

Report on Board Member Responses: Addressing Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) in Northern Ireland

1. Introduction

Family Justice Centers (FJCs) represent a transformative approach to addressing the needs of victims of domestic and sexual assault and other forms of abuse. These centres are designed to provide a coordinated and comprehensive response to all victims and survivors irrespective of age race gender, sexual orientation, or disability bringing together various agencies and organizations under one roof to offer a seamless support system for victims and their families. The Family Justice Centre key staff and board received mentoring and training provided by the Justice Centre Alliance USA with whom we are affiliated.

The primary work of Family Justice Centres is to create a one-stop service environment where victims can access multiple services without the need to visit multiple agencies. This model not only simplifies the process for victims but also enhances the effectiveness of the support provided. Key features of FJCs include crisis intervention, legal assistance, counselling and support, and other identified services. By fostering collaboration among different service providers, FJCs ensure that victims receive holistic support tailored to their specific needs that is delivered within a trauma informed model and setting.

This report consolidates the insights and recommendations provided by board members of the Family Justice Centre in NI in response to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee's inquiry into domestic abuse and violence against women and girls (VAWG). The responses reflect a deep understanding of the unique challenges faced in Northern Ireland and propose strategic, evidence-based solutions.

The Family Justice Centre Board and associated senior managers consist of key individuals that have currently or have had senior positions and a wealth of knowledge and skills and experience across various specialisms including Economics, Law, Courts, Housing, Human Rights, Veterinary Links group, Forensic Psychology PSNI and Foyle Women's Aid and Assist NI.

2. Key Themes and Findings

2.1. Prevalence and Impact of VAWG in Northern Ireland

Police Statistics:

- 75% of girls aged 16 surveyed experienced street harassment at least once in their lifetime
- 73% of girls and young women surveyed, aged between 12 to 17 years of age, reported having experienced one or more forms of gender-based violence
- 98% of adult women surveyed said that they had experienced at least one form of gender-based violence or abuse in their lifetime
- 67% of female students surveyed said that they had had at least one unwanted sexual experience during their time in higher education, including experiences of unwanted sexual contact, coercion, attempted rape, and rape
- 3 in 5 women polled across the UK said they have experienced harassment at work – rising to almost 2 in 3 women aged 25 to 37
- 69% of all victims of domestic abuse crimes, recorded by PSNI in 2022/23 were female
- 42 women across our society were murdered from January 2013 to June 2023 – 1 every 3 months

Despite the alarming figures, reported in Northern Ireland was the last UK region to implement a VAWG strategy. Marie noted that women's groups had to campaign for equal protections, with the absence of a functioning government for 1,094 days (60% of the time) cited as a key reason for the delay. This political instability also delayed key legislation and hindered the rollout of vital services.

She emphasized that Northern Ireland is the most dangerous places in the United Kingdom for women and girls, with crime statistics showing they are disproportionately affected by violence, abuse, and intimidation.

Cuts to PSNI budgets have further constrained support systems, placing additional burdens on victims and service providers.

In 2018/19, these services faced a 5% budget cut, and despite inflation reaching 11%, only a 4.5% uplift was granted in 2024. This has led to staff retention issues and increased pressure on already overwhelmed services.

Marie stressed that legislative changes have not been matched with the necessary resources, undermining their effectiveness.

In contrast, Northern Ireland has not received comparable funding, despite facing greater challenges.

A joined-up approach to housing and homelessness prevention is urgently needed.

She also highlighted the housing crisis, noting that many families are forced to flee their homes while perpetrators remain. There are missing opportunities to work together and support families to remain in their homes and remove perpetrators. There needs to be an overall analysis of homicide reviews and assurance that the recommendations are being implemented into policy practice and training of key stakeholders. The lack of effective communication between agencies and the prevalence of paramilitary activities are some of the key factors to date.

There is a lack of reporting of breaches of orders and high repeat victimization being recorded. We have clients reporting lack of confidence that they will be taken seriously.

There is little to no confidence in the courts when they do get there with victims increasingly highlighting to the local press their disappointment that issues such as strangulation and sentencing on domestic abuse are not matching the seriousness of the crime. The journey through the criminal justice system has proved harrowing for many victims and the lack of communication or willingness to collaborate between agencies in criminal justice system has caused undue hardship for victims trying to stay within the process. Information on special measures to victims and the lack of remote court provision has caused a great deal of stress to some of the victims and survivors we work with.

The Gillen review 2018 has not yet been fully implemented. Reviews take time and resources and many victims and agencies who feed them engage in the processes because they want to see improvement and changes to the systems. The level of disappointment and lack of confidence that when reviews are not implemented fully or timebound creates complete distrust in the systems and lack of willingness to engage

Specialized Domestic abuse services have proven track records of supporting and increasing women and children's safety and have for over fifty years been a lifeline for women, girls, and children fleeing abuse, yet they face long waiting lists, increased demand, and chronic underfunding.

Marie emphasized that while awareness-raising efforts are welcome, they must be matched with proper funding for frontline services currently overwhelmed.

- Westminster's Domestic Abuse Bill: £125 million ring-fenced for local authority support in 2021-22.

- Ireland's 2022 Strategy: £363 million to tackle gender-based violence.

- Scotland's Equally Safe Fund: £9.5 million in the first six months.

Marie provided a comparative analysis of funding across the UK and Ireland:

She pointed out that frontline domestic abuse services are under-resourced, operating on budgets that have not been uplifted since 2009.

Marie Brown underscored that Northern Ireland's post-conflict complexities continue to impact victims of abuse.

Marie Brown highlighted that domestic abuse accounts for 20% of all crimes in Northern Ireland, yet the budget allocated to address this crisis remains disproportionately low.

Michelle Martin ASSIST CEO highlighted alarming statistics including high rates of street harassment, gender-based violence, and unwanted sexual experiences among women and girls. The societal impact includes reduced school attendance, economic participation, and underrepresentation of women in the workforce.

2.2. Structural and Systemic Challenges

Northern Ireland's post-conflict legacy contributes to low trust in policing, trauma, and patriarchal norms. Resource limitations and unstable governance further hinder effective responses to VAWG.

2.3. Funding and Legislative Disparities

Damian Mc Ateer and Judge Burgess emphasized the need for ring-fenced funding and legislative parity across the UK. Domestic violence should be recognized as a human rights issue, and a UK-wide task force is recommended.

2.4. Service Delivery and Victim Support

Dr Geraldine O Hare, and Damian Mc Ateer stressed early intervention, investment in perpetrator programmes, and co-located service models like Family Justice Centres to support victim engagement.

2.5. Animal Abuse as a Barrier to Leaving

Andrea and Tom highlighted the lack of specialist domestic abuse animal fostering services in NI. Pets can be a significant barrier to victims fleeing abuse, and NI is the only UK region without such services.

3. Recommendations

- Establish a Four-Nation Strategy: Ensure consistent legal powers, funding, and data collection across the UK. Appoint an independent EVAWG Champion for NI.
- Improve Data and Accountability: Align reporting structures and invest in technology for better data retention and analysis.
- Invest in Services and Workforce: Address skills gaps in health, social care, and education. Fund specialist services, including animal fostering support.
- Legislate for Equality and Protection: Extend protections such as stalking and coercive control laws to NI. Recognize domestic abuse as a breach of human rights.

- Support Victim-Centric Models: Further invest in and expand Family Justice Model and FDACs. Ensure wraparound support for victims, including housing and legal

4. Conclusion

The board's responses underscore the urgent need for a coordinated, well-funded, and victim-centered approach to tackling VAWG in Northern Ireland. Addressing systemic gaps, ensuring legislative parity, and investing in innovative support models are essential to achieving meaningful change.

Paramilitary Research: Additional Insights and Conclusions

- Do women and girls experience violence differently in Northern Ireland, compared to the rest of the UK? o If so, how?
- How do women and girls in Northern Ireland experience online abuse, such as sexual harassment and cyberbullying, compared to the rest of the UK?

While women and girls in Northern Ireland experience gendered violence in ways that are common to/shared with other regions in the UK (and globally), there are a number of context-specific factors that both 1) exacerbate the ways that women experience violence, as well as, 2) generate specific forms of harm that are unique to Northern Ireland within the UK.

