

Equally Safe Strategy – A Strategy to tackle Violence Against Women and Girls

Response from the Commissioner for Older People for
Northern Ireland

March 2022

Equally Safe Strategy – A Strategy to tackle Violence Against Women and Girls

Community Safety Division

Department of Justice

Room A4.03

Castle Buildings

Stormont Estate

BELFAST

BT4 3SG

RE - Via Email: Equally Safe Strategy – A Strategy to tackle Violence Against Women and Girls- A response by the Commissioner for Older People.

Dear Sir / Madam

As Commissioner for older people, I welcome this new strategy and its potential to prevent and eradicate violence against women and girls and create a Northern Ireland where women and girls live free from such abuse – and the attitudes that help perpetuate it. As Commissioner, I am conscious and concerned by the unfortunate fact that the specific needs of older women and the additional impacts of such violence and abuse on older people is often overlooked at a governmental and societal level. For ease of reference, I have categorised below some examples of issues in relation to violence and abuse against older women that my office believes require urgent attention:

Domestic violence:

The most recent statistics from the Police Service for Northern Ireland (PSNI) show that during 2020-2021, police responded to 31,196 domestic abuse incidents in Northern Ireland¹. A breakdown of the victim age profile shows that about 5% were aged over 60. The report also shows that there were no reports by victims over 80 years old.

Although these figures show a lower prevalence of older victims than those of other age groups, there is significant research that shows that these figures may not give an accurate reflection of the extent of domestic violence amongst older persons and older women, due to several divergent factors. An ongoing project by Women's Aid "Older but No Safer"² has found that many older women in NI may have been living with domestic abuse all their adult lives, enduring abuse both physical, mental, and financial without reporting it and that this abuse can also start in later years.

A report by the House of Lords in July 2021, which drew upon an extensive range of research found that data on the extent of elder abuse is limited and reported rates are likely to be an underestimation.³ This publication also referenced a 2017 meta-analysis report referenced by the World Health

Organisation (WHO) which was conducted by the Davis School of Gerontology which found that only 1 in 24 cases of such abuse are reported, often due to older people's fears around reporting abuse to family, friends, or to authorities⁴.

The charity Hourglass, formerly Action on Elder Abuse, have found that attitudes around what counts as abuse are fuelling a crisis in this area. Hourglass has reported that nearly a third of UK residents they surveyed did not see acts of domestic violence directed at an older person as abuse, including inappropriate sexual acts, as well as pushing, hitting, or beating an older person⁵.

1. <https://www.psni.police.uk/globalassets/inside-the-psni/our-statistics/domestic-abuse-statistics/2020-21/domestic-abuse-incidents-and-crimes-in-northern-ireland-2004-05-to-2020-21.pdf>
2. <https://womens-aid.org.uk/older-but-no-safer-this-christmas/>
3. <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/domestic-abuse-of-older-people/>
4. <https://www.thelancet.com/action/showPdf?pii=S2214-109X%2817%2930006-2>
5. <https://www.wearhourglass.org/alarmed-new-research-hourglass-northern-ireland-reveals-abuse-older-people-comes-last-line>

Sexual abuse: The PSNI's provisional 2020/21 crime statistics reported 3,276 reported sexual offences. Of these, 89.8% were against those who identified as women with 2.1% of victims reporting offences being over 60. However, these figures do not present the full picture of sexual abuse experienced by older persons.

Sexual abuse referrals to health and social care trusts – These are not included in currently published PSNI crime statistics. In 2017, research by the charity, Action on Elder Abuse Northern Ireland (Hourglass), found there were 310 sexual abuse referrals to health and social care trusts relating to people aged over 65 for 2017, this was nearly double the figure for 2014/15 which was 160⁷. However, these statistics are not included in the published PSNI crime statistics for these years⁸.

Older women in care facilities - As part of my Investigation into the Dunmurray Care Home in 2018⁹, COPNI found that reported sexual offences against female residents were prevalent. My investigation found evidence of physical and sexual assaults on female residents and that despite evidence of ambulant males physical and sexual assaults on a number of female residents, there was a lack of a clear coherent policy to manage these risks over prolonged periods of time. My office has received similar complaints from older women residing at other care homes where relatives and those affected have not pursued their complaints further, due to a lack of faith in the extant procedures and the potential additional distress to both relatives and the victim.

Ageism and crimes against older people and older women:

In tandem with gender bias, older women in society must also face the 'double vulnerability' of Ageism. Research from the charity Hourglass has shown that

more than 1 in 3 people in UK do not believe that 'acts of domestic violence directed towards an older person count as abuse'¹⁰. Worryingly, the same survey found that 1 in 3 people felt that inappropriate sexual acts directed at older persons did not constitute abuse.

Earlier this year, the first ever UN Global Report on Ageism outlined that half of the world's population is ageist against older persons. The report highlights that policies and laws often reflect generalised perceptions of older persons as recipients of assistance and care¹⁰.

In 2018, my office published the report: Crime and Justice: The Experience of Older People in Northern Ireland¹². My report found that while older people were less likely to be victims of crime in Northern Ireland, they are disproportionately more likely to be negatively impacted because of those crimes and that the outcome rates for crimes such as burglary, criminal damage, vehicle theft and violence without injury are not as high for older people as they are for other age groups. I have included an appendix, providing details of some complaints relevant to the above themes received by our legal team.

Recommendations:

- The Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland (COPNI) is supportive of measures which aim to protect women and girls from violence in society. COPNI welcomes the plan to tackle the root causes of violence against women and girls and recognises the importance that this must be intersectional and focus on all forms of violence.

6. https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.psni.police.uk%2Fglobalassets%2Finside-the-psni%2Ffour-statistics%2Fpolice-recorded-crime-statistics%2F2021%2Fmarch%2Fcrime-tables-mar-_21.xls&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK
7. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/2017/02/07/news/reports-of-sexual-abuse-against-older-people-almost-doubles-in-ni-922205/>
8. <https://www.psni.police.uk/inside-psni/Statistics/police-recorded-crime-statistics/police-recorded-crime-statistics-archive/>
9. <https://www.copni.org/media/1444/copni-home-truths-summary-report-web.pdf>
10. https://www.wearehourglass.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/SAFER%20AGEING%E2%80%93%20what%20does%20growing%20old%20in%20the%20UK%20look%20like%3F_Layout%201.pdf
11. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/Ageism-and-age-discrimination.aspx>
12. <https://www.copni.org/media/1540/206567-online-a4-crime-report-56p.pdf>

- Whilst COPNI wholeheartedly agrees that attention needs to be given to groups in society that are subjected to heightened levels of crime and violence, due regard should be given to the double risk that is imposed due to intersectionality. In basic terms, there may be a heightened risk to older women being targeted due their 'double vulnerability'.
- COPNI have for some time, called for age to be considered as a category of hate crime these views were supported by review undertaken by Judge Marrinan's recent review of hate crime legislation¹³. It is my office's view that targeting a person due to an actual or perceived weakness is a form of contempt or hatred toward those characteristics. Therefore, an individual who commits an offence against an older person wholly or partially because they consider that

older person to be vulnerable based on their age, demonstrates an attitude of hostility and disdain for members of that group.

- That the proposed scope, vision, and objectives of the new strategy is revised to include specific and targeted goals aimed at addressing the needs of older women within the context of violence against women.

If you would like to discuss this letter or any matters further, please contact me via my Personal Secretary, Patricia Maskey on (028) 9089 0892, or by email: patricia.maskey@copni.org

Yours sincerely,



Eddie Lynch
Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland