



BRIEFING PAPER IN PREPARATION FOR EVIDENCE TO THE NORTHERN IRELAND AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

A RESPONSE BY WOMEN'S AID FEDERATION NI JUNE 2025

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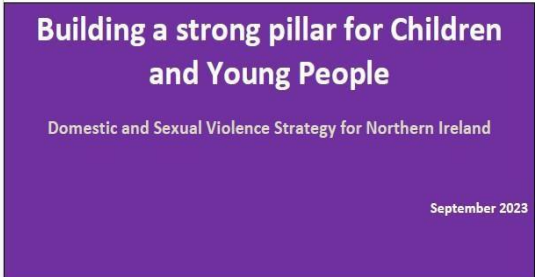
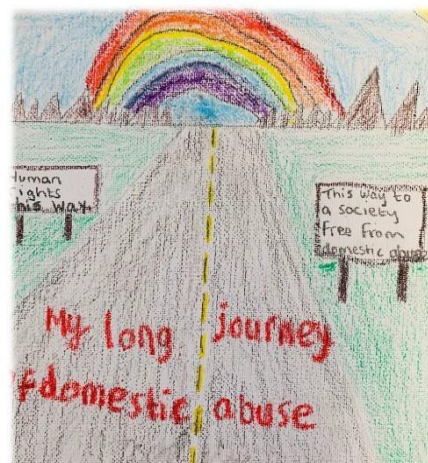
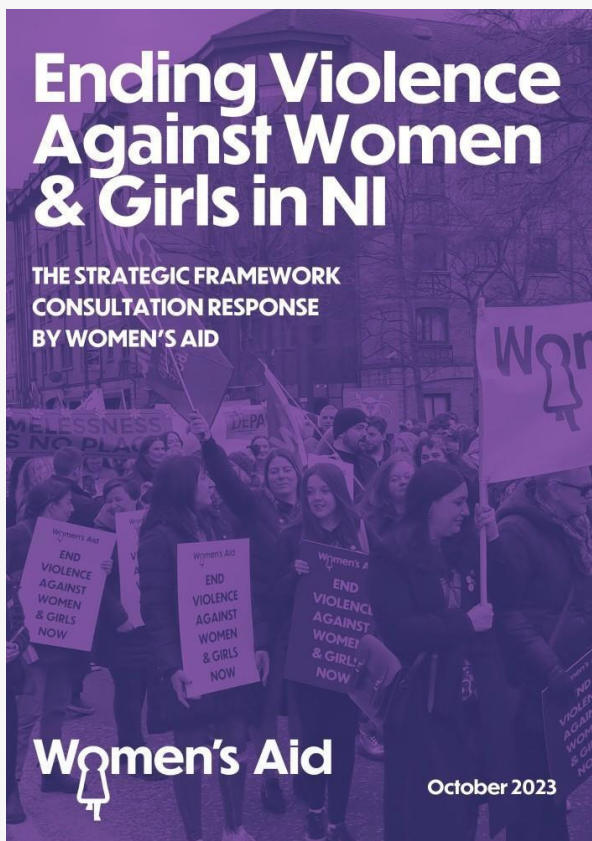
Women's Aid – Information & Statistics

Women's Aid NI is the lead voluntary organisation challenging and addressing domestic violence and abuse in Northern Ireland. WAFNI is the umbrella body of eight Women's Aid groups across NI. WAFNI promotes regional collaborative working across all Women's Aid groups and provides a regional lead in areas of training development, preventative education, strategic development of children and young people's services, policy response and advocacy.

We work collectively across Northern Ireland to:

- engage with women, children and young people, to give them a voice and ensure they inform all aspects of service development and delivery.
- provide trauma informed specialised services to women, children and young people who have experienced domestic abuse.
- deliver preventative education programmes in schools and community settings to promote healthy non-abusive relationships and share key safeguarding messages.
- educate and inform the public, private, voluntary, statutory and community sectors of the context and impact of domestic abuse.
- provide quality assured education and training to a wide audience, to increase capacity to respond to domestic abuse.
- monitor, influence and respond to government policy and legislation as a Subject Matter Expert, giving a voice to survivors of domestic abuse.
- Work in partnership, sharing our expertise with all relevant agencies to ensure a joined-up response to domestic abuse.

Throughout this response, the term “Women's Aid” refers to the overall Women's Aid movement in Northern Ireland, including our local groups and Women's Aid Federation NI.



STATISTICS 2023/24



527 Women
stayed in our refuges
throughout NI



10,955
Referrals made to
Women's Aid Services



291 Children
stayed in refuge
with their mum



7,637 Women
received support whilst
staying in their homes



45 Women
women supported
through pregnancy
in refuge



5,293 Children
had mums supported in
Women's Aid services



266 Women
who were pregnant
received support
from Women's Aid



10 Babies
Born in refuge

DOMESTIC ABUSE POLICE SNAPSHOT



**16
minutes**

The average time
the PSNI receive a
call regarding
a domestic abuse
incident in 23/24



1/5 of all Crime

The amount of
crimes committed
that were domestic
abuse related in
23/24



**Women
murdered**

The number of
women killed in
Northern Ireland
since 2020

SEXUAL OFFENCES - PSNI STATISTICS 23/24



There were 1,181 rape offences recorded by the PSNI, 454 cases in which the victim was under 18 years old.



Of the rape offences recorded by Police, 60% were reported within 12 months of occurring.



The number of Sexual offences recorded in 23/24 was 2,393.



1/3 of rape offences recorded by the PSNI were domestic abuse related.



Sexual offences currently represent around 4% of all crimes recorded.

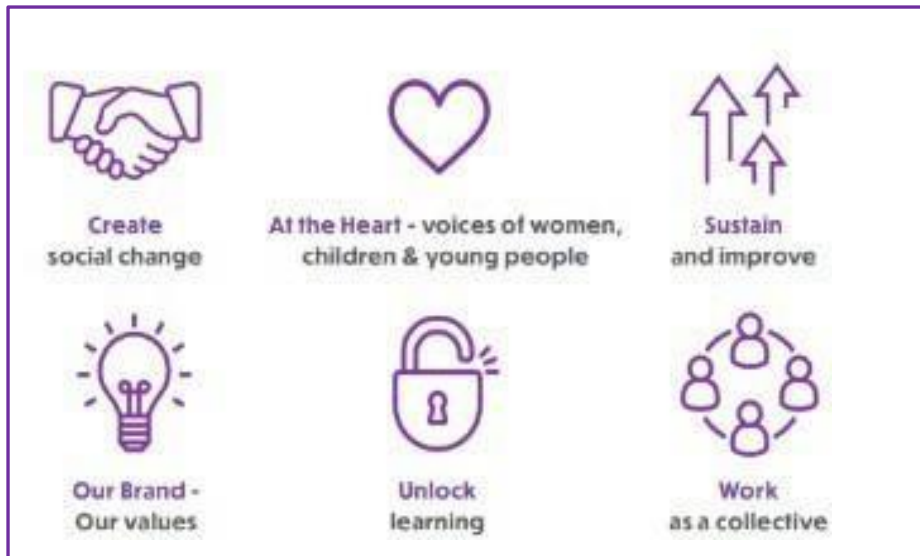


Of the Sexual Assaults recorded by Police, 69% were reported within 12 months of occurring.

Background to Organisation

Women's Aid is the original EAWG organisation, responding to and challenging VAWG, before it was acknowledged strategically at a government level. Women's Aid called for this EAWG strategic framework and was a key player in the co facilitation process. Women's Aid believes the best way to eliminate VAWG in society is to prevent it from happening. This is the only way to shift the narrative and create lasting change. We welcome the TEO's strong commitment to prevention in the framework. Women's Aid, as a Subject Matter Expert (SME) in VAWG is unique in its service provision, providing a specialist wrap around service for victims and survivors of VAWG. Services are based upon over 40 years' experience and are person-centred, and trauma informed. Women's Aid vision and core aims and statistics for 2022/23 are provided on page 3.

WAFNI has developed since 1978 as a strong umbrella body, providing leadership and support to eight Women's Aid groups. WAFNI creates social change and supports innovation and best practice with a 3-year strategy "Unlocking Potential – Building on Success" which presents 6 big ideas (strategic themes). Prevention underpins all of these.



WAFNI provides the regional lead for:

Initiating powerful campaigns: Developed in partnership with Women's Aid groups and informed by voices of lived experience.

Policy and lobbying: WAFNI advocates for policy changes, legal reforms, and government action to address domestic abuse and VAWG effectively, amplifying the voices of lived experience. We respond to government requests for consultations and calls for evidence, this involves consultation with all the eight local Women's Aid groups and engagement with survivors at all stages of their journey. This is important to meet with women in refuge and outreach services right through to the survivor engagement group, so we are able to capture from crisis services through to recovery.

The last key pieces of work we have been involved in include:

- Review into Routine Enquiry for PHA
- Access to Justice including civil legal aid.
- PPS Policy on Stalking
- NI Programme for Government
- Safe Leave Act
- Submission to the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women and Girls
- Offcom response
- Victim and Witnesses Bill

As service providers Women's Aid see many barriers that must be overcome for victims and survivors of domestic abuse to adequately access support and seek redress which include:

- The full implementation of aspects of Domestic Abuse & Civil Proceedings Act (NI) 2021 including Domestic Abuse Protection Orders and Notices which have yet to be introduced in NI. ¹
- Breaches of Personal Protection Orders such as Non-Molestation Orders which are not being taken seriously by authorities.
- Protection Orders not being granted due to bail conditions being in place or not extended failing to protect the victim.
- The number of Non-Molestation Orders being granted has reduced over the last number of years and is very concerning, we have raised this with Lady Chief Justice, Justice Minister and Victims Commissioner. *(numbers attached as appendix 1)*

Judicial Reviews

There have been several Judicial Review challenges brought since the pandemic on the area of ex-parte protection.

The first deals with the Court's power to extend ex-parte non-molestation orders.²

The second deals with the hearing of non-molestation cases where there are linked criminal proceedings.³

The third deals with bail and ex-parte appeals in applications where an emergency order is refused.⁴

- The continuing abuse of women and their children in the Family Court.
- Major delays in the criminal justice process for domestic abuse related cases, victims and survivors fear engaging due to the delays and serious concerns that if convicted their perpetrator will not face a custodial sentence so they feel 'what's the point?' in engaging with the Justice System. Major concern is also in relation to sexual offences not being proceeded with in relation to domestic abuse cases.
- There is a comprehensive and widespread lack of core trauma informed training of key stakeholders as well as wider sections of society to dispel myths around domestic abuse and sexual offences.
- All elements of relationship and sexuality education are taught consistently throughout NI within schools to allow our young people in line with the UK Government's amended regulations for NI. ⁵
- The lack of sufficient resourcing of special support services to adequately address the number of women coming forward for support following changes in the law in Northern Ireland around domestic abuse, which encourages victims and survivors to come forward.

¹ Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021 (legislation.gov.uk)

² [Neutral Citation No: \[2020\] NIQB 54](#) - Judicial review 118

³ [Neutral Citation No: \[2021\] NIQB 2](#) - Judicial review 131

⁴ [Neutral Citation No. \[2022\] NIKB 14](#)

⁵ These regulations amend the Education (NI) Order 2006, and the Education (Curriculum Minimum Content) Order (NI) 2007. See Regulation 2(2), Relationships and Sexuality Education (NI) (Amendment) Regulations 2023; Regulation 3, Relationships and Sexuality Education (NI) (Amendment) Regulations 2023.

- There is a lack of understanding of the link between homelessness and domestic abuse, as our current legislation does not reference or include a link to homelessness and needs to be addressed urgently.
- Statutory acknowledgement and funding for migrant women.
- More engagement with survivors to better inform services.
- Domestic Homicide Reviews to include suicide.
- Northern Ireland continues to have a high risk of femicide. Since 2020, 26 women have been murdered in Northern Ireland, 25 of whom were murdered by a man who was suspected to be a current/ex intimate partner or another male relative. Women's Aid Federation NI collates a femicide record for the whole of Ireland with Women's Aid Ireland and contributes to the UK Femicide report.
 - More must be done in NI from a societal approach to stop abusive relationships from escalating to the point where a femicide occurs, including the adequate funding of support services, strengthening legal protections and training for statutory organisations that can help intervene before a situation escalates to femicide.
 - NI has no support for the families and loved ones who lose these women to femicide, with many of these families being left with no specialist support to process what has happened, especially through long delays in the criminal justice process that mean murder trials in NI take years

Professional training and capacity building: WAFNI's 'Centre of Training Excellence' builds capacity, increases learning and promotes best practice. WAFNI has led the way Shifting the Narrative – Creating the Change - A Proposal submitted to TEO – Ending Violence against Women and Girls Strategy, September 2024 in tried and tested models such as "Journey to Freedom", "You and Me, Mum" etc. Training and capacity-building is available for professionals across sectors, equipping them with knowledge and skills to recognise and respond to VAWG.

Women's Aid Federation NI have a centre of training excellence and we contribute to both internal training within Women's Aid and external training to both voluntary and statutory agencies across NI. This ranges from PSNI, PPS, QUB, Law Society, Energia, Start 360, Clanmill Housing, Cancer Focus, childcare providers, financial institutions including local banks and building societies and many more.

Public awareness: WAFNI is active across all major social media channels including Facebook, X and Instagram. WAFNI works in partnership with Women's Aid groups to promote consistent, collective image and brand.

Survivor engagement: WAFNI works to ensure the voices of victims and survivors are heard within a policy and training context. There is an active Survivor Engagement group that meets regularly to inform research, policy and consultation responses, media campaigns and so much more. The groups are true change makers using their lived

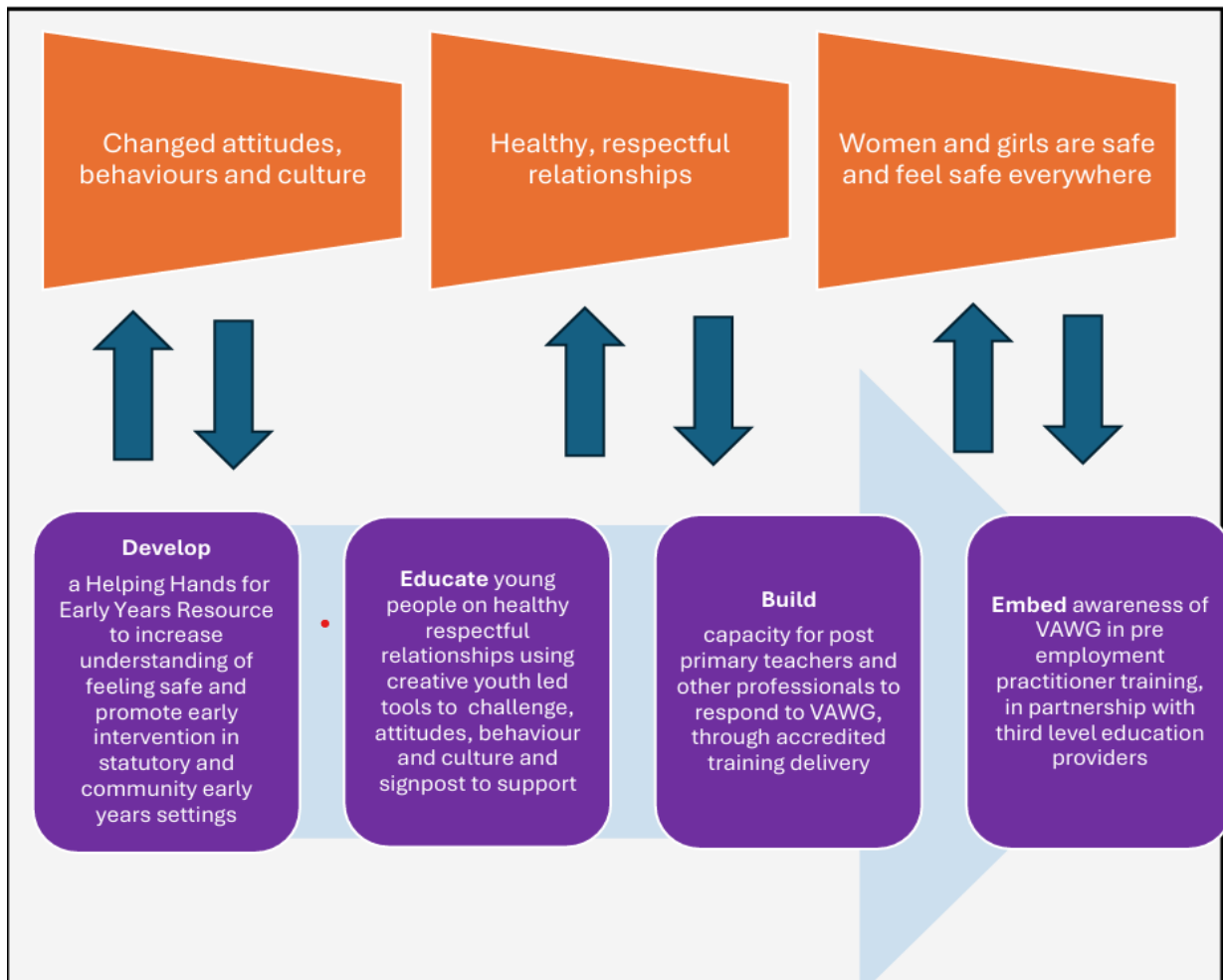
experience for the women who will follow. Our Survivor Engagement group contribute to research and policy, meet with political representatives and victim and survivor groups. They also contribute to campaigns and have an overview of all of the work within Women's Aid. Survivor engagement in policy is crucial because it ensures that the needs, experiences, and voices of survivors are heard and considered when developing and implementing policies related to violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence.

Preventative education: Over the past 15 years, WAFNI has delivered a capacity building programme in primary schools "Effective Communication Skills for Social Guardians Delivering Helping Hands" which develops teacher's skills as social guardians to deliver the highly successful Helping Hands programme. An independent evaluation by Dr. Helga Sneddon, evidenced positive outcomes along with recommendations. To date 1,756 teachers representing 600 primary schools have been trained. This has been adopted across ROI and UK, as a model of best practice. The success of preventative work at primary school level, along with feedback from young people, teachers and external agencies has highlighted the need for a robust preventative model at post primary level, to build teacher capacity, and promote safety, respect, equality, and trust. This provides the foundation for this proposal.

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Through funding secured by TEO EVAWG Directive Women's Aid will deliver the following programme of work:

Building upon WAFNI's successful track record of preventative education and developing this to post primary and third level education, clearly aligns with the prevention theme in the EVAWG strategic framework which seeks to place an overall emphasis on prevention, tackling the root causes, and stopping the violence before it starts. Developing a continuous preventative journey for all children and young people, from early years, through to primary, post primary and third level education, ensures they are getting clear messaging about healthy relationships and respect throughout. Our capacity building plans for professionals including teachers, social workers, health and social care practitioners will ensure this journey is supported by Social Action Champions who can support and refer. We will deliver four high level outputs throughout NI which correlate directly to and deliver upon the three outcomes presented under the prevention theme as outlined below:



Women's Aid are committed to leaving a legacy with this funding model and hope to build on an already strong foundation within prevention work to end violence against women and girls.

This is an important time in NI history with the introduction of a Violence Against Women & Girls strategy. We are post-conflict society and finally have violence with the home and especially against women and girls recognised and actioned is a seismic shift, although this has been the focus of Women's Aid work over the last 50 years. So, we welcome this End Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy and commend the TEO for focussing the first Action Plan on Prevention, we are on the road to prevention and hopefully to a changed and safer society for women and girls.

Women's Aid

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