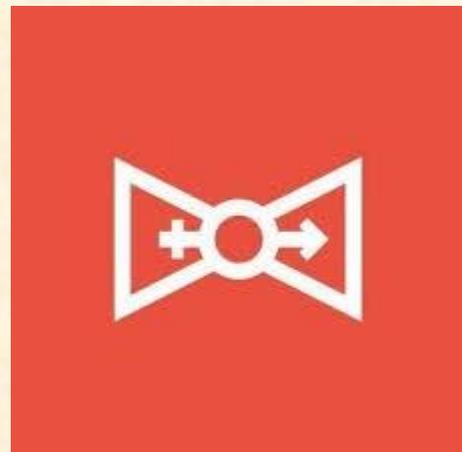


# Equally Seen, Served & Safe.

The Call for Strategies to Tackle  
Intimate Violence Against Boys and Men



Briefing Paper 1: February 2022  
The Case for a Strategy in Northern Ireland





**Split The Difference** are campaigning to secure the development of Strategies to tackle intimate violence experienced by boys & men.<sup>1</sup>

The Campaign begins with a call on the Northern Ireland Executive to develop a male victim strategy to complement the important work they are undertaking to tackle violence against women and girls.

[The Men and Boys Coalition](#) have shown how 'gendered violence' strategies cause the marginalisation and invisibilisation of male victims.<sup>2</sup> The direction of travel in other UK regions is towards male specific strategies and The SNP have already committed to develop one to support and protect the rights of male victims in Scotland.

Sign up to support the campaign: [www.split-the-difference.com](http://www.split-the-difference.com)



**We share the Northern Ireland Executive's view that: '[male] victims of violence may feel that when we prioritise violence against women and girls, their trauma is being seen as less important.' That's why we're calling for a strategy to tackle intimate violence against boys & men.**

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<sup>1</sup> Acts of violence, abuse and exploitation in which men or boys are the victims, and in which their gender, sexuality and/or intimate relationships are motivating or prevailing factors. These include (but are not necessarily restricted to) acts of sexual abuse and sexual violence; domestic and relationship violence; stalking; sexual exploitation; forced marriage and so-called honour-based violence.

<sup>2</sup> By way of example, the crimes of the UK's most prolific rapist, all committed against boys and men are recorded by the Crown Prosecution Service as violence against women and girls.

# A Strategy for Boys and Men in Northern Ireland

Split The Difference are calling on the Northern Ireland Executive to develop an intimate violence against boys and men strategy. This will both complement and support their important work to address the unique challenges experienced by female victims of violence.<sup>3</sup>

We believe that this is necessary because:

- **Police Service for Northern Ireland data shows that:**
  - 1 in 4 child victims of sexual abuse are male;
  - 1 in 5 adult victims of sexual abuse are male;
  - 1 in 3 adult victims of domestic abuse are male, and
  - 1 in 3 victims of domestic homicide are male.
- **Male victims also face unique challenges including:**
  - Fear of not being believed or losing their children.
  - Stigma if their perpetrator is female;
  - Victim blaming if their perpetrator is male; and
  - Prejudice from some support service providers.
- **Aspects of the Northern Ireland Executive's current domestic and sexual violence strategy are 'gender neutral' in name only. This means male victims have to navigate:**
  - A sex segregated service infrastructure;
  - Significant / total gaps in service;
  - Exclusion from funding streams;
  - Suspicion and sex discrimination.
- **The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland have called on the Executive to adopt '*gender specific*' approaches to tackle the causes of violence experienced by women and men.<sup>4</sup>**
- **The Executive claim that they are already: "*keenly aware of the suffering of victims of violence who may feel that when [they] prioritise violence against women and girls, their trauma is being seen as less important.*"<sup>5</sup>**

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<sup>3</sup> The Executive have called for views on plans for a '[Gender Neutral](#)' Strategy to Tackle Domestic and Sexual Violence and a '[Gender Specific](#)' Strategy to Tackle Violence Against Women and Girls.

<sup>4</sup> [ECNI Gender Equality Policy Priorities and Recommendations \(2016\)](#)

<sup>5</sup> Call for Views on Violence Against Women & Girls Strategy (2022), Page 17.

# Male Victims of Violence in Northern Ireland

**According to Police Service for Northern Ireland (PSNI) data:**

- 1 in every 4 child victims of sexual offences are male;
- 1 in every 5 adult victims of sexual offences are male;
- 1 in every 3 adult victims of domestic abuse are male;
- 1 in 3 victims of domestic homicide are male.

## **VIOLENT CRIME TRENDS IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

[Northern Ireland Safe Community Survey findings](#) indicate that:

- 2% of adult males and 1% of adult females experienced some form of violent crime in 2020.
- Only two-fifths (39%) of violent crime is reported to the police.<sup>6</sup>
- 8% of adult males and 15% of adult females have experienced some form of domestic violence by a partner.<sup>7</sup>

## **RECORDED DOMESTIC & SEXUAL VIOLENCE CRIME**

In 2021, [the Police Service for Northern Ireland recorded](#) 19,036 domestic abuse crimes. This figure is nearly twice the level in 2004/05

- 31% of all domestic abuse crime victims were male.
- 20% of all sexual offence crime victims were male.

There have been a total of 100 domestic abuse related homicides in Northern Ireland [between 2005 and 2021](#).

- 40% of domestic homicide victims were male.

Over a five year period, between 2016 and 2021:

- 55% of child victims of violence,
- 30% of child victims of sexual assault, and
- 26% of child victims of all sexual offences were boys.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> [The Mankind Initiative estimates](#) that half of male victims (49%) fail to tell anyone they are a victim of abuse and are two and a half times less likely to tell anyone than female victims (19%).

<sup>7</sup> [Experience of Domestic Violence: Research and Statistical Bulletin 17 \(/2017\)](#).

<sup>8</sup> [Police Recorded Crime Annual Trends 1998/99 to 2020/21](#) - Tables 7.3 and 7.6.

## Fear, Stigma, Stereotypes and Barriers

### Male victims experience unique challenges, including:

- Fear of not being believed or losing their children.
- Stigma if their perpetrator is female;
- Victim blaming if their perpetrator is male;
- Policies that can be '*gender neutral*' in name only;
- Prejudice from service providers.

### FEAR

Male victims can be reluctant to report abuse for a range of complex reasons. These include: fear of not being believed; fear of losing contact with their children; not recognising the situation as abusive; not knowing who to report crimes to; fear of recriminations from the wider community; and societal trivialisation of violence experienced by men.

### STIGMA

Male victims may feel their masculinity will be diminished if they report abuse by a woman; or their sexuality questioned if they report rape by a man; or if they are young they will be perceived as being initiated into sexual activity by a woman, rather than being recognised as a victim of child sexual abuse.

### STEREOTYPES

The misleading claim that the '*overwhelming majority*' of victims of domestic violence are female minimises the visibility of 1 in every 3 victims of domestic abuse crimes<sup>9</sup>. Visibility is also undermined by the claim that most perpetrators of violence against boys and men are other boys and men. This is a form of victim blaming and can also be dangerously misleading, for example: Men's Aid Ireland estimate that 94% of perpetrators of abuse experienced by their service users are female<sup>10</sup> and research indicates that mothers are more likely to kill their children than fathers and male partners combined.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> In 2019 a complaint by the Men and Boys Coalition to the Office for Statistics Regulation was upheld acknowledging that the use of the word '*overwhelming*' would "imply that a larger proportion of victims are female than the statistics show."

<sup>10</sup> Men's Aid received 8,000 contacts last year — and 94% of their abusers were women.

<sup>11</sup> William Collins, *The Empathy Gap* (2019), pages 265-267.

## STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

An international review of intimate violence public policy practice found that gender-neutral definitions affording inclusivity and regard for all victims are often positioned under gendered strategic frameworks.<sup>12</sup> The gender-neutral definitions used in England and America both sit under violence against women strategies and much of the language used refers to the misleading perception that men are primarily perpetrators and women primarily victims.<sup>13</sup>

Positioning intimate violence under '*gendered*' frameworks exacerbate issues for those who sit outside the male perpetrator/female victim narrative. Evidence of barriers that male victims face in accessing help and support can be seen both in the academic literature, and in lesser presentation to services (such as IDVAs, MARAC). The relative lack of resources and service provision for male victims is also evidenced.

## ATTITUDINAL BARRIERS

There is a need for a wider culture change across the Domestic Violence and Abuse sector. Many barriers that men and those from the LGBTQ+ community report in help-seeking stem from a lack of knowledge, understanding and inclusivity within this sector. The lack of regard towards men and male victims evidenced in the sector inevitably creates unique challenges for The Executive who have a statutory duty to deliver the equitable provision of support and justice to **all** vulnerable victims of violence and abuse.

Male and female victims of domestic violence, especially children, can also be dangerously disadvantaged by the lack of acknowledgement and awareness of the fact that research consistently shows us that the most common manifestation of domestic violence is bi-directional, involving dysfunctional behaviour and violence by both partners.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> [Bates and Douglas \(2020: Services for Domestic Violence Victims: Where Are We Today?](#)

<sup>13</sup> The authors noted there is a need for policies and laws that are inclusive in both "name and spirit."

<sup>14</sup> [A review of 12,000 studies into intimate partner abuse found that 58% of abuse was bi-directional.](#)

# Support and Justice for Male Victims

## Male victims in Northern Ireland have to navigate:

- A sex segregated service infrastructure;
- Significant gaps in service;
- Exclusion from funding streams;
- Suspicion and sex discrimination.

## SEX SEGREGATED SUPPORT SERVICE INFRASTRUCTURE

Support services offered to the general public by a range of Public Authorities in Northern Ireland are extremely reliant on support service infrastructure operated by strategic partners who will not work with male victims. We are concerned that the Executive have not taken sufficient steps to address adverse impacts arising from this reality, and that discriminatory practices may have become embedded and normalised within public sector service provision practices in this area.

## GAPS IN SERVICE

2010 research conducted by MAP-NI highlighted a number of gaps for male victims in Northern Ireland. They found that support agencies were not trained on how to identify and support male victims, and that, due to the lack of specific support and resources available, public narratives about regard for male victims often only involved “*lip service*.”<sup>15</sup>

Split The Difference recently undertook a mapping exercise of support services available to male victims of intimate violence in Northern Ireland and identified a number of examples of how the Executive’s strategy for tackling domestic and sexual violence can be perceived to be ‘gender neutral’ in name only.<sup>16</sup> For example, Northern Ireland is currently the only region of the UK without any specialist emergency support accommodation made available to male victims and their children.

## EXCLUSION FROM FUNDING STREAMS

We estimate that the Department of Communities pay the Northern Ireland Housing Executive around £4 million pounds annually to fund services for victims of domestic violence via the Supporting People Fund. Many different groups of vulnerable people benefit from housing related support through the Supporting People programme and for some reason the Domestic Violence strand is the only one that restricts support to women only.

<sup>15</sup> [Towards Gender Equality \(2010\)](#)

<sup>16</sup> Our research included [a number of freedom of information enquiries](#).

We also estimate that over the last three years the Department of Health and Department of Communities provided at least an additional £1.5 million funding support to domestic violence projects that exclusively offer support to female victims. We are aware of only one project funded by these Departments that claim to provide services to anyone, regardless of sex, and did not identify any that exclusively offer support to male victims.

## **SUSPICION AND SEX DISCRIMINATION**

Men experiencing intimate violence from a partner or ex-partner can be reluctant to seek help due to a fear that they will be perceived as the abuser. This is a valid concern as some service providers in the UK are trained to perceive men seeking help as potential perpetrators masquerading as a victim.<sup>17</sup>

It is estimated that half of male victims fail to tell anyone they are experiencing abuse so quality of service at first points of contact and support gateways are crucial when men do come forward. We have found evidence that National Domestic and Sexual Violence Helpline Operators were trained to screen male callers when the service was delivered by Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland.<sup>18</sup> We have sought reassurances from the Departments of Justice, Health and Communities that service users of the helpline that they co-fund are not currently being discriminated against on grounds of sex, or any other personal characteristic protected under equality law.<sup>19</sup>

## **DISCRIMINATION AGAINST CHILDREN?**

To date, we have been unable to establish if any publicly funded refuges in Northern Ireland turn children away on the basis of their sex and continue to engage the relevant Departments about this concern. Women's Aid Federation England estimates that 80% of their domestic violence refuges operate sex discriminatory criteria that bar older male children from access to their services. Boys as young as 8 have been turned away and some have ended up in care as a consequence of this discrimination.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> [The Respect Toolkit for Work with Male Victims](#) promotes such an approach. The Equality and Human Rights Commission have warned this practice amounts to direct sex discrimination if applied only to one sex of service users.

<sup>18</sup> [WAFNI 2013/14 Annual Report](#) confirms that helpline operators were trained to use The Respect Toolkit for Work with Male Victims.

<sup>19</sup> During most of Women's Aid's tenure as service provider the proportion of male callers to the helpline (1% to 2%) was much lower the estimated proportion of victims who are male (roughly 33%).

<sup>20</sup> [Women's Aid \(2020\): Nowhere to Turn for Children & Young People.](#)

## **DISCRIMINATION IN EMPLOYMENT?**

We sought guidance from the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland on directly sex discriminatory criteria applied in a recent job advertisement by one of the five multi-agency regional Domestic Violence Partnerships established to progress the Executive's Stopping Domestic & Sexual Violence and Abuse Strategy. The Equality Commission was unable to determine if this example of sex discrimination practice could be justified under equality law.

## **DISCRIMINATION IN LAW?**

The Department for Justice has called for views on the merits of including misogyny within hate crime laws as an alternative to Judge Marrinan's recommendation that sex/gender (neutral) should be added to the list of protected grounds.<sup>21</sup>

We are concerned that this development is indicative of a direction of travel signalled last year when the Justice Minister proposed that the Northern Ireland Executive should develop a gender specific strategy to exclusively tackle violence against female victims, and a step towards the Executive abandoning a commitment to gender neutrality or equality in either the letter or spirit of the law.



**We share The Justice Minister's concerns *'that a gender sensitive strategy would send out a signal that tackling abuse against men is less important'*. That's why we're calling for a strategy to tackle intimate violence against boys & men.**

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<sup>21</sup> [Improving the effectiveness of Hate Crime Legislation in Northern Ireland A Call for Views](#)

## Equally Seen, Served and Safe?

We support The Executive's important work to address the unique challenges and prejudices faced by female victims of violence. To complement and support this work **we ask that the Executive commit to the development of a male victims strategy.**

Northern Ireland is currently the only UK region with a '*gender neutral*' strategy to stop domestic and sexual abuse. To some extent this is to be commended, nevertheless **our assessment is that the Executive's strategy is '*gender neutral*' in name only.**

We share the Justice Minister's concern that a single '*gender sensitive*' strategy will send out a message that tackling abuse against male victims is less important.<sup>22</sup> **1 in 3 domestic abuse victims are male.**

Equality and Human Rights Law requires support and justice for all victims and the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland have recommended that the Executive adopt '*gender specific*' approaches to tackling the causes of violence experienced by women and men, as well as ensure appropriate and equitable service provision. **Northern Ireland is the only UK region without any specialist emergency support accommodation for male victims.**

There is a significant empathy gap regarding male victims of violence, and intimate violence in particular. They are frequently marginalised and hidden in narratives about such crimes. A stark example of this is the claim that '*Northern Ireland is the femicide capital of Europe*'.<sup>23</sup> The Police Service for Northern Ireland recently issued a clarification note confirming that this claim is based on data that includes **all** domestic homicide victims.<sup>24</sup> **40% of domestic homicide victims are male.**

Sex discrimination has been illegal in the entire UK since 1976 and positive action is required to address the unique barriers to justice experienced by male victims of violence and abuse. **Please support our call on the Northern Ireland Executive to make history by becoming the first UK region to develop an intimate violence strategy to safeguard the human rights of boys and men.**

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<sup>22</sup> In February 2021, the Justice Minister informed the Assembly that: "*All victims should be covered by any strategy regardless of gender;*" and that she had concerns that the adoption of a gender-sensitive strategy would "*send out a message that tackling abuse against men is less important.*"

<sup>23</sup> [Northern Ireland is most dangerous place in Europe for women.](#)

<sup>24</sup> [Clarification - Northern Ireland's ranking in Domestic Abuse Homicide rates across Europe.](#)