

Split the Difference Response To: The Draft NI Domestic & Sexual Abuse Strategy

1.0 Split the Difference

Split the Difference aim is to raise awareness and campaign, within the United Nations member states, for equality and gender parity for men and boys. We encourage consultation, guidance, legislation and policy that support men and boys equally to women and girls.

1.1 Male Victim Strategy

Split the Difference are campaigning to secure the development of strategies to tackle intimate violence experienced by boys & men. This campaign began in February 2022 with [a call on the Northern Ireland Executive to develop a male victims strategy](#) to complement the violence against women and girls strategy that they have committed to develop.

Charities & academics advocating for male victims have repeatedly warned that including male victims in national VAWG strategies is harmful, offensive and leads to the invisibilisation of male victims & inadequate provision of care & human rights protection.

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'. The Police Service for Northern Ireland have issued [a clarification note](#) confirming that this claim is based on data that includes **all** domestic homicide victims. 40% of domestic homicide victims are male.

Male victims face unique challenges that must be addressed, including: Fear of not being believed or losing their children; Stigma if their perpetrator is female; Victim blaming if their perpetrator is male; and Gaps in services and support arising from a sex segregated service infrastructure.

1.2 Gaps in Support and Human Rights Protections

Split the Difference have been engaging Northern Ireland Government Departments on the structural and attitudinal barriers male victims can encounter when coming forward to seek support and justice from Public Authorities. In March 2023, we published a [Report on Gaps in Support and Human Rights Protections for Male Victims in Northern Ireland](#).

Northern Ireland is the only region of the UK where Government Departments promote a 'gender neutral' approach to tackling domestic and sexual violence, and supporting victims of these crimes. We commend the Departments of Justice and Health for their leadership in this regard. We also acknowledge that this approach has led to some positive best practice outcomes benefiting all victims. This includes the development of a National Helpline for victims that does not discriminate against callers on grounds of sex, or any other protected characteristic.

Many of the specific concerns we have raised remain unresolved however, and our report documents evidence of discriminatory practices, 'lip service' and adverse impacts for male victims intersecting across at least ten different areas of public policy. These include: child protection; housing; provision of services; employment; statutory funding and procurement; partnership working; information and signposting; legislative reform; public policy development and design; and compliance with public sector equality duties.

Recommendations identified in the Report are primarily directed to The NI Executive and relevant Government Departments, including the Departments of Justice and Health. These recommendations are outlined in our [Executive Summary Briefing](#).

2.0 Main Concerns and Recommendations

Split the Difference welcomes the inclusive approach proposed by the strategy and commend The Departments for ensuring that their new strategy continues to recognise that anyone can be a victim of domestic and sexual abuse, regardless of gender or any other personal characteristic. We also broadly support the proposed four pillar framework approach but seek to urgently bring your attention to a fundamental concern.

2.1 A Fundamental Concern

The draft strategy and related equality impact assessment fail to identify, acknowledge or seek to mitigate against adverse impacts arising from the approach adopted by NI Executive Departments to date. Failure to address this oversight will have significant implications for every aspect of the strategy

Split the Difference urge the Departments of Justice and Health to progress the two actions The Men's Federation Northern Ireland have recommended they take to address this concern. These are as follow:

- Identify and address adverse impacts for male victims arising from both the proposed approach and approaches adopted in previous strategies.
- Develop and progress gender / sex specific actions aligned to the strategy that will adequately address the needs and experiences of male and female victims respectively.

In addition, we request that the Departments of Justice and Health progress additional recommendations outlined in our Report on Gaps in Support and Human Rights Protections for Male Victims in Northern Ireland.

2.2 Recommendation One: Identify and Address Adverse Impacts

Split the Difference share The Men's Federation's concern that The Departments appear to have failed in their duty to show adequate regard to male victims of abuse when developing the draft strategy.

The equality impact assessment for the draft strategy concludes that the proposed approach is not expected to have any differential impact based on gender (page 29). We urge The Departments to urgently review the reliability of this assessment.

Male victims of abuse in Northern Ireland are not afforded access to the same standard or range of statutory funded services and support, as compared to female victims. Gaps in support and protections for male victims have a direct correlation with gendered budgeting and procurement practices aligned to previous domestic and sexual abuse strategies.

The draft strategy and related equality impact assessment fail to identify, acknowledge or seek to mitigate against adverse impacts arising from the approach adopted by NI Executive Departments to date.

The assessment also appears to fail to consider potential gendered outcomes arising from aligned areas of working that are informed by overtly gender biased strategies (Violence Against Women and Girls and Gender Equality Strategies) and international obligations (CEDAW and Istanbul Convention).

Failure to address these factors may have the potential to create further and continuing adverse impacts for male victims from across the full spectrum of Section 75 protected characteristics.

Examples of negative discriminatory impact on the implementation of singular, gender specific policies can now be seen within other GB areas, particularly within risk management processes and the professional development of staff teams and their training.

Examples of areas affected in statutory and sub-contracted service environments are: domestic abuse, policing, housing, education, children's services, health, family court, criminal court, and more. Risk management processes are impacted in every arena Split the Difference has researched including the management of private business. The outcome of an exclusive gender specific government policy is single-handedly impacting on male victims of domestic abuse and their children.

One of the fathers Split the Difference advocated for through a family court process told us: "I experienced 12 years of domestic abuse, stayed only for my children, even when the police attended and found me covered in blood they would arrest me, I was arrested 39 times never being charged. "When I finally couldn't take it anymore and left, within 6 months my children were removed from my ex-wife for neglect and physical abuse.

"Even though I was found to not be an perpetrator, children's services and their family risk management processes took three years to identify me as the victim of domestic abuse when in an attempt to get my children out of the care system and in my care I funded psychological assessments of myself and attended positive relationship programs supported by Split the Difference.

"In attempted to care for and protect my children, I was informed by the social worker and her manager that because I am a man they have no internal policy that enables them to put in place systems to support me as a victim, only systems as a male perpetrator."

"Like wise in the abuse my children experienced for the 6 months after I left, they informed me that their department does not have domestic abuse policies that identify female domestic abuse perpetrators, that their staff are not trained and they do not have supporting programs that female perpetrators can be referred to in the family court process."

2.3 Recommendation Two: Develop and Progress Gender Specific Actions

The Human Rights and Equality Commissions for Northern Ireland have both recommended that The Departments should adopt gender specific approaches to tackle abuse experienced by women and men.

The 2022 Call for Views related to this strategy established that the majority of advocates for both male and female victims also support the adoption of 'gender specific' approaches.

Split the Difference supports the consensus view that The Departments should adopt gender specific actions aligned to the draft strategy.

We also support the consensus view of male victim's stakeholder groups, who responded to last year's call for views, that The Departments should develop parallel strategies to progress gender specific actions for male and female victims respectively.

An action plan or strategy for male victims will be the most effective way to address and mitigate against the adverse impacts highlighted in recommendation one.

The Northern Ireland Executive have listened to calls from advocates for female victims and have already committed to the development of a specific strategy to tackle violence against women and girls. This strategy will be aligned to the draft domestic and sexual abuse strategy. The absence of a parallel strategy for boys and men will cause further adverse impacts for male victims.

2.4 Recommendation Three: Progress Additional Actions

Split the Difference request that the Departments of Justice and Health progress additional recommendations outlined in our Report on Gaps in Support and Human Rights Protections for Male Victims in Northern Ireland.

2.4.1 Establish Clear & Accountable Lines of Accountability

Throughout a year of engagement with Government Departments, Public Authorities and Arm's Length Bodies, a consistent frustration that we encountered involved establishing ownership and lines of responsibility in relation to the issues that we have attempted to raise.

Inevitably government departments run by Ministers from competing political parties may, from time to time, attempt to pass the buck and lines of vicarious responsibility become even less transparent when Arm's Length Bodies, such as the Housing Executive, and third party service providers are also involved.

As the Departments responsible for the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy, The Departments of Justice and Health must show leadership on this issue.

2.4.2 Address Gaps in Knowledge & Combat Stereotypes

There is a significant and easily documented empathy gap amongst the general public towards male victims of violence. We believe that the key to addressing this cultural, social and political phenomenon is to consciously acknowledge that such a gap exists and combat the propagation of myths and stereotypes that help to sustain this gap.

We also support and signal boost the recommendation made in 2021 by The Gender Equality Strategy Expert Advisory Panel that The Department of Communities should: *“Provide a greater focus on the importance of training on anti-discrimination law, Section 75 and positive action measures to ensure maximum knowledge and awareness of the law and good practice among policy makers, employers and service providers.”*

2.4.3 Promote Equitable Working Partnerships

We ask that the Departments of Health and Regional Health and Social Care Trusts ensure that all domestic and sexual violence partnership working arrangements are fit for purpose and that all health care professionals adopt an equitable approach to addressing the needs of male victims.

We are concerned that gendered', and possibly discriminatory, practices may be tolerated in some regions. We highlight concerns relating to three of the five Regional Health and Social Care Trusts in pages 39 to 41 of our report. We ask that adequate and robust assessments of equality impact and objective justification is undertaken in all areas.

2.4.4 Address Data Monitoring & Research Gaps

We recommend that steps are taken to address gaps in disaggregated data and research pertaining to domestic abuse generally, that positive action is taken to address significant gaps in research pertaining to male victims specifically and that all research and data analysis used to inform public policy and legislative reform is fit for purpose, ethical, and empirical evidence based.

2.4.5 Mitigate Against Adverse Impacts Arising From Sex Segregation in Service Provision

Support services provided to the general public by a range of Public Authorities can be seen to be extremely reliant on services delivered by strategic partners who openly discriminate against service users and victims of abuse solely on the basis of their sex.

We are concerned that sufficient steps have not been taken to address the adverse impacts arising from this reality. We are also concerned that discriminatory practices have become embedded and normalised within some areas of public sector service provision practices.

There is a need for a wider culture change across the Domestic Abuse Sector and sadly the lack of regard towards male victims 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.

2.4.6 Mitigate Against Potential Adverse Impacts Relating To Occupational Segregation

In Northern Ireland approximately 80% of people employed across the health and social care sector are female, as are 75% of people working in the NGO sector. At least nine of the largest charities delivering services to victims of abuse self-identify as female led.

We also note that all members of the Department for Communities' Gender Equality Expert Advisory Panel were female, as was the Minister responsible for their appointment and The Justice Minister who proposed the development of a VAWG specific strategy.

Furthermore, the majority of Senior Public Servants and Commissioners from relevant Arm's Length Bodies that we have engaged with have also been female, as are the current heads of the NI Civil Service and the NI Housing Executive respectively.

Women can be powerful allies and advocates for victims of abuse. They are also less vulnerable to the perception or suggestion that those who advocate for the human rights of male victims are somehow anti-women. Nevertheless, we encourage public authorities to guard against conscious, unconscious and gamma bias given the significant under-representation of men in positions of power, control and responsibility over this important area of public policy.

2.4.6 Address Chill Factor Through Inclusive Messaging

The Executive Office appear to clearly understand that the proposed two strand strategic approach will be perceived by some as a political signal to public authorities, service providers, victims and the general public alike, that male victims of crime are less important.

We ask that the Government Departments responsible for progressing this two tier approach consciously commit to equitable best practice standards of working and to promote clear and unambiguous messaging that they are committed to protecting the human rights of all victims and survivors.

In partnership with the Men's Alliance Northern Ireland, Split the Difference have developed The Be Seen, Heard and Safe Promise to assist them to promote inclusive messaging and a commitment to protect and serve all victims of abuse by undertaking a number of simple best practice positive action steps to promote equality and combat discrimination in this area.

We encourage the Senior Management and key personnel from the Departments of Justice and Health to make and share The Be Seen, Heard and Safe Promise. The Promise is included as an appendix to our report.

2.4.7 Encourage And Support Advocacy For Male Victims

One reason why the experiences and needs of male victims are so rarely articulated or understood is because there are so few human rights advocates with the time, remit or resources to speak specifically for them. Advocates for male victims must also navigate chill factors, concerns around tone and can be vulnerable to victimisation or the perception that advocacy and regard for men is somehow anti-women.

A major outcome of Split the Difference's engagement in Northern Ireland has been the co-founding of The Men's Federation in partnership with the Men's Alliance NI. The purpose of The Men's Federation will be to connect, support and represent organisations, professionals and academics committed to working collectively and collaboratively to bring about positive change for men and their families.

We encourage The Departments of Justice and Health to work with the Federation and support them in their aim to proactively put the wellbeing of men and their families on the public agenda and contribute to relevant public policy conversations and consultations.

3.0 Responses To Specific Consultation Questions

In this section we provide responses to each of the questions set out in the main consultation form.

3.1 Is the strategy vision reflective of what we want to achieve?

The strategy vision is that everyone can live without fear from domestic and sexual abuse. For this vision to be realistically achieved, The Departments must: take steps to meet the needs of people with protected characteristics where these are different from the needs of others. They must also mitigate against adverse impacts for people with protected characteristics arising from the proposed approach.

The equality impact assessment for the draft strategy concludes that the proposed approach is not expected to have any differential impact based on gender (page 29). **Split the Difference believe impact on men and boys has not been appropriately assessed and urge The Departments to review the reliability of this assessment.**

3.2 Does the definition of domestic abuse reflect what you understand this to mean?

Yes

3.3 Does the definition of sexual abuse reflect what you understand this to mean?

Yes

3.4 Do you agree with the use of the four pillars in the draft Strategy as levers for change?

For change to be realistically achieved across these four crucial areas The Departments must take all reasonable steps to: a) Meet the specific needs of people with protected characteristics where these are different from the needs of others. b) Remove or minimise disadvantages suffered by people due to their protected characteristics. c) Combat discrimination in the provision of services to people at risk of or experiencing domestic and sexual abuse. d) Mitigate against adverse impacts for people with protected characteristics arising from the proposed approach.

Split the Difference strongly urge The Departments to urgently review the reliability of the equality impact assessment for the draft strategy.

We believe the best available option for The Departments is to enable the development of an action plan or strategy to: a) address the needs of male victims; b) address and mitigate adverse impacts for them arising by The NI Executive's approach to date; and c) address and mitigate adverse impacts for them arising from aligned areas of working that are informed by overtly gender biased strategies and international obligations.

3.5 Do you agree with the outcome and key priority areas identified under Pillar 1 (Partnership)?

Split the Difference believe that if the proposed Partnership Pillar actions and outcomes have any realistic chance of being achieved, then positive action must be taken to address the significant structural, attitudinal and resourcing issues that advocates for male victims and their families currently face.

One reason the experiences of male victims are so rarely articulated or understood is because there are so few human rights advocates with the time, remit or resources to speak specifically for them.

What little representation they do have generally comes from significantly under-resourced projects which are often too busy firefighting to keep their front line services afloat to be able to contribute adequate time and resources to the numerous partnership working and consultation opportunities flowing for this and other Government initiatives.

There is a stark difference in the availability of resources across the two sex segregated domestic abuse service sectors in Northern Ireland. Pages 29 to 31 of our Report on Gaps in Support and Human Rights Protections for Male Victims of Intimate Violence in Northern Ireland highlight this issue and estimate that roughly 96% of the combined resources available within these two sectors are focused on support to females only. Public Bodies that help to maintain this disparity through gendered budgeting and procurement arrangements must recognise responsibility for adverse impacts arising from their current approach.

Beyond the significant disparity in the range and standard of services available to female and male victims, this funding gap means that the NGOs and advocates that do seek to speak for male victims have comparatively very few resources or time to commit to raising wider public awareness about their needs or to lobby government and / or contribute effectively to partnership working initiatives.

The significant disparity in the availability of advocates to represent the needs and experiences of males and females respectively is currently a major obstacle to achieving effective and equitable partnerships. Availability of advocates to equitably represent the needs and experiences of males during the co-design process for The Department for Communities' Gender Equality Strategy is an example of this disparity.

Government Departments, such as The Departments of Justice and Health seek to draw significant kudos from being seen to be consulting and working in partnership with advocates for male victims. This is not a one way street and we urge The Departments to take positive action to help develop and sustain effective and equitable advocacy for male victims.

3.5.1 Data from key stakeholders is shared, ensuring that as a system we understand and can respond to trends and emerging issues.

Split the Difference urge The Departments to take steps to address gaps in disaggregated data and research pertaining to domestic abuse generally.

We also ask that positive action is taken to address significant gaps in research pertaining to male victims specifically and that all research and data analysis used to inform public policy and legislative reform is fit for purpose, ethical, and empirical evidenced based.

There is a significant disparity in the amount and range of sex specific data identified and utilised in the accompanying Equality Impact Assessment. This appears to be directly related to the comparative level of public investment into infrastructure within the sex segregated service sectors that can in turn provide you with this data.

Split the Difference also urges The Executive to consider statistical evidence that states over 70% of domestic abuse relationships are bi-directional and that the assessed impact recognises the disparity and unequal opportunity for female perpetrators to access services that works to prevent their perpetrator behaviours.

3.5.3 Having effective governance structures underpinning the strategy's delivery with a performance framework to monitor outcomes and impact.

The strategy vision is that everyone can live without fear from domestic and sexual abuse. It will be important that all partners working towards this vision are fully committed to this vision, and to The Departments' aligned Equality Schemes and policies on equality of opportunity and harmonious environments for the provision of services to vulnerable children and adults.

The Departments must ensure that all strategic partners responsible for delivering this vision are committed to addressing attitudinal and structural barriers that victims can encounter when seeking support and justice.

For example, The Department for Communities have invested significant public monies into the construction and running costs of the recently opened Foyle Family Justice Centre. This Centre will play an integral role in delivering outcomes aligned to this strategy for victims in the Foyle area. The Centre is managed by Foyle Women's Aid who have no track record or experience of working with adult male victims. This is highly likely to create a chill factor for male victims and their children seeking to access services provided by the centre on an equitable basis and will require positive action / mitigation measures to overcome.

3.6 Do you agree with the outcome and key priority areas identified under Pillar 2 (Prevention)?

Split the Difference seek to highlight the importance of ensuring that the general public and Prevention Focused Public Officials employed to deliver this strategy also have sound understanding of the causes of domestic and sexual abuse.

Awareness around accurate perpetration trends is also crucial. This must include awareness around the prevalence of bi-direction intimate partner abuse. This complexity is largely ignored by ideological based research which prefers to promote a clean victim versus perpetrator narrative.

For example, last year Bradford Council's children's services were severely criticized for failing to grasp the complex dynamics of domestic abuse within families leading to the death of two children

The National Review into the separate murders of an 18 month old female infant and a six year old boy found that practitioner biases and assumptions about domestic violence can have catastrophic implications for child safety.

3.6.1 Enabling people working in frontline and public-facing roles to identify and respond effectively to domestic and sexual abuse at the earliest opportunity.

Split the Difference seek to highlight a fundamental concern about the gender neutral terminology promoted throughout most of the document (see section one). This must be addressed if key prevention pillar priority actions and desired outcomes have any realistic chance of being achieved.

The equality impact assessment related to the draft strategy appears to fail to consider potential gendered outcomes arising from aligned areas of working that are informed by overtly gender biased strategies (Violence Against Women and Girls and Gender Equality Strategies) and international obligations (CEDAW and Istanbul Convention).

Failure to address these factors will significantly hamper The Departments' ability to deliver on the crucial Partnership Pillar actions and desired outcomes identified in the strategy.

This is especially troubling as Partnership Pillar actions and outcomes are most directly aligned to The Departments' statutory responsibilities under Article 2 of The Human Rights Act 1998.

Failure to acknowledge and adequately address The Departments' significant shift towards gendered policy arising from aligned commitments and 'agenda' are likely to create further adverse impacts for male victims from across the full spectrum of Section 75 protected characteristics.

The Departments: '*acknowledge that the majority of victims are female and that this has informed [their] approach*' to developing the draft strategy. They do not expand on how this perspective has informed their approach.

The Departments also assert that: '*it will be important that actions taken forward under the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy align with the key messages and wider actions of the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) agenda*'. They do not expand on how this agenda will be aligned to actions taken forward under the strategy, especially in the context of their statutory equality duties.

One especially troubling gendered perspective provided in relation to the analysis of available statistical data can be found on page 15 of the draft strategy where the authors make the following observation and emphasis about domestic homicide trends:

"Tragically there were 9 murders with a domestic abuse motivation between 1 November 2021 and 31 October 2022. Four of the victims were female."

We seek to highlight that The Departments' gendered assessment of domestic abuse homicide trends may be perceived as offensive by the families and loved ones of the five male victims whose Article 2 rights were denied over the period.

The gendered emphasis presented by The Departments appears to have been conscious, deliberate and possibly aligned to the VAWG agenda. This emphasis mirrors the following gendered assessment of domestic homicide trends published by the PSNI in February 2023:

“In the 12 months from 1st February 2022 to 31st January 2023 there were ten homicides with a domestic abuse motivation. Four of the victims were female.”

As the consultation document notes, The PSNI gendered VAWG strategy will also be closely aligned to the proposed strategy. Development of a VAWG Strategy by The PSNI was a requirement arising from [The National Police Chiefs' Council \(NPCC\) and College of Policing's Police VAWG Framework](#).

In February 2023, The Home Office confirmed that male victims are included within the scope of this framework, and in other recent measures announced with respect to domestic abuse, including making violence against women and girls a strategic national policing priority.

Gendered VAWG strategies clearly cause the marginalisation and invisibilisation of male victims. The discriminatory impact of VAWG strategies across Great Britain is becoming increasingly recognised. This can be evidenced by outcomes arising from the Home Office's current approach. For 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'

In November 2022, a coalition of the UK leading charities and academics specialising in supporting male victims and survivors wrote to the Home Secretary calling for a parallel strategy for preventing Intimate Violence Against Men and Boys. This letter outlined why including male victims in the national VAWG strategy is harmful, offensive and leads to inadequate provision of care and protection. The Coalition have urged the government to adopt the recommendations in the recent [report by the APPG On Issues Affecting Men and Boys](#).

3.6.2 Supporting the education sector to build capacity, knowledge and skills to promote understanding about consent and healthy relationships and to teach about sensitive subjects such as domestic and sexual abuse, in an age appropriate and inclusive way.

Prevention pillar priority actions and desired outcomes appear to be especially aligned to the proposed VAWG strategy currently under development by The Executive Office (TEO).

This strategy appears to be significantly narrower in scope to VAWG strategies in other UK regions and will primarily focus on early intervention measures: "changing attitudes and behaviours at home, in education, in work and in the public sphere."

Split the Difference urge caution around progression of associated priority actions in the absence of identifying appropriate measures to mitigate against adverse impacts arising from defining violence and abuse experienced by male victims as 'violence against women and girls'.

PSNI data indicates that 1 in 3 victims of domestic abuse that they come into contact with are male. Over the past 24 months 58% of domestic homicide victims were male and it is well understood that male victims are significantly less likely to seek help from authorities. The Departments have a moral and legal duty to show equitable due regard and respect to these victims and survivors.

Furthermore, research into the experiences of 16 year olds in Northern Ireland, commissioned by TEO's VAWG Unit, found that 91% of young males and 96% of young females have experienced one or more violent acts or behaviours at some point in their lifetime.

Young males (47%) also experienced abuse or threats on social media at similar levels to young females (50%) and experienced higher proportions of verbal abuse, or threats in person, (69%) and physical assault (59%) than young females (60% and 46% respectively).

3.7 Do you agree with the outcome and key priority areas identified under Pillar 3 (Support)?

Split the Difference seek to highlight a fundamental concern about the gender neutral terminology promoted throughout most of the document (see section one). This must be addressed if the proposed Support Pillar priority actions and desired outcomes have any realistic chance of being achieved.

For the most part, the Draft Strategy promotes a gender neutral perspective on how to tackle abuse and support victims. Inclusive and non gendered terminology is also used throughout the document. In many regards this is to be commended, however we are concerned that, in some important instances, such gender neutral terminology can be exploited to obfuscate the existence, needs and rights of male victims.

For example, the following two key priorities are identified in relation to outcome six (page 27):

- Ensure all victims and their children can access accommodation that is safe and appropriate to their needs and circumstances.
- Support victims of domestic abuse to remain safely in their home if they want to and it is safe to do so.

Split the Difference welcomes and supports both of these proposed actions in principle. To have any realistic chance of achieving these outcomes however, The Departments must address the fact that the Department for Communities and Northern Ireland Housing Executive currently only procure and provide refuge accommodation and floating support services to women and their children.

Our report on Gaps in Support and Protections for Male Victims has raised concerns that aspects of The Departments' approach is 'gender neutral' in name only (see page 54). This echoes concerns raised by The Men's Advisory Project over a decade ago that [narratives around male victims often only contained 'lip service' due to the lack of specific support and resources available to them.](#)

There remains a stark difference in the availability of resources across the two sex segregated domestic abuse service sectors in Northern Ireland. We estimate that roughly 96% of the combined resources available within these two sectors are focused on support to females only.

We have also raised concerns about direct sex discrimination against male children seeking access to safe accommodation (see page 37 of the report). The Departments must address these concerns if they want to ensure all victims and their children can access accommodation that is safe and appropriate to their needs and circumstances.

Another example of the potential for obfuscation can be found in the Introduction Section of [the supporting consultation document](#) where The Department states that they are particularly keen to hear from 'different groups and communities including victims from LGBTQIA+ and minority ethnic communities and those with a disability' (page 2, para 3).

Men and boys are not included in this welcoming statement towards victims from different groups. Omissions such as this have the potential to create chill factors for male victims, including those from LGBTQIA+ and minority ethnic communities and male victims with a disability.

Potential adverse impacts arising from the significant omission of male victims from the list of perceived minority groups may be further compounded by the additional context that the immediately preceding paragraph states that The Departments: '*acknowledge that the majority of victims are female and that this has informed [their] approach.*'

3.8 Do you agree with the outcome and key priority areas identified under Pillar 4 (Justice)?

Throughout this response we have highlighted concerns about implications arising from the use of gender neutral and gender biased terminology. Both approaches have the potential to create adverse impacts for male victims that must be mitigated against .

This issue must be addressed if key justice priority actions and desired outcomes have any realistic chance of being achieved.

For all victims to feel confident to report domestic and sexual abuse, gendered barriers to participating in the justice system must be reduced and justice responses must be effective for all.

PSNI data indicates that 32% of victims and over 80% of perpetrators of domestic abuse that they come into contact with are male. These trends indicate a significant disconnect and under-representation of male victims in justice outcomes.

The Men's Advisory Project NI indicate that the majority of men that they help have experienced abuse by a woman. They also indicate that most of their service users have never contacted the police. The Men's Alliance NI estimate that 95% of their members were abused by a female partner or ex-partner. Men's Aid Ireland report that 94% of male victims using their service disclose that their perpetrator is female.

Positive action to better understand factors contributing to high attrition levels and under-reporting in domestic and sexual abuse must address the gendered barriers to reporting that many men disclose.

3.9 Do you have any further comments that you wish to make about the draft Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy?

Section 75 of The Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires public authorities in Northern Ireland to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between people with protected characteristics. This equality duty entails more than the elimination of discrimination. It requires public authorities to take proactive action to address any adverse impacts for protected groups arising from their policies, practices or approaches to the provision of services to members of the public.

It is widely understood that victims of domestic and sexual abuse can experience uniquely, or predominately gendered challenges, both when experiencing abuse and when considering coming forward to seek support and / or justice from the state.

The draft Strategy identifies a number of barriers particular to male victims (page 18), including '*not knowing that support is available and believing services are for women only*'.

We acknowledge that this can be an issue for many male victims, however we are deeply troubled that The Departments have failed to acknowledge the reality that some statutory funded services are currently made available to women only. For example, refuge accommodation and floating support services provided through The Supporting People Fund are currently only offered to female victims of abuse at risk of homelessness.

Long established practices related to gendered budgeting and the procurement of services mean that male victims are often not afforded access to the same standard or range of services. The existence of these significant and obvious gaps in the provision of public services has been understood for well over a decade.

Advocates for male victims highlighted them once again during the related 2022 Call for Views and yet The Departments have failed to acknowledge them in the Draft Strategy.

The reality for many victims of abuse in Northern Ireland is that some of the largest and most influential publicly funded service providers in the domestic and sexual abuse sector will not provide services to them, solely on the grounds of their sex. These service providers advocate almost exclusively on behalf of female victims and do not promote particular due regard towards male victims.

Our Personnel have had involvement in the formulation of the VAWG strategy in GB and subsequent reviews, and experience in delivering front line services in partnership with female domestic abuse services. This experience and subsequent research has informed our understanding of the gaps in domestic abuse services for boys and men.

Split the Differences especially urge The Departments to consider the impact on children who grow up in an abusive home. The absence of a parallel strategy for male victims impacts globally on the needs of all family members. Where policies are created that refuse to equally acknowledge the capacity for male and female perpetrators and victims of abuse, systemic intergenerational abuse cycles are enabled to continuously generate trauma and response behaviours.

Men and women who perpetrate domestic abuse in all its forms cannot be denied equal pathways in statutory policies and procedures. Northern Ireland's equality and human rights legislation firmly requires The Departments to recognise perpetrators and victims, regardless of their sex.

The absence of this provision legally, ethically and morally could only be deemed as discriminatory and neglectful, both in the support and education for men and women living with domestic abuse and we urge The Departments to consider the impact on all. Prevention and solutions will not succeed unless identical pathways are enabled for all who seek safety and change.

In order to address the elephant in the room, we must first acknowledge that it exists.

Split The Difference
May 2023