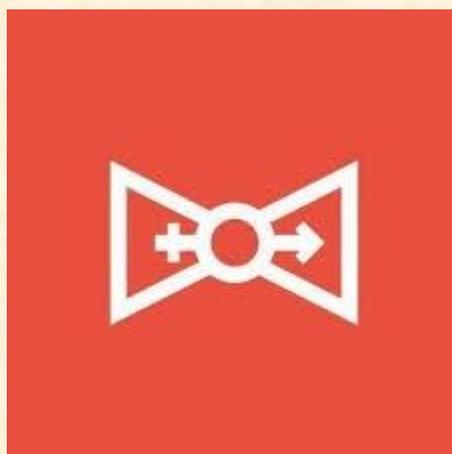


Equally Seen, Served & Safe.

The Campaign for A Strategy To Tackle
Intimate Violence Experienced by Boys & Men



Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission
Briefing Paper
August 2022



Briefing for NI Human Rights Commission

Split the Difference have prepared this briefing for the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) to assist them with their assessment of the needs of male victims of domestic abuse across the Section 75 spectrum of protected characteristics.

The briefing addresses the following positions promoted by NIHRC:

- That domestic abuse is a '**gendered**' crime.
- That **victims of domestic abuse are overwhelmingly female** and perpetrators overwhelmingly male.
- That the majority of the **perpetrators** who commit domestic abuse against men are other men.
- That domestic **abuse experienced by heterosexual male victims** is very different to the type of domestic abuse experienced by heterosexual female victims.
- That there is clear evidence of the need for a **gender exclusive strategy for women and girls**.
- That there is no or insufficient evidence of the need for a **parallel strategy for boys and men**.
- That it is not relevant to compare any **actions taken by The Northern Ireland Executive or Public Authorities** to address domestic abuse experienced by women and girls when considering any actions, or inactions, by them to address domestic abuse experienced by boys and men.
- That promoting and protecting the **Equality and Human Rights** of everyone in Northern Ireland does not mean treating everyone exactly the same.

Perpetration of Domestic Violence Experienced by Men

In 2019, The Mankind Initiative issued a briefing paper on [the Gender and Sexuality of Perpetrators of Male Victims of Domestic Abuse and Partner Abuse](#). The main purpose of this paper was to specifically address the persistent myth that the majority of the perpetrators who commit domestic abuse and partner abuse against men are other men. They highlighted the following data sources that show that the overwhelming majority of perpetrators of abuse experienced by male victims are female:

- **ONS: Crime Survey of England and Wales (2015):** 7% of male victims of abuse identified a male partner as the perpetrator of their abuse.
- **Scottish Justice Survey (2018)¹:** Where the victim was male, 88% of perpetrators identified were female and 9% were male.
- **Police Scotland Domestic Abuse (2018):** One in every nine male victims contacting Police Scotland reported a male perpetrator.

Mankind claim that there is no statistical evidence in the UK to prove that the majority of perpetrators of domestic abuse against men are male and that this claim is '***a deliberate falsehood designed to minimise the experiences of heterosexual male victims***'.

Furthermore, they note that the ongoing promotion of this myth by senior figures within the domestic abuse sector has the additional consequence of falsely portraying male same-sex relationships as being highly abusive. For example: ONS data for 2019 estimates that the proportion of men identifying as gay or bisexual in the UK to be 754,000². For the same year the ONS estimate for male victims of domestic abuse was 786,000(in England & Wales)³. Therefore for the majority of male partner abuse to be carried out by men would require evidence to show that the majority of gay/bisexual men are in abusive relationships.

¹ This is the main report in the UK where both the sexuality of the victims and perpetrators can be found in one dataset with a direct link. Given the sample size, there is no reason not to believe these figures read across to the rest of the UK.

² [ONS \(2019\) Sexual Identity in the UK](#)

³ [ONS \(2019\) Domestic Abuse Victims Characteristics](#)

To date the largest meta-analysis of intimate partner violence (IPV) data conducted worldwide was undertaken by [The Partner Abuse State of Knowledge Project \(PASK\)](#). This involved a two year undertaking by family violence scholars from 20 universities and research institutions in the U.K, Canada and USA.

PASK (2012) found that in most cases, same-sex cohabitants do report at slightly higher rates of IPV than opposite-sex cohabitants. Some studies also found that lesbians experienced higher rates of IPV than gay men⁴. This is consistent with trends identified at a UK level with ONS data indicating that lesbian and bisexual women are between two and three times more likely to experience abuse when compared to gay men and heterosexual women⁵.

PASK (2012) also found that rates of physical IPV perpetrated by men and women generally were more similar than they were different, with slightly higher rates for women (28%) than for men (22%). This research also found that the most common form of IPV is bi-directional⁶ (58%)⁷, a complexity largely ignored by ideological lobbyists who prefer to promote a clean victim versus perpetrator narrative to public policy makers and funders.

PASK (2012) found that a higher ratio of male-to-female unidirectional violence was only found in criminal justice/legal studies that relied on police reports of IPV perpetration. This is consistent with the limited Northern Ireland specific data that we have been able to identify in relation to perpetrators, with PSNI data showing that in 2018/19 women represented only 12% of all offenders dealt with by police in connection with domestic abuse crimes resulting in an outcome (charge, summons, caution, etc.).

The Men's Advisory Project NI indicates that the majority of men that they help have experienced abuse by women⁸ and that most service users have never approached the PSNI⁹. Men's Aid Ireland also report that 94% of male victims using their service disclose that their perpetrator is female¹⁰.

⁴ Page 16.

⁵ Fact 10 : [55-Key-Facts-about-Male-Victims-of-Domestic-Abuse-and-Partner-Abuse](#)

⁶ Bidirectional violence is defined as mutual engagement in violence by both intimate partners.

⁷ Page 8.

⁸ See: <http://tiny.cc/tcgwuz>

⁹ See: <http://tiny.cc/wcgwuz>

¹⁰ See: www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-40776516.html

Male Victims - Frequency

[Split the Difference's February 2022 Briefing Paper](#) highlighted the fact that Police Service for Northern Ireland (PSNI) data for 2021 indicates that roughly 1 in every 3 adult victims of domestic abuse are male. This is consistent with ONS data trends for England and Wales which consistently show that every year one in the three victims of domestic abuse are male equating to 757,000 men (1.561m women).

In 2019, the UK Statistic Authority upheld a complaint by the Men & Boys Coalition after the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State Victoria Atkins MP misled Parliament by claiming that '*the overwhelming majority of victims are female*'¹¹. The Authority made a similar intervention in 2009 when the Crown Prosecution Service made this claim in a draft of their Public Policy Statement on Prosecuting Domestic Abuse Cases.¹²

[The Mankind Initiative](#) also 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%).

The Office of National Statistics (ONS) report that male victims (59%) of partner abuse are far more likely to perceive what happened to them as not being domestic abuse (female victims 40%)¹³.

British Medical Journal research (2019) on the barriers to initial disclosure and help-seeking by male victims found five key themes:

- fear of disclosure,
- challenge to masculinity,
- commitment to relationship and/or children,
- diminished confidence/despondency and
- the invisibility perception of services¹⁴.

¹¹ M&BC (2019) [Stats watchdog upholds complaint over governments-misleading-description-of abuse victims](#)

¹² See: <http://tiny.cc/1d7wuz>

¹³ Fact 42 : [55-Key-Facts-about-Male-Victims-of-Domestic-Abuse-and-Partner-Abuse](#)

¹⁴ [Help-seeking by male victims of domestic violence and abuse \(DVA\): a systematic review and qualitative evidence synthesis](#): Alyson L Huntley, Lucy Potter, Emma Williamson, Alice Malpass, Eszter Szilassy, Gene Feder - British Medical Journal (2019).

Male Victims - Impact of abuse

PSNI data shows that, between 2005 and 2021, 40% of domestic homicide victims in Northern Ireland were male¹⁵.

[Women's Aid claim that there are important differences between male violence against women and female violence against men](#), namely the amount, severity and impact. They argue that women experience higher levels of fear, repeated victimisation and are much more likely to be seriously hurt or killed than male victims of domestic abuse.

Some data will support aspects of this claim; however it is also extremely stereotypical, dismissive and dangerous to promote the narrative that the unique impact of abuse on a victim can be primarily determined by their sex. For example, while UK data consistently show that annually more women are killed by their partners or ex partners, men are also victims of domestic homicide¹⁶.

In 2020 [an analysis of 22 Domestic Homicide Reviews](#) identified several findings where there were missed opportunities to help and support male victims, including repeated dismissal of female partners' abusive acts by services. Half of the reviews showed support services lacked guidance to help identify and treat male victims and a considerable number of men whose injuries were dismissed by the police and other services as well as friends and family. Some of the men found themselves suspected instead.

The Mankind Initiative has highlighted the fact that ONS data for England and Wales show that:

- 12% of male victims of partner abuse suffered three or more incidents (compared to 15% of female victims).
- 1% of men suffered 50 or more incidents (2% of female victims).
- Of those men that suffered from partner abuse:
 - 32% suffered a physical injury (23% of women)
 - 2% suffered severe bruising or bleeding (3% women)
 - 4% suffered internal injuries, broken bones or teeth (0.4% women).
 - 41% of have emotional / mental problems (52% women).
 - 11% of have tried to take their own lives (7% women).¹⁷

¹⁵ Split the Difference Feb 2022 Briefing – Page 4.

¹⁶ In 17/18, 16 men died at the hands of their partner or ex-partner compared to 80 women.

¹⁷ Facts 15 - 19: [55-Key-Facts-about-Male-Victims-of-Domestic-Abuse-and-Partner-Abuse](#)

Suicide is a significant public health and social inequality issue, with more than 6,000 people across the UK and Republic of Ireland taking their own lives each year¹⁸. Research has found a strong and consistent association between intimate partner abuse and both suicidal ideation and attempts¹⁹. In 2020, 75% of suicides in NI were male²⁰.

A recent study found that, after adjusting for demographics, socioeconomics, and lifetime experience of adversities, the odds ratio of a past-year suicide attempt were 3 times higher in those who have ever experienced IPV, compared with those who had not²¹.

Even in areas that are often seen as almost exclusively affecting female victims, such as economic abuse and sexual coercion, research has demonstrated that male victims experience persistent and severe patterns similar to those experienced by female victims. Over half of the male victims participating in a recent study into [Male Victim's Experience and Impact of Coercive Control](#) reported having their earnings controlled and one in five reported being forced to penetrate as an ongoing pattern of abuse.

This research also found that coercive control for male victims is uniquely gendered in some aspects. In particular, men's relationship with their children is often exploited to coercively control them, both within the relationship and post-separation. False allegations or the threat of making these, to the police and social services as a pattern of abuse were reported by almost two thirds of male victims.

Dominant and pervasive gendered narratives create deep-seated barriers for male victims. This means that support agencies (including the police, social services and the family courts) may not recognise men's victimisation and societal beliefs leave men vulnerable to persistent abuse, and at risk of post-separation abuse and secondary victimisation (including by support services). Additionally, and crucially, this leaves the children of male victims at risk of harm, either directly, or as a member of a household controlled by an abusive mother.

¹⁸ [Samaritans - Suicide Facts and Figures](#)

¹⁹ McLaughlin et al. (2012) [Intimate Partner Abuse and Suicidality: a Systematic Review](#)

²⁰ [Samaritans - Suicide Facts and Figures](#)

²¹ McManus et al. (2022) [Intimate Partner Violence, Suicidality, and Self-harm](#)

Gendered Violence and Public Policy

NIHRC have made it clear that they will not be reviewing their current ideological position in support of the feminist perspective that domestic violence is an example of 'gendered violence'²².

We do not therefore seek to share information robustly challenging the credibility of this widely promoted construct and will instead focus on highlighting the adverse impact this perspective can have on people with protected characteristics whose experiences do not sit neatly within definitions of 'gendered violence'.

Strategic Frameworks

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 frameworks²³. 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 victims²⁴.

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.

Public Authorities have a statutory duty to ensure that their practices are a proportionate means of meeting a legitimate aim and when considering the possibility that practices arising from 'gendered' frameworks can be found to directly or indirectly discriminate against male victims, it is crucial to take into account the intersecting impact of this discrimination across the entire Section 75 spectrum.

²² [The UN define Gender-Based violence as](#): harmful acts directed at an individual based on their gender. It is rooted in gender inequality, the abuse of power and harmful norms. **Note:** Technically boys and men can be victims of 'gendered violence' but they are excluded from the scope of protection offered by instruments such as the Council of Europe Convention on preventing & combating violence against women / domestic violence. [The European Commission define Gender Based Violence as](#): violence directed against a person because of that person's gender or violence that affects persons of a particular gender disproportionately. **Note:** In reality 'gendered violence' is only used to describe violence that affects women and girls disproportionately. A stark example of this was seen recently when the Ukraine [ratified the 'Istanbul Convention'](#) only months after declaring declared martial law at the start of Russia's invasion and [barring all men aged 18 to 60 eligible for conscripted military service from leaving the country](#).

²³ Bates and Douglas (2020): [Services for Domestic Violence Victims: Where Are We Today?](#)

²⁴ The authors noted there is a need for policies and laws that are inclusive in both "name and spirit only."

Intersectional Perspectives

ONS data indicates that men with disabilities are more likely to be a victim of partner abuse than non-disabled women.²⁵ Therefore when the experience of male victims is undermined, misunderstood or ignored by gatekeepers of their human rights, the experiences of people with disabilities are also undermined, misunderstood or ignored.

We note that when NIHRC have raised shortcomings relating to violence and abuse with the United Nations Committee on the Rights of People with Disabilities they have only extend regard to the impact of these shortcomings on disabled female victims of violence and abuse.²⁶

‘Gendering’ public policy can also reduce the visibility of people protected from slavery and forced labour under Article 4 of the Human Rights Act. For example, in England and Wales the Crown Prosecution Service currently classifies human trafficking as Violence Against Women and Girls²⁷. The Home Office estimate that 74% of victims of this crime are male²⁸. Any potential detriments arising from reducing their visibility will disproportionately impact on men from BAME backgrounds.

The Home Office also estimate that over 5,000 children were trafficked into the UK in 2020; again the visibility of male children can be undermined by heavily or exclusively gendered perspectives. Split the Difference is especially concerned about the plight of children disadvantaged by ‘gendered’ policy and practices informed by perceptions of oppression and some form of battle between the sexes.

For example, last year Bradford Council’s children’s services were severely criticized for dismissing numerous concerns raised in the months leading up to the death of 16 month old Star Hobson who was killed after sustaining multiple injuries inflicted by her mother’s female partner. Little Star endured months of assaults and psychological harm but social workers investigating concerns raised by her grandparents just one week before her death dismissed the referral as ‘*malicious*’ and made by ‘*racist homophobes*’.²⁹ The National Review into her murder and a similar case involving a 6 year old boy found that practitioner biases and assumptions about domestic violence can have catastrophic implications for child safety.³⁰

²⁵ Fact 13: [55-Key-Facts-about-Male-Victims-of-Domestic-Abuse-and-Partner-Abuse](#)

²⁶ NIHRC (2018): [Disability Rights in Northern Ireland](#), page 49.

²⁷ CPS: [Violence Against Women and Girls](#)

²⁸ Home Office (2021): [UK Annual Report on Modern Slavery](#)

²⁹ [www.dailymail.co.uk/Social-workers-investigating-Star-Hobson-death-missed-five-chances-save-her.](#)

³⁰ CASPAR (2022): [The national review into the murders of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson](#)

In 2020 a serious case review by the Manchester Safeguarding Partnership concluded that professionals from children's services and other agencies can make persistent assumptions about the perpetrator of violence within households, despite evidence to the contrary. Social workers involved with this case failed to grasp the "complex dynamics" of domestic abuse within a family where the mother subsequently assaulted her baby, causing bleeding on the brain.

It is estimated that mothers are responsible for filicide at higher rates than fathers and new partners combined³¹. This may go some way to explaining why the authors of the much publicised 'Counting Dead Women Project' do not include girls within the scope of their regard³².

Criminal Justice and Potential Political Policing

In section one, we noted that PSNI records show that only 12% of perpetrators identified in connection with domestic abuse crimes that resulted in an outcome were female. In section two we noted that PSNI records show that 31% of victims are male. We were unable to identify perpetrator characteristics for these crimes but, as trends indicate that the majority of them will have been female, the disparity between these outcomes may be significant.

The most recent update on the PSNI progress in implementing the recommendations made in the 2009 NI Policing Board's domestic abuse and human rights thematic review indicates that the PSNI did not take forward the Chief Commissioner's recommendation that steps be taken to consider the needs of male victims. Notably recommendations relating to other Section 75 Groups were progressed.³³

In 2020 the PSNI committed to developing a 'Male Violence and Intimidation against Women and Girls strategy' and have subsequently committed to respond to and investigate 'VAWG offences' with a focus on perpetrator behaviour and improving criminal justice outcomes for female victims of crime³⁴. This approach withholds regard for male victims both inside and outside of the home (where they represent the majority of victims). In March 2022, the Chief Constable confirmed that regard for male children has been withheld by this strategy due to the PSNI's perception that the bulk of perpetrators of violence are men.³⁵

³¹ Collins (2019): The Empathy Gap, pages 265-266.

³² www.communitycare.co.uk/social-workers-missed-complex-dynamics-ic-abuse-mother-assaulted-baby

³³ www.nipolicingboard.org.uk/domestic-abuse-update-report-may-2011

³⁴ www.itv.com/women-need-to-feel-safe-no-matter-where-they-are

³⁵ www.youtube.com/watch?v=M46VGUa-G88&t=3143s

Proposed Northern Ireland Strategies

As Women's Aid Northern Ireland have highlighted, Northern Ireland is currently the only region of the UK without a specific Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy³⁶. To-date actions to tackle this have been progressed through the [Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse Northern Ireland Strategy \(DSVA\)](#).

The Departments responsible for co-ordinating this Strategy insist that, as required by law, it is 'gender neutral' and adopts an approach informed by the following definition of domestic abuse:

'Threatening, controlling, coercive behaviour, violence or abuse (psychological, virtual, physical, verbal, sexual, financial or emotional) inflicted on anyone (irrespective of age, ethnicity, religion, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation or any form of disability) by a current or former intimate partner or family member.'

Split the Difference commend the Executive for having attempted to adopt an inclusive and non-stereotyping approach and had previously viewed this as the best practice example to recommend to other regions seeking to adopt an approach seeking to most effectively promote equality of opportunity while also combating discrimination for all victims.

We believe that The NI Executive's commitment to a gender exclusive strategy to tackle violence against women and girls (VAWG) has the potential to create adverse impacts for men, children and adult women who are lesbian or bi-sexual.

