



women's
RESOURCE & DEVELOPMENT AGENCY
Supporting Women's Groups and Networks across Northern Ireland

Consultation – “Hidden Crimes Secret Pain”
A consultation Paper on a proposed Regional Strategy
for addressing Sexual Violence in Northern Ireland

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Introduction

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The Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA) is a regional organisation whose mission is to 'advance women's equality and participation in society by working to bring about social, political and economic change'. The organisation was established in 1983 and continues to focus its efforts on working with and through women and community organisations located within disadvantaged and/or divided communities.

By strengthening the role and position of women in their own communities, it is anticipated that wider community change will be brought about, leading to the advancement of the broader vision for peace, reconciliation and social inclusion.

The WRDA has obtained funding from Awards for All to deliver a series of policy consultations, in addition to developing an e-consultation facility on its website. The response to this consultation is the result of a consultation event organised in partnership with Women's Aid and attended by twenty three women, representing the following organisations:

North Down and Ards Women's Aid
Women's Aid Federation
Amnesty International
NI Human Rights Commission
Fermanagh Women's Aid
Women's Support Network
Women's News
Footprints Women's Centre
Belfast and Lisburn Women's Aid
Women's Resource and Development Agency

The discussion on the consultation concentrated upon specific aspects of the consultation. This response will therefore address only selected questions.

Interrelated Strategies

We note the list of inter-related strategies, initiatives and reports listed in 1.6 deemed relevant to the strategy. We note that the Gender Equality Strategy is omitted from this list. As the GES includes 'gender related violence' amongst its key action areas and has the strategic objective of the elimination of gender based violence, we would urge the inclusion of the Gender Equality Strategy in the strategies informing the development of the sexual violence strategy. The structural analysis of women's unequal status within society is highly relevant to an understanding of the prevalence of sexual violence directed overwhelmingly against women, as acknowledged in 1.22.

1. Definition of sexual violence

The definition is acceptable if it is intended to include forms of violence such as sexual harassment and stalking. We would prefer a strategy that incorporates all forms of violence – domestic violence, rape, sexual assault, trafficking for sexual exploitation, etc. We support the argument that ‘it is the combination across all these forms of violence...which make up ‘violence against women’ and in many women’s experiences these different forms of violence are intertwined (Kelly and Lovett, *What a Waste*, 2005).

It was felt that the domestic violence and abuse strategy and the sexual violence strategy should be combined. This would make for a stronger strategy and improve co-ordination of services. It was also felt that the strategy was too gender neutral, with insufficient acknowledgement that in the majority of cases, the perpetrator is male. The statement ‘female children are most at risk and adult males are least at risk’ (p.21) is a weak portrayal of the realities of life for a large percentage of women.

2. Effective ways to increase understanding of the realities of sexual violence amongst the general public, including children.

Campaigning and publicity should provide clear information on what constitutes sexual violence. The overall message must be that this is unacceptable behaviour. There appears to be a reluctance to identify women as the main victims of sexual violence. Explanation for such acts must include the imbalance of power between men and women.

Public awareness campaigns must include a focus on the vulnerability of certain groups, such as the mentally ill, persons with learning disabilities and people with physical disabilities. For campaigns to be effective, sufficient resources must be available to provide effective remedies for those requiring support.

3. Which key target groups could contribute to supporting the process of increasing public understanding of the realities of sexual violence?

The voluntary sector, in particular women’s groups and centres, can play an important role in their local communities and in lobbying and advocacy work. Indeed, women’s centres such as Footprints and Shankill have played key roles in their neighbourhoods in response to the rapes of women in the locality. This work, however, requires resources.

5. Effective ways to (a) encourage the development of social attitudes that will support the prevention of sexual violence

The most important aspect to this is the inclusion of education on sexual violence within the school curriculum. There was concern regarding the lack of skills, knowledge, willingness and confidence in delivering such education material within the school curriculum.

(b) Key influencers

This education would be better carried out by specialist groups working in this area, with the support of the Department of Education. Parents, teachers and

community groups should be working together to educate children and education and prevention work should also be targeted at these groups so that there is an holistic approach to the task of influencing and changing attitudes.

Concern was expressed that nothing was aimed at the perpetrators of sexual violence and that they should also be targeted.

6. Should government give a clear message to stem the tide of normalising sexual violence in society?

Yes. This should provide information about sexual violence and should be direct and open in explanation. Sexual violence is a violation of a person's human rights. In addition, government spending should be within a policy framework that is directed towards a more effective, integrated and preventative response to violence against women in general. Both the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the UN Beijing Platform for Action, which have been endorsed by the UK government, have specific clauses relating to the elimination of violence against women. It is stated that violence is one of the major barriers for achieving gender equality. This message should be included in government policy.

7. What steps could the media take to support the process of increasing public understanding and awareness of the realities of sexual violence?

A 'shaming' campaign such as that for drink driving, aimed specifically at young men, should be instituted. Reporting of sexual violence should be unambiguous in placing such acts of violence within the following context, as articulated by Kofi Annan, it is 'the most shameful human rights violation, and it is perhaps the most pervasive. It knows no boundaries of geography, culture or wealth. As long as it continues, we cannot claim to be making real progress towards equality, development and peace.'

8. What key messages should be promoted in relation to how healthy relationships and respect can help prevent sexual violence?

The most fundamental message must relate to women's right to equality and to respect. Relationship and sexuality education in schools must be more than biology and the mechanics of sex. It has to include emotional education and discussion of what makes for healthy relationships between people.

9. In addition to the education and training sector, what other sectoral groups and influencers have a role in delivering relevant messages?

The women's voluntary and community sector have a clear role. They have on the ground experience of women's lives. Some women's centres have advice lines, where women are able to obtain advice in a woman-only supportive setting. These must be supported.

The NI Human Rights Commission has a clear role in articulating and delivering the message that violence against women is a fundamental abuse of the human rights of women and girls.

The Equality Commission has a clear role in putting forward the message that violence against women is a major barrier to the achievement of equality. The Criminal Justice system can convey a message of zero tolerance for sexual violence.

10. What more could government do to promote the importance of healthy relationships in society?

Develop a policy for personal and sexual education within schools that takes on the issues raised by this strategy and insist that there can be no opt-out for schools or pupils.

16. How do we ensure that the legal system is better able to provide children with protection and justice when they have experienced sexual assault?

We do not have specific comments to make regarding the legal system and children. Our concern is that the needs of children are very different from those of adults, and therefore should be covered under Child Protection. If this is inadequate, then this should be looked at and remedied.

19. What are the key messages to be developed with (a) adult perpetrators and potential perpetrators?

There needs to be a clear message that this behaviour is unacceptable, and this needs to be reflected in prosecution and sentencing. More work must be done in prison with offenders and more resources devoted to this work. In particular, there must be more resources for work with young offenders. Indeterminate and extended public protection sentencing for the more dangerous offenders is vital.

(b) with young people who display sexually harmful behaviour?

Intervention at an earlier age has to be implemented where behaviour displays potential danger. Child protection also needs a prevention strand. Rehabilitation programmes need to address inappropriate behaviour at an early a stage as possible.

25. What key services would contribute most to victim/survivor care and support?

The proposal to establish a SARC has a number of elements that require greater elaboration and consideration. A SARC should not be confined to a medical model. SARCs are regarded as being effective only at the time of the crisis. Emphasis also needs to be given to the need to develop a relationship of trust and support for the victim/survivor. SARCs are a one stop shop for those affected by 'stranger' rapes. They are not a solution for women who are victims of all sexual violence, particularly in a domestic situation.

Many women would not regard SARC as an option because it would involve travel, and possible stigma or danger if being seen entering a specific venue housing a SARC.

It was felt very important that a SARC would not be limited to one geographical location, probably Belfast. This would raise considerable difficulties for women in rural areas in particular. Of more value would be an outreach service with a mobile unit to bring the service to the victim/survivor. If a SARC was to be in one area, then there should be free, unidentified transport to bring people to it.

A SARC would need to do more than provide help at one particular crisis point. What access to services would be available following the SARC visit? Would a SARC service take into account the psychological needs of those presenting themselves? Could access to free, long-term counselling be made available at the SARC stage?

If the voluntary sector is to be involved in the provision of services, then more funding must be directed at the sector to ensure that it can deliver services.

26. Is there a need to develop different services for different cohorts of victim/survivor, due to gender, age or sexual orientation?

There was a strong feeling that a SARC should cater for adult victims/survivors because children's needs were different and should be met accordingly.

There are gaps in current services for ethnic minorities and a SARC should consider the needs of all.

A variety of services will be needed, according to individuals, their circumstances and ethnicity.

30. Is a 24 hour sexual violence regional help-line needed in N. Ireland?

Support must not be time-limited, it has to be outside the hours of 9 -5. There is a great need for support for those affected by sexual violence, particularly as the Rape Crisis Centre is no longer operating. To make this strategy realistic, then a regional help-line must be a priority.

Some women's centres provide women-only expert advice on issues of particular relevance to women. These advice centres are currently struggling for survival and other centres wish to offer similar services. It may be the case that women's centres in different parts of the north could be resourced to provide help lines.

38. Have the needs of the s75 categories of people been fully addressed in the proposals?

There are gaps in the current services for ethnic minorities and more should be done, in consultation with representatives of minority ethnic groups, to ensure that these gaps are addressed. The needs of those from the lesbian, gay and transgendered communities have also to be taken into account, in consultation with representative groups, so that services can be provided that sufficiently address all needs.