Northern Ireland's history of political violence, referred to 'the Troubles', has left a significant mark on Northern Irish society. What is often referred to as the 'legacy' of the Troubles is in fact a sustained and residual impact of organised violence on families, communities and institutions. This includes ongoing direct and intergenerational trauma on individuals and entire families, and on intimate relations within families; enduring instability in the political institutions at a macro level and mistrust of institutions in some communities; and ongoing gaps in accountability and justice for atrocities which are a burden that many families carry. These ongoing dynamics are additional contributory factors to violence against women and girls and exacerbate the ways that they bear the brunt of violence and controls ordinarily present in society. Enduring instability, tolerance of violence, and what, for some, would be unresolved political ambitions associated with the Troubles, all come to bear on the ways that women and girls may experience violence.

Further, there are more direct ways that the Troubles period results in specific harms impacting women and girls. While not all communities directly experience paramilitarism, in some areas where paramilitaries continue to be present, they are considered to represent significant risk. Fourteen 'proscribed organisations' remain listed under the Terrorism Act (2000), with the terrorist threat level and active violence of these groups estimated as 'substantial' by MI5 (2024). They are estimated to represent a controlling and violent force

on these communities, involved in 'punishment' attacks and shootings; murder; forced drug dealing and debt controls; commercial exploitation and extortion; loan sharking; protection rackets; forced prostitution; human trafficking; forced recruitment; and sexual exploitation and abuse.

Research by Foyle Family Justice Centre and University College Dublin in 2024 examined the specific experiences of women in relationships with men involved in paramilitarism. It found that where paramilitarism is present (in some communities only), it can represent a specific risk and contributory factor to the ways that women experience IPV. For example, while women experience many of the same dynamics common to IPV across regions of the UK. However, in Northern Ireland, the research identified that paramilitarism plays a dualistic role in (some) women's experiences of IPV. First, paramilitary implicit presence and controls at community level is a resource that perpetrators draw from. Women's knowledge of the control and punishment strategies of paramilitarism creates fear that perpetrators exploit by eliciting threats to involve paramilitary 'friends' in the abuse. Second, paramilitarism is used tacitly and explicitly in the abuse. For example, the coercer, or the wider group, use paramilitary practices, such as punishment shootings as forms of threat/harm, or involve the resources of the group in the surveillance of women. There is also an impact on service delivery, where some services may be manipulated or exploited by paramilitary actors, and where service providers themselves will refer to the ways that it can be difficult to deliver services where they know paramilitarism is an aspect of the case they are dealing with. It is evident that women affected by paramilitarism live their lives within a coercive net of implicit and explicit coercion and control that is driven by the histories, status and ongoing organised violence of some paramilitary groups in some communities.

Going forward, it is important that recognition is given to the need for policy and the services sector to recognise the 'group-based capacity' in some women's experiences of IPV and coercive control. There is need for service professionals to have training on the significance of paramilitarism in some women's experiences of IPV and to understand and respond to the ways that she is not just having to deal with violence in an intimate relationship, but also his connections to wider group at community levels. More explicit recommendations are available in the full report of the research here:

<https://foylefamilyjusticecentre.org/when-you-know-what-they-are-capable-of-paramilitary-related-gendered-coercive-control/>



Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

By email only

29 April 2025

From the Chair
Tonia Antoniazzi MP

Dear Foyle Family Justice Centre,

The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, which I chair, is looking into the issue of ending violence against women and girls in Northern Ireland. To help my Committee better understand this deeply important subject, I would be grateful if you could answer some or all of these questions for us:

- How prevalent is violence against women and girls in Northern Ireland, compared to the rest of the UK?
- Do women and girls experience violence differently in Northern Ireland, compared to the rest of the UK?
 - If so, how?
- How do women and girls in Northern Ireland experience online abuse, such as sexual harassment and cyberbullying, compared to the rest of the UK?
- What steps should the UK Government at Westminster take to end violence against women and girls in Northern Ireland?
- How could the UK Government and Northern Ireland Executive better work together to end violence against women and girls in Northern Ireland?

Yours sincerely,

Tonia Antoniazzi MP
Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee