our legislation was the last in the United Kingdom to be implemented. They take a while to embed themselves—our laws on coercive control, our Justice Bill, our Protection from Stalking Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 and the introduction of domestic abuse protection orders and notices.

I think the Criminal Justice Inspection is very useful with its key recommendations, which we always use for lobbying and campaigning. Interestingly, their key recommendations around the new Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act were around children and young people, and I have never seen that happen before. We need to have a recognition that, yes, we have the past, but we need to move forward.

The violence against women and girls strategy launched in September last year. It cannot be a "Tick box—it's done" approach; we really need to invest. If you look at the comparisons, I think we can look at that in relation to other parts of the UK and indeed the south through the new Cuan centre. There is a huge amount of investment. Ultimately, Women's Aid have no money for children's services. It is not funded. Every child and young person coming through our services deserves therapeutic intervention. They deserve the support that they need to be able to develop resilience and not come back into this intergenerational cycle of violence. A number of the women who have been murdered recently have been murdered by sons and grandsons. We have let so many families down across the board, so we cannot think this has been achieved.

We really welcome the opportunity to be here today, because I think we need a mapping. I would love the leads of every violence against women



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and girls strategy in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to meet regularly and look at that scoping and mapping of services and delivery so that no one is left behind.

Claire Hanna: We are really glad you are here to give us those insights. We will pick up on funding issues later.

- Q15 **Simon Hoare:** I understand the under-reporting. If you had a magic wand, what is the thing that would help? Is it better public information to define what violence against women and girls is and why it is not acceptable—the recognition bit? Is that the box you tick, or is it the resourcing and to whom you can report and see meaningful action flow from that reporting process? It might be helpful if you told us how many officers in the PSNI have this as a specialism.

Detective Chief Superintendent McKee: I will pick up on the resourcing question after, but the magic wand piece is really important. It starts in the prevention. It starts in the behaviours and attitudes of young men and boys and how we get to what we are looking to achieve, which is ending violence against women and girls. It is not necessarily about the women understanding that they are the victims of abuse—though that is important—but about the behaviours of the men and focusing on the perpetrators in this space.

I think the magic wand is changing societies, cultures, attitudes and behaviours towards women in the first instance. If you build on the sexism and chauvinism, which then maybe builds on to criminality, it moves into the online space and you are looking at incels, radicalisation and specific ideology. It is so broad, but the issue is with men and boys. We need to not lose sight of that.

- Q16 **Simon Hoare:** Sorry, is it not both? I take that point entirely, but if men and boys perpetrate in a vacuum of ignorance, they get away with what they are doing. We need to understand that what men and boys are doing is unacceptable, but women and girls need to understand what it is that is unacceptable and how to go about reporting it in a meaningful way that would see some action accrue from the action of reporting. It is not an either/or, is it?

Detective Chief Superintendent McKee: Absolutely not, no. I think it is a dual focus. It is about the victim, the services, the support and the public trust and confidence that they have to come forward and report, and then, equally, it is perpetrator focused. For example, we have launched a campaign, Power to Change, which is fairly significant and high-profile within Northern Ireland, as part of the Executive programme. It focuses specifically on changing attitudes and behaviours of young men and boys and a call for action in that space.

We are already seeing uptake in schools—in teaching and training on awareness raising—and broader public services. To date, we have trained 500 teachers. It only rolled out in January this year. We are getting a lot of reach—2 million—on Facebook and social media platforms. We are looking at the next stage of that. How do we build on that in terms of

landing the messages, not just on attitudes and behaviours, but the consequences once you perpetrate?

Building on the resources piece—Sonya has already referenced this, and I am sure it is something you want to pick up—it would be remiss of us not to say that, if we do not have the dedicated resources to deal with issues like this, we are going to be in a perpetual cycle and we are going to be creating our own legacy in time. I cannot begin to describe the challenges within the public protection arena in policing currently.

By way of example, this week alone, I have had 24 officers extracted for public disorder that stemmed from a violence against women and girls offence. That narrative has been lost in a lot of what has happened in recent weeks. We are facing significant underfunding challenges—a £21 million gap. We have the very lowest level of officers that we have ever had in the PSNI, at 6,200. We should be sitting at 7,500. Those are real challenges that affect how we deliver services, support victims and prosecute offenders for all the violence against women and girls offence types.

Q17 Simon Hoare: Does anybody else want to add anything?

Sonya McMullan: I would start with early intervention. The first strand of our new VAWG strategy is covering and looking at prevention. If we do not invest in our children, we have a disaster waiting to happen. For our young people at the moment, if you look at the research and data that is out there, especially for young boys, we need to further examine access to harmful material and pornography—I am back to education and the lack of it, unfortunately, in our schools in Northern Ireland.

The funding that Women's Aid Federation have got through the ending violence against women and girls strategy focuses on prevention. We have the Helping Hands model—a tried and tested prevention programme—in primary schools, and we are developing it to go right back to the early years setting, which is really good as well. We are working with educators around all our nursing staff in years 1, 2 and 3 in Queen's—we launched that initiative last week.

We do not think that anybody—social services, police or anyone—should be learning about domestic abuse on the job, especially those in health and social care. Everyone will come into contact with it. It is so important that they are able to ask the question and that someone has the opportunity to tell them what is happening—creating more and more opportunities for early intervention.

But again, around prevention, the lack of support services for children and young people across Northern Ireland is a key priority. That would be my magic wand wish: an early intervention trauma network for children and young people affected by all forms of violence against women and girls so that they can get in and get the support they need. The waiting lists for CAMHS, our mental health services for young people, are huge. Children



and young people simply cannot access the support they need—and when someone is reaching out, it is so important that they get timely support.

- Q18 **Simon Hoare:** Dr McAlister, could you say a few words on your finding that some women may report, or indeed prefer to report, violence to paramilitaries?

Dr McAlister: I am not sure that was my finding—it was getting things sorted out within communities rather than going to the police.

Simon Hoare: Well, a mistrust or distrust in the police and a default to, “This is a problem here; we can get people here to intervene or resolve.”

Dr McAlister: I actually think that has changed within communities. To be honest, there has been a lot of work done by the tackling paramilitarism programme to change the narrative from protectors to abusers, and we are using the language of child criminal exploitation now. I think that possibly happens less, but there is still that mistrust of the police within communities, and that impacts on young women as well. We see that being passed down within families and communities—“You don’t go to the police”—and paramilitaries within communities might then know if you do, so that still has an impact.

- Q19 **Simon Hoare:** In the allocation of resources—scant as they might be, as Zoe has intimated—do you think there is sufficient weight given to this? I am thinking back to a predecessor Committee and an inquiry that was undertaken on the amount of intimidation, violence and abuse of women and girls that is done to effectively extract an income, either through sex work and prostitution—one could almost describe it as indentured labour—or roping them into the drug-trafficking business.

All of that will have, at some point, a manifestation of violence, intimidation and hostile behaviour—the whole realm of it. Is that taken into account enough? Do you have an anxiety that too much of the focus on combating paramilitaries is on the drugs and violence side, but violence on the streets, rather than against women and girls?

Dr McAlister: For a long time, women and girls really were not recognised in the tackling paramilitarism strategy at all, particularly young women, because the ways in which they experience violence are very different, and they are almost very silent ways. They live in communities where they know there is the constant threat of violence. Many of them are under surveillance, and many have been subject to threats and physical violence.

We need to recognise that, when we also talk about how women experience so-called paramilitary violence, we are often also focusing on adult women, and the debt piece is huge. We are talking about poverty. These are people who are taking advantage of vulnerability. Again, there are children within those families, and there are also reports coming out about young women being used to pay drug debts and being sexually exploited. Those are coming to the fore.



I know that we cannot separate it from gender-based violence generally, but we also need to go back to the point where we have that, but gender-based violence happens in all communities and across all backgrounds. I would be worried that we do not want to lose that by focusing too much on the uniqueness of Northern Ireland as well.

- Q20 **Gavin Robinson:** Thank you very much for all that you have shared so far. DCS McKee, what you have said is very stark. I will not get into the specifics of the case in Ballymena, but it should be a reminder to everyone that you have just said you lost 15 officers in your public protection branch, who are there to help assist victims of violence against women and girls, in responding to disorder that followed an issue that started as violence against women and girls. I think that is very stark and should be a cool reminder to people out there that some of the outworkings over the last week are having a material impact on your ability to do your job and help protect victims.

Detective Chief Superintendent McKee: To build on that, what you are seeing is the displacement of minority communities, with women and children—probably disproportionately women and children—being forced from their homes and having crimes committed against them as a result of the disorder that has happened. That is also something that we need to bear in mind.

- Q21 **Gavin Robinson:** How temporary was that removal from your team?

Detective Chief Superintendent McKee: It went on for probably about the last week. Every day there was a review of resources and a surge out to support frontline policing and public order. I think that it is slightly going back to normal, but we are ready and alive to the fact that that could be ongoing at any minute. As you know, it is a fairly febrile situation.

- Q22 **Gavin Robinson:** Dr McAlister, on a number of occasions you have talked about violence and gender-based violence not being unique to Northern Ireland. Sometimes we can be too introspective, like we are always in some special category, but actually it is faced elsewhere.

From the perspective of a constituency MP, I know the stories of individuals who have come to me, who as young girls ended up in relationships they would never have ordinarily chosen to be in with much older men. It has happened through drug debt or the men's iconic status in the community—if you can see it through that warped lens. How true is that of Northern Ireland compared to Glasgow, Manchester, or Liverpool, where similarly there will be drug dealers and people involved in criminality who prey on vulnerable women?

Dr McAlister: There are similar dynamics there. It is the same vulnerabilities. It is the same young women that we were talking about, particularly those in the care system; for years we have known that paramilitaries have preyed on their vulnerability. There are definitely similarities in terms of the vulnerabilities.



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The responses probably need to be a bit different. On the one hand we say, "Let's not be too specific about Northern Ireland," and on the other we say, "We need to be specific about Northern Ireland." There are very unique challenges in terms of dealing with this issue. I think naming is always the first step in responding to something—recognising that it is happening, and it is a problem. For a long time people did not want to talk about this. They would say that it was only one case; if somebody in your constituency came to you, they would say, "Well, that is only one person." But one child should not be experiencing that level of abuse.

Q23 Gavin Robinson: Of course. You have answered questions about data and comparisons, and the Committee has had the benefit of your responses. There have been a number of high-profile cases in Northern Ireland over the last—to stretch it out—six or seven years. They tend to fascinate the public and lead to a lot of gossip, innuendo and attempts to identify victims online. We know we have a criminal justice system that is slower than in the rest of the United Kingdom. We know that there are frailties within the criminal justice system. We know that it led to the Gillen review around reporting restrictions on cases of a sexual nature. Dr McAlister and Ms McMullan, how much do you feel that the system we have acts as a barrier to victims having the confidence in the first place, more so than in other parts of the United Kingdom?

Sonya McMullan: The delays in our criminal justice system are well documented. I have been supporting a woman whose case finally came up to sentencing; the final hearing was last Friday. It had taken five years, and it was a really serious domestic abuse case. The perpetrator had not been in custody for one day until the first sentencing hearing. If it was not for the great police officer she had, the prosecutor she had, and her Women's Aid support worker, there is no way she would have stayed with that. She has left her job; she finds it difficult to leave her home. Her whole life has been impacted because of that case and that delay.

People are dropping out; we have this issue all the time. It does not instil confidence in people. Are you going to put your life on hold for five years to go through it? I know the length of that particular case was quite specific, but after some of those high-profile cases, within Women's Aid services we had women coming forward and saying, "I'm not going through this. I simply cannot put myself and my family through this." People talk about the re-traumatisation of going through the court process and having to relive it, as well as not being able to seek the counselling and therapeutic support they need during that process. A lot of that does not encourage people to come forward. It takes a lot. Even when I am sitting in court—Zoe has been in court too—it is an awful lot to put yourself through. Until we have a more trauma-informed and victim-centred criminal justice system, that simply is not going to change.

The Gillen review has brought in a lot of really good recommendations, many of which have been implemented, including in respect of the public gallery. It has been like a day out, to attend the court.

Gavin Robinson: A knitting needles at the gallows-type situation,

fascinated by the trauma of it all.

Sonya McMullan: Yes, it was absolutely terrible. For a lot of that, our Lady Chief Justice has been looking at the trauma-informed process and at trauma-informed justice, as the other criminal justice agencies have been. We have done a lot of training with the PPS and probation. They are really willing—if you have the right people around the table, and the police as well—to try to make the changes, but they are working with under-investment and being under-resourced, so it is very difficult to keep going. We need an awful lot of investment in Northern Ireland to make it better, but it is not a very victim-friendly or focused place to go through a criminal justice process at this time.

Dr McAlister: Young people know that. Those messages are heard loud and clear by young people, and they see a lot on social media. There is lots of discussion among young women on reporting sexual violence.

In the research, a couple of the young women who reported it had had very negative experiences with the criminal justice system, and every other young woman repeated the myths that we hear about: “You have to provide the evidence”; “Sure, nobody’s ever convicted anyway”; or, “Why would you report when everybody’s going to know it was you, and you would be blamed for ruining the boy’s life?” I know we are supposed to have dealt with some of those myths, but young women know them, and they have an impact on reporting.

A young woman in the research talked clearly about how that, and not wanting to upset her parents, had put her off reporting a rape, to the point where she was left with this huge amount of guilt: on the one hand, she feels that she did nothing about it, so the young man might commit similar offences again, but on the other hand, she could not deal with the trauma that was going to come with reporting. Sometimes, when we talk about reporting, we almost see it as the panacea, but reporting can be harmful.

Detective Chief Superintendent McKee: Some brilliant things came out of the Gillen review. I was the senior investigating officer on one of those high-profile trials—so we are talking seven years ago—and we have now had the Gillen review and a series of recommendations. We cannot take away from what has been achieved to date—I think something like 80% of the recommendations have been completed—but the pace at which that has been delivered affects how victims engage with the wider system.

It is back to the systems piece. The sheer pace at which we deliver change—with the EVAWG strategy and our own VAWG action plan—is how we are going to demonstrate to victims and survivors that we are taking them seriously and will not just be talking about this again at the end of the next seven-year EVAWG strategy. That is how we build up on the attrition rates, which are concerning and a challenge for us, because of all the things that have been described today.

We can talk about all that, but then we need to tie what is happening with Gillen and, in the Northern Ireland context, to what is happening



nationally, and things about where we can take the good practice with the things that are happening. For example, the pilots for the domestic violence protection orders and the domestic violence protection notices are happening in England and Wales, and we are now moving towards doing that and exploring it further in the Northern Ireland context. There are really good initiatives that we can cross-pollinate with England and Wales.

Even in how we respond to VAWG now, there is an entirely different pivot towards the perpetrators. There is the prevention, protection and partnership work, but in the pursuit of perpetrators we are pivoting towards the CT and SOC model, so it is about what capabilities and capacities we are able to use to target our resources in the highest-harm areas. We are proactively looking at that within policing, in the knowledge that we have the funding and resource gaps. It is how we make the best use of what we have.

It is a collective thing—it is that classic: people do not care what you know until they know how much you care, and we can demonstrate that by showing committed effort in this space. I do not doubt that that is here in this room.

Q24 Gavin Robinson: I'm sorry but I am going to have to withdraw early to attend another Committee.

What you just suggested is helpful for the Committee. There is the Executive and their strategy, but our role is to look at it from a UK perspective, and we were not going to ignore this issue. Sonya talked earlier about mapping out and getting greater engagement across the UK in respect of sharing information and so on; that could form one of our recommendations. I don't want to steal colleagues' thunder as they ask questions, but we can think about what we could helpfully do to speak up on this issue.

I hope this is not inappropriate, DCS McKee, but I am thinking about the tools you have, and about getting tools to help you in this quest. I feel that over the past couple of months there has been increased public awareness of people like paedophile hunters. I know this is not exactly about women and girls—it tends to be young boys who are victims—but there is increasing awareness of the actions of paedophile hunters, who very much present themselves as doing the job that the police are not doing. Could you to take this opportunity to respond to that? How helpful, destructive or obstructive is it to the job you are trying to do? I am not saying it is a good thing; I am just keen to hear from you, as the senior officer involved, as to how useful or not, and how harmful or not, those actions are.

Detective Chief Superintendent McKee: To take a personal view on this, if it means one more person identified, off the streets and before the criminal justice system, I would only welcome that. From a policing perspective, we obviously have significant capabilities, but we also have huge volume.



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Essentially, in the online space there are offenders who are being caught by OCAG gangs—the online “paedophile hunters”, for want of a better phrase; it is not something I am overly comfortable with, but that is what they are known as. We are sitting with a 123% increase in referrals from the National Crime Agency that come into our teams, and they are going out and they are actioning those, exactly like people who are taking those actions into their own hands. We are working through a significant volume, but that demonstrates the rise in this particular space. Even with the Online Safety Act and the additional powers that we have, we also have the additional problems of deepfakes, online stalking and harassment, and all the other stuff that comes with that.

I think we have to accept what it is, and policing will respond when things happen—and we do: we take them on as criminal justice cases. But we also have voluminous referrals from the National Crime Agency, to the point that when HMI recently inspected us, we said we do not have the funding, resources or capability.

If you are looking for opportunities in this space, it is about looking at the online, tech-enabled space, and it is about having the capability and capacity in policing to deal with this massively growing crime type in the VAWG space. At the minute, we just have a superficial awareness of it. We really need to get into the stats, the data, who is doing it and how we combat it. I know you are having a separate session, so you might want to tease all that out. That was a bit of a long-winded response.

Gavin Robinson: No—thank you for it. I hope the Chair forgives me for delving into a slight tangent, but it was an important opportunity.

Q25 Dr Pinkerton: Thank you so much for attending today. DCS McKee, forgive me if I am misattributing this, but I think you said, when asked to contemplate your magic wand, that changing the attitudes and behaviours of men and boys is critical. My question relates to the role that education may or may not play in providing one route through this very complicated situation. In particular, I am thinking about the relationships and sexuality education that people might experience routinely in Northern Irish schools. Could you offer any reflections on the role that you think education, particularly the specific educational element that people might expect to have, may play in providing a route through this? Also, if you know of any differences between that curriculum and, for example, the experience in the rest of the UK, I would be grateful for your thoughts and reflections.

Sonya McMullan: The Secretary of State brought in guidance in Northern Ireland for RSE to be on a statutory footing. It has been somewhat of a challenge across the board. At the moment, it still sits with boards of governors and parental consent and that kind of thing.

We have the SAY project—our social action youth group project—and you were privileged, Chair, to come to Stormont and be part of the launch. The children and young people we work with have all come through domestic abuse services, whether that is refuge or outreach services. Their voices are so important when we talk about engagement, but they said that



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whenever they were in school they could not have those conversations, because it was like a deep, dark secret.

Nobody knew about or they did not have the opportunity to talk about domestic abuse in any part of their school life. That was one of the things they wanted to change, so they developed a website, with animation and tools. We have been working with the Education Authority to deliver those tools as part of a training package for all the designated safeguarding teachers in schools.

But we also need to look at healthy relationships. Whenever we talk about RSE, we think everyone is going to be having lots more sex and all the rest of it, which is not a bad thing—

Simon Hoare: Not in this heat. *[Laughter.]*

Sonya McMullan: It is about being able to build healthy relationships. We need to look at the issue of consent and our values, including trust, equality and all those different things.

We are in a society now where our children are getting pornography in the palm of their hand. A few weeks ago, I was at the launch of a report in Athlone that the Community Foundation and Women's Aid Ireland had done, and it was frightening looking at the amount of pornography—really damaging material—that our children and young people are accessing daily. That has led to the normalisation around, for example, strangulation. We have our new legislation on the removal of the rough sex defence, and non-fatal strangulation legislation. There are articles on how to safely strangle your partner when you are having sex; I am sorry but there is no way to safely strangle anybody. Those narratives are really harmful, and they are what our young people are seeing everywhere they go. Access to that material is really damaging.

We need it to be on a formal statutory footing. Our children deserve it—it is a basic human right for our children and young people—and not only in schools. Post covid, we see a lot of children who are not attending, so we need to look at youth clubs. Sport is a big one for me with regard to the role it has to play, especially in Northern Ireland, through football, rugby and GAA. We are currently doing some work on that with the IFA. There are a lot of wins we could have on that. I am sure Siobhán has a lot to say on this.

Dr McAlistar: I am sure you can imagine that in every piece of research you do with young people, RSE is always brought up. Despite changes, for probably the past 20 years, it almost feels that you hear the same thing time and again in schools. We specifically asked young women if they learned about violence against women and girls and domestic abuse in schools, and none of them could remember having done so. That does not mean it was not covered, but it tells us something about how it is delivered and how effective it is.



Many talked about RSE in schools being formulaic and non-engaging, and teachers being quite uncomfortable with it, especially given some of the issues that Sonya talked about. There is a large expectation on teachers, and we have to realise that. Also, young people like it when professionals come into the school. They create a much more engaging environment, they make young people feel that they can ask questions, and they relate things to their everyday lives.

There is a place for schools, but as Sonya said, one of the strengths of the strategy is the focus on education, early intervention and the amount of work being done with youth and community groups. At the moment almost every group I go out to for different projects is doing something on ending violence against women and girls. Young men are involved and young women are involved. My hope is that the kind of energy we are seeing at the minute is maintained, because we cannot just have this as one part of the strategy and then move on. It really needs to be maintained throughout.

As Sonya mentioned, we need to involve children and young people in the design of the education resources that they are going to find useful and need. Sonya's side project has done great work on that. I am working with a group of young women on the Shankill Road in Belfast at the minute and developing a video around everyday violence. They are trying to get at the notion of a day in the life of a young woman and how you feel at risk and unsafe through the everyday, normalised and trivialised behaviours of young men. They do not want to go down the route of alienating young men; they just want to have them understand how it feels. Their sense is that you are not going to bring young men with you if you call them toxic and talk about toxic masculinity.

We need to trust our young people more. To make one final point about schools: it cannot all be about RSE. From young people's narratives, the cultures and rules within schools often perpetuate quite dangerous gender stereotypes around young women being responsible for sexism and violence. There are lots of examples of young women being told that their shirts are see-through and that that is not good for the young men or male teachers or that they should not wear leggings in PE, again because it is distracting. Everyday sexism is not being called out and a blind eye is being turned to it or eyes are being rolled. We need to challenge those things and have conversations in schools about them. RSE is important and we could talk about it a lot, but it is a lot broader.

Chair: I was a French teacher for 20 years. I was never comfortable teaching RSE. PSHE just was not my thing. It is so important that the professionals are in schools—and it is not just about schools. Thank you for your comments, Siobhán. Sonya, I appreciate the work that you have been doing, which I saw at first hand when I was in Belfast and Stormont with you. What you do around stereotypes is very important across the UK because we have a problem with that and the culture. I want to give an extra thank you for the work that you are doing.

Q26 **David Smith:** I want to touch on education. Speaking of previous lives, I



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ran a homelessness charity before, but we had a domestic abuse strand within that. We tried to set up domestic abuse training in high schools specifically for young men. We were repeatedly rebuffed by funders. We were told that the money is only for young women, which seemed an absolutely circuitous nonsense because, as you have been saying, we have to educate young men.

At the same time, what you were saying about young men not just being told that they are a problem resonated with me. I was involved in mentoring adult men going through a programme to mentor young men. I am interested in your take and if there is anything like that going on in Northern Ireland because in terms of domestic violence against women and girls that is such a critical part. I used to be a youth worker in Northern Ireland as well and it is great for that stuff to happen outside of school, but one guaranteed way for it to happen is if it is funded, in school and focused on young men.

Sonya McMullan: We have a project at the moment through this funding stream that we have linked in with the Irish Football Association. Sport is important. I sit on a committee in Claire's constituency in south Belfast, Rosario local football club, and I am always trying to bring sport into this space. We have done a lot of work with the sporting organisations around safeguarding and introducing domestic abuse case studies. We are also starting to look at numerous case studies around violence against women and girls—for example, with every coach that is going out there so that they are aware.

We are starting with young boys, and we are going into football clubs. We are looking at six sessions, which will each be an hour, focusing on consent and coercive control. We are looking at misogyny and all of those things, but a lot of it is through games, a bit of banter, and trying to get their opinion—as Siobhán said—rather than talking at them. We are trying to say how difficult it is to navigate, as a young man, at the moment. I have two boys and I know how difficult that is. They are actually helping me with the material, as we develop it.

Claire Hanna: Whether they like it or not.

Sonya McMullan: Yes, they will tell me. They will be open and honest around that. We have to bring boys along with us. It is important, because sometimes they do not actually identify how their behaviours are causing an impact. They do not realise that, and we need to give them the opportunity, in safe spaces, to talk about it. It is through sport: it is an hour of looking at difficult subject matter, then some pizza, and then an hour of football, or rugby, or whatever. It is things like that. It is grassroots—getting into the community.

Sport is so important. Coaches have such an important part to play. They spend a lot of time with children and young people, as do teachers and youth workers, and should be able to identify and ask the question, "Is everything all right? What's going on for you?"



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That is one model of work. We have not started it yet; it is just in the developmental stages, but a lot of work is going on around the prevention of violence against women and girls through the TEO. However, they cannot be one-off pieces. I hope that project, for example, leaves a lasting legacy and stays; it is not for one year and, "That's it done. We've done X number of clubs." It needs to be something that really causes change, and we need to work with men and boys. There is a lot of debate and research about whether we work with boys and girls together or separate them. There is research around the benefits of both. Siobhán, you can probably add to that.

Dr McAlister: When you ask the young women, the response is mixed, but they are very clear that they do not want to be separated to be told how to keep themselves safe. That was reiterated time and again. The message that they are hearing at home—out of their parents' care for them—at school, and in the media is that you have to keep yourself safe. All the strategies that they put in place for that are interesting, but it goes back to the point you made: ending violence against women and girls cannot be the job of women and girls alone. We have to bring young men with us.

The Executive Office recently commissioned some research with young men to look at masculinities and how they might be involved. That will feed in too. It is important that we engage boys and young men in what would be useful for them, and what training would be useful for them. Do they want to make resources around that? That is what some of the early work with the Executive has focused on. Whether that gets into schools or not, I am not so sure.

Sonya McMullan: It is early days, I suppose. The strategy only launched in September, so we are very much at the starting point, but very open to looking at good practice. I know that the EVAWG team has been very good at looking to see what else is out there, but that piece of research will be good for looking at that narrative in Northern Ireland.

Q27 **Dr Pinkerton:** We have spoken this morning about some quite high-level stuff: the prevalence of violence against women and girls, the often intergenerational nature of it, and some of the educational strategies that can be pursued. One of the things we have not quite grounded out yet is the impact or effect of violence against women and girls on women and girls. DCS McKee, I imagine that you have supported many women in composing impact statements, so I put this to you, to help us understand: what impact does violence have on women and girls on an everyday basis? I recognise that is a challenging question because violence comes in many forms.

Detective Chief Superintendent McKee: It is, but it is an important question because it is something that we always need to consider. If we are not thinking about the impact on women and girls, what are we doing? There is the impact of the crime itself, which will probably remain for their lifetime. That is something that you always need to be aware of. We obviously have protection in that space, in terms of anonymity. That is



good, but that is only for people who actually go through the criminal justice process. The impact on a daily basis will be wide-ranging—I am sure that Sonya can give far better insights than I can, but it is wide-ranging, from the perspective of how safe they feel.

Public safety is a huge impact, because when it happens to one victim or survivor, that has a massive impact on other women, in terms of how they feel, and how they perceive safety in spaces. That is why we are doing quite a lot of work on that. It is one of our action plan strands. We are planning on proactively going out into public spaces. We have done a lot with Ask for Angela, for example, which is now a well-recognised scheme.

We are now pivoting to how we target those individuals who hang around outside bars at closing time at the end of the night, who approach females when they are slightly more vulnerable, possibly due to being on their own and isolated from groups. We are doing a lot of proactive work on that, and we are going to test it. Project Vigilant is a national best-practice initiative that we are rolling out in Northern Ireland. The impact of that is not felt, so we are trying to get in with prevention and early intervention.

The wider impact is in how they experience the rest of their lives as a result of that. It will last with them for a very long time. I am still in contact with some of the victims where I was the investigating officer for some of the crimes. It stays with them for ever. When there are high-profile cases, it brings it alive again, when there are conversations in this space. A lot of them also want to give their voice. We have to recognise that there is huge courage that comes from having experienced and come forward or being a collective of women and girls. There is a lot of strength gained there, so the impact of one offence can have positive repercussions, as well as negative for others.

Q28 Dr Pinkerton: Thank you. Sonya, I am going to come to you next.

Sonya McMullan: We have a powerful survivor engagement group of women who have come through our services and they inform everything. One thing that struck me was when the non-fatal strangulation legislation was going through, four women bravely told their stories. Very often before the committee when we are looking at new legislation, the committee is very good at breaking that down and maybe having only two people—a survivor or two survivors will come in at once. But they bravely told their harrowing and horrific stories, for the women who are coming after them. Our survivor engagement group is really powerful.

We see the long-term trauma so much in our work at Women's Aid. We have women coming back into services maybe five years later. Specifically with domestic abuse, it does not end at the point of separation. Post-separation abuse is a huge thing. Then we enter into the realm of the family courts and the extension of that. The abuse continues, and there is the weaponisation of children and young people within that. For a lot of women who come through it, it can affect their college life, university, school life for younger women, their work and career progression.



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We are doing a lot of work around economic and financial abuse at the moment, which is something we do not always think about. Then there is how to build future relationships and have trust and move on with your life. The work we do at Women's Aid is around trying to resize that trauma. You will always have it with you, but it is about trying to resize it in a manageable way that you can come back and be able to carry on.

If we look at intimate partner sexual violence, I do not think we talk enough about it. Certainly, we were disappointed that it was not named more in the Gillen review, with regard to the accessibility that a perpetrator has to a victim, the ongoing trauma and impact, and services that are adequately able to support women.

If we look at the number of cases going through of serious sexual offences in the domestic abuse arena, they are very low, and they are often dropped. That is very difficult when you have gone through that process. What we need is good, dedicated, specialised support services at all points of a woman's journey. That is why, whenever we do any consultation processes, we go into refuges. We will speak to women at that point of crisis, right through to our survivor engagement group, who are a few years out of their particular space and feel that they are in a better place to be able to respond. It is really important that we do that at every part and give everyone a voice.

Dr McAlister: Can I just say one thing about the continuum of violence? For young women, they talk a lot about experiencing gender-based violence in public spaces, and that impacts their use of those spaces and their right to freedom of association, and where they can go.

Public transport is huge in terms of young women feeling unsafe. The recent Northern Ireland Life and Times survey, for example, asked young women and young men how safe they felt in different spaces. Almost half of girls reported feeling unsafe using public transport on their own—that is seven times higher than young men. Feelings of safety in public space are very important.

Q29 **Dr Pinkerton:** And is that sometimes not necessarily because they have experienced violence themselves, but because public transport has become associated with it?

Dr McAlister: Yes, and it is the expectation of violence. Hearing stories, it is often known that young women are vulnerable to violence. It might not necessarily be that they have had previous experience themselves.

Q30 **David Smith:** This is quite a straightforward question to ask, but maybe more difficult to answer. There are a couple of strategies that the Northern Ireland Executive have: the overarching Programme for Government, which focuses on ending violence against women and girls, and the separate joint Department of Health and Department of Justice strategy.

It could be seen as early days, as the Programme for Government is from '24 to '27, but the Health and Justice one is slightly longer. Either way, both are at quite early stages. How effective do you think the strategies



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are, in how they have been set out initially and in how they have begun?

Dr McAlister: Happy to defer to you, Sonya.

Sonya McMullan: The ending violence against women and girls strategy was part of that co-design process. It was a very well thought-out process; you felt really part of it. We were delighted that it was launched in September last year, and we feel we have a real commitment from our First Minister and Deputy First Minister with regard to that. The implementation of the action plan in year one is looking at prevention and going out to those grassroots community groups.

Then there are 10 organisations, including ours, to do that regional delivery as well, but a strategy is only a piece of paper—it is very early days. It is the monitoring and scrutiny of it that is important to us for any strategy. The domestic and sexual abuse strategy is overseen by Health and Justice, but if you look at the majority of money—about £4.7 million of support for people through our Housing Executive and the Department for Communities—that comes from them, and they are not necessarily as involved.

We have to remember that Health cut our funding—our core grant—so we get no money as a federation for our services, and that really impacts our policy lobbying and campaigning. A lot of our work in Women's Aid Federation as a membership organisation is very much about sitting on the stakeholder groups for all those strategies on behalf of our members. It is very hard to do that when you are not funded to do it.

On Health and Justice, I suppose that strategy is the third or fourth in that space as well. There are action plans and deliverables every year, but we keep coming down to the issue of no resourcing and no money. You can have a strategy, but if you have no money attached to it, it is as simple as that. We work very hard with the Department of Health and Department of Justice on many really good initiatives.

The Department of Health, for example, have the IRIS programme, which they deliver as a prevention model in GP surgeries. It is not a pilot—everything in Northern Ireland is a pilot—but it has been going on for about six years. It is in two different areas in Northern Ireland, doing really good work, and we would love that to be rolled out across the whole of Northern Ireland.

The Department of Justice also have a perpetrator programme that they run in conjunction with Women's Aid, and that is for men of concern who want to see their children, so that is linked to social services as well. There are a lot of good things coming out of the strategy.

We get a very small grant from the Department of Justice for our Responsible Reporting Matters, which we launched in March this year. We have worked very closely with our local journalists, because they have a real part to play in the narrative they produce for society as well. There are very small pockets of money coming out of that, but, again, there needs to be further investment to get meaningful change.



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I know there is the assist programme and everything else that is going on—Zoe might want to speak—and bigger projects that are funded through Health and Justice, but I think there were concerns around the overlap and how they will play out. They have to work together. Whenever we called for the EVAWG strategy, the Justice Minister said at the time she definitely did not want it to sit with Justice. She wanted it to be with the Executive Office, because all Government Departments felt part of this. It has to be cross-departmental, because it crosses all of them.

Q31 David Smith: Can I do a quick follow-up that Siobhán and Zoe could come in on as well, if you want? As you say, Sonya, a strategy is only worth the paper it is written on if it is implemented, has the relevant resources and so on, but the other thing is joining things up, which Governments do not do very well. We silo things a lot: “That’s a police matter. That’s a justice matter. That’s an education matter.” Is there evidence of an integration or joined-up approach to these multiple strategies?

Detective Chief Superintendent McKee: Yes, I would say there is. I am actually quite buoyed by the fact that there is quite a lot of join-up. I say that from a professional and personal perspective, having worked for the last couple of years on the England and Wales violence against women and girls strategy and the delivery of it. They have had their strategy in place a lot longer than Northern Ireland, so I saw the outworkings and learnings from that. Cross-departmental improvements could be made, and improvements in ownership, so it does not just sit with one Department or team. I have applied that lens when coming back in and assessing it against the ending violence against women and girls strategy and all the other strategies we have looked at.

In terms of the strategy, it is in early days, but there seems to be really good buy-in from across Departments, and there is a really strong oversight board, so I am quite hopeful and optimistic. That is caveated by the fact that it needs to be adequately funded and needs long-term sustainability. It is a seven-year strategy; let’s see where we are in seven years, but it seems to be built on quite a good, robust theory of change model. I think policing were also involved in the co-design stage of that. We had the benefit of having had an action plan in place within policing long before the Government strategy, because we were aligning ourselves with some of the work that was coming out of the National Police Chiefs’ Council where every UK police force or service had a violence against women and girls action plan post Everard and the Angiolini inquiry. We have had that in place for a few years and had the benefit to see the outworkings of it and how it interacts with the overarching strategy.

David Smith: That is an encouraging note.

Q32 Katrina Murray: I apologise for not being here at the very beginning, but thankfully I have managed to catch most of the session. I will take over from David’s previous question. As you said earlier, Sonya, there was an absolute need for collaboration on ending violence against women across all the four nations that make up the United Kingdom. Our focus rightly is



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on the UK Government and the Northern Ireland Office. We have a Government who have a clear target of halving violence against women within 10 years. That will need to permeate out across all the devolved areas. How would you foresee the UK Government working to end violence against women within Northern Ireland?

Sonya McMullan: I suppose by not forgetting us, which is important—I know a lot of people probably want to. That is really important. Back to the mapping out piece, we were really encouraged that, for the first time, our Programme for Government had ending violence against women and girls in it. That was really groundbreaking for us. I know the current Government talk about halving it, and our strategy talks about eliminating all forms of violence against women and girls. It is wonderful to be here and to have you talk about and focus on it.

In Northern Ireland, I think some people think that this just started last September and that there was no violence against women and girls before that, but Women's Aid has been in existence for 50 years. This is not a new, shiny thing that everyone wants to be part of; it has been here for a long time. We all need to work together. For me, it is about that mapping and the leads all coming together, whether that is through an oversight board or whatever it might look like. To really make that happen and report on it is really important, certainly for Women's Aid.

Q33 **Katrina Murray:** Do you want to add anything?

Detective Chief Superintendent McKee: I just want to pick up a point about how policing feeds into both strategies—in Northern Ireland and in England and Wales. On the development of policing at a national level, we have a violence against women and girls lead for all the UK forces, including Northern Ireland, even though we are a non-Home Office force. A new national centre for public protection has been set up, and we will be docking into that. That has aligned how we engage with other policing areas, and how we take best practice. We take some of their innovations and insights, which will be key in terms of trying to meet the outcomes of the strategies. The most important thing is that it is a cross-system, cross-departmental, whole-society approach; I don't think that can be overemphasised.

Q34 **Katrina Murray:** Is there anything you want to add?

Dr McAlister: I just want to go back to the value of the co-design approach and ensuring it continues. Children and young people were involved in the co-design process. Sometimes we take an overprotective approach, but a participative approach is needed if we are going to protect children and young people. When we talk about continuing to roll on and fund the strategy, ensuring children and young people are involved in that process is key.

Q35 **Katrina Murray:** I want to pick up on one thing from that. You talked about being listened to, but the other bit is being heard, and they can be very different things. A lot of this is about action, as well as being there. How can the United Kingdom Government and the Northern Ireland



Executive work better to end violence against women and girls in Northern Ireland?

Detective Chief Superintendent McKee: I think that goes to some of the points that I have already made. Because the UK Government have had a strategy for longer, they have a good story to tell about the successes and pitfalls. It is about cross-pollinating that learning. Northern Ireland officials have gone over and spoken to the Home Office policy teams. They are having those conversations, which can only be good. Let us not forget that VAWG knows no boundaries—it is everywhere. When you look at the two strategies, there are real similarities. There is a huge prevention lens applied in both of them, which is positive.

Because the funding, resources and time are finite, the important thing is not to reinvent the wheel. If there are things being done elsewhere that could be duplicated with pride in other places, we should do that. We probably need an oversight board across the four nations to look at how they are sharing information, but it probably needs to come down to practitioner level too, because sometimes that is where the business gets done.

- Q36 **Claire Hanna:** I think we have covered the issue of funding. You are right that it is really good that we have the strategy and that it is across the Executive, but culture eats strategy for breakfast if it is not resourced. Sonya, you have referenced the challenges that Women's Aid has, even just getting core funding. We know that there are not just police funding issues but, as you have referenced, issues with disorder, meaning that officers are pulled away from proactive and everyday policing. Is there anything else you want to add about funding and the challenges you face in that regard? In the spending review last week, we noticed that there will be a 2.3% uplift for policing, specifically on ending violence against women and girls. Have you had any conversations about the work-through of that and whether it will make its way to that part of the budget?

Detective Chief Superintendent McKee: Candidly, I don't know yet. Probably a lot of people would say that. We don't know the outworkings of the spending review. I do not think the Home Office would assess that it had enough for the delivery of its strategy. Likewise, there is the spending review and how that goes out to devolved institutions and what we realise in terms of monetary value. I have articulated the funding and the resource position, particularly for the PSNI, and it is wholly underfunded. We are delivering services at risk, and we are not doing all that we could in the space of violence against women and girls. In the interests of candour, that has to be said.

Likewise, with those challenges come opportunities, as was said earlier, so we need to be thinking more innovatively about how we do those services. I think there are opportunities in the cross-pollination between the two Governments, and with the different initiatives and projects that are happening. Equally, you will probably pick this up in the next session, but the Online Safety Act covers all jurisdictions—there is no England,

Scotland, Northern Ireland. In the metaverse, the challenge is massive, and that is where you could realise some innovative opportunities.

Q37 Claire Hanna: Sonya, is there a sense of the funding allocations attached to the ideas and plans in the Executive strategy? We were at Larne FC and we saw a really good project there, which was similar to what you referenced about getting men involved. We were also in Foyle, where they spoke about councils being given a whack of money. There was the sense that they had done their best with it, but it was end-of-year and limited—all that. Is there a specific budget allocated to the strategy? I perhaps should not say this, but it is true. There is lots of stuff in the Programme for Government that sounds great but does not have a budget allocation. The Programme for Government accounts for only about 3% of the budget. Does this risk the priorities in there?

Sonya McMullan: There was £2 million that went out to the local councils. That was for awareness-raising, public engagement, events and different things. It was delivered differently in different councils, but it was the first time it went out. It did get out into the grassroots. It could have been done better, but there is learning from that as well. There were lots of conferences and events, and a lot of training. A lot of Women's Aid groups were being asked to speak at every club in the land, but obviously not getting any payment or resources for it. There is a bit of learning from that, but it did get through to the grassroots.

In the regional delivery, there were eight organisations, of which we are one. That was £1.2 million. That was to look at the prevention piece. We are doing the early intervention and Helping Hands work in early years, and we are looking at post primary. We are also working with educators in the teacher training colleges, and we have a programme with nurses and social work students as well.

There are lots of good initiatives, but it will take a while to embed itself. Getting through to the grassroots is really important. It was a challenge because of the idea that money has been spent, and you have only so many weeks and you have to try. That is not a good use of money. How are we going to monitor that societal change in our local communities? But I think learning will come back from that, and hopefully that will improve. It is really important to reach the harder-to-reach people, especially within rural communities across the country.

Dr McAlister: I suppose it is that point again: it feels that every youth group and community group you go to at the minute is doing work on this, which is great, and the Power to Change campaign really is fantastic. We are seeing lots of really good work, but it is about making sure that it does not fizzle out, and money will be required for that. Often, youth services are the first thing to go, but, actually, those informal services are the places that young people look to most for support, so we need our universal youth provision to remain funded. We probably need to embed and mainstream a lot of this work in there. Then, there are those very specialist services, which I think Sonya also talked about; we need to see it as an obligation to provide those, in terms of recovery for children and



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young people who experience violence. Again, I would just reiterate that lots of really good work is going on, but we need more money, I guess, for that to continue.

- Q38 **Chair:** We have talked about online pornography and the Online Safety Act, but I have done some work on pimping websites—prostitution and trafficking. Is there any specific work in Northern Ireland around that? What is its prevalence? Is there any kind of picture you can paint on that, particularly you, Zoe? It is an issue across the UK, and I just wondered whether it was a specific issue that you were dealing with in Northern Ireland at the moment.

Detective Chief Superintendent McKee: Candidly, Chair, it is not something that we have significant insight into. By way of example, I think there are gaps where we just don't know what we don't know. Even just the capability and capacity—in terms of even having a workforce that has not only the technology but the skills, the training and the resources to pivot towards looking at the issues you have just described—is a gap for us, because we are not necessarily monitoring that at all. But we absolutely recognise that there are risks in that space.

- Q39 **Chair:** Okay. With your research hat on, Siobhán, is that on your radar?

Dr McAlister: I am not aware of any research. I know you are going to be having another panel, so there might be some academics in that who are doing work in that field, but I am not aware of it.

- Q40 **Chair:** Sonya, is any of that on your radar, regarding any of the women you have seen?

Sonya McMullan: We have the trafficking project, as you know, through Belfast and Lisburn Women's Aid. There are about 300 women in that project now, with more than 200 children attached to those women. It is an amazing project. I think that Women's Aid is hoping to replicate the research from the Community Foundation and Women's Aid in Ireland, specifically looking at pornography. That focused a lot on Pornhub and things like that, and the damage from OnlyFans and all of that as well. We certainly have women coming through our services who have been exploited through OnlyFans. We are starting to see that, and the support is being built in but, as Zoe said, it is very early days. I think with anything around the technology space, we are always two steps—10 steps—behind. I know that, with the Justice Bill, they are looking at an amendment around AI technology-facilitated abuse as well, and that is another huge area that needs an awful lot of work.

- Q41 **Chair:** But while this moves on at pace, we are we are not catching up?

Sonya McMullan: No.

Chair: Zoe, Siobhán and Sonya, thank you for your work in this space. It is really tremendous, and we hope to work with you.