In 2021, Split the Difference commenced a mapping exercise of support services available to male victims of intimate violence in Northern Ireland. We have identified some evidence of positive outcomes for boys and men arising from the 'gender neutral' approach³⁷, however we have also identified a range of significant examples of how the Executive's strategy for tackling domestic and sexual violence can be perceived to be 'gender neutral' in name only. 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.³⁸

³⁶ See: www.womensaidni.org/womens-aid-petition-for-a-violence-against-women-and-girls-strategy-in-ni

³⁷ For example: A higher proportion of men report abuse to the police in NI than in many other UK regions and DFC also recently advised us that Women's Aid NI no longer bar male children fleeing violence from access to their services (unlike in other UK regions where boys as young as 8 are turned away, leaving mothers to choose between returning to a violent home or in some cases abandon their boy(s) to the care of statutory services).

³⁸ See our briefing paper for further examples.

There remains considerable confusion as to how the VAWG and DSVA strategies will interact. The Women's Sector continue to lobby for a gender exclusive strategy for female victims and we believe a parallel strategy for male victims of intimate violence³⁹ is also required.

VAWG strategies clearly cause the marginalisation and invisibilisation of male victims⁴⁰. This is increasingly recognised and the direction of travel in England and Wales is moving towards the development of a male specific strategy⁴¹. The SNP have already committed to develop one to support and protect the human rights of male victims in Scotland.

The Men & Boys Coalition and the Mankind Initiative both urged the NI Executive to develop a male specific strategy during their recent call for views and 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 men⁴².

Split the Difference are also calling on the NI Executive to develop a male strategy to both complement and support their important work to address the unique challenges experienced by female victims of violence. We believe this is necessary because male victims also face unique and sex specific 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 and/or ignorance from some support service providers.

We also believe that a specific strategy is required because aspects of the Department of Justice / Health's 'gender neutral' approach can be seen to be gender neutral in name only. This means that male victims have to navigate:

- A heavily sex segregated service infrastructure;
- Significant / total gaps in service;
- Exclusion from funding streams;
- Suspicion, stereotyping and sex discrimination.

³⁹ 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; human trafficking, forced marriage & so-called honour-based violence.

⁴⁰ 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.

⁴¹ The Victims Commissioner has [called on the Home Office to develop a male victims strategy](#).

⁴² ECNI (2016) [Gender Equality Policy Priorities and Recommendations](#)

Equality & Human Rights Considerations

NIHRC Perspectives

Split the Difference support all ethical and effective actions adopted to tackle violence experienced by women and girls. We do not view such actions to be in competition with the adoption of actions to tackle violence experienced by boys and men. We also believe that neither equity nor equality mean treating everyone the same, however we are deeply troubled by NIHRC's view that actions taken by The NI Executive to address abuse experienced by women and girls have no relevance in the context of considering action or inaction by them to address abuse experienced by boys and men.

This perspective contradicts NIHRC's stance on 'gendered violence' which is based on comparisons of crime data and perceptions of structural inequality / unequal power relations between men and women.

Such a perspective also appears to be relatively unique in the discipline of equality and human rights considerations, not least given that it is widely understood that both Article 14 of the Human Rights Act⁴³ and Northern Ireland Equality Law are informed by the concept of comparison of treatment and, indeed, a comparator⁴⁴ is required to evidence breaches of these laws.

For example, over the time that Women's Aid NI delivered the National Domestic Abuse Helpline Service they appear to have operated a perpetrator screening practice based solely on the sex of service users⁴⁵. Such a practice is direct sex discrimination and illegal under UK equality laws. The Department of Health have recently provided us with reassurances that the new service provider does not operate this practice and has taken positive action to ensure that messaging about the service is inclusive and welcoming to all.

We ask that the NIHRC Commissioners consider the evidence set out in this briefing and urgently review their current positions on the perpetration, frequency, impact and needs of male victims of intimate violence.

⁴³ Article 14 requires that all of the rights and freedoms set out in the Act must be protected and applied without discrimination.

⁴⁴ A comparator is someone who is in the same or similar enough situation to someone else, but who doesn't have the same protected characteristic (such as sex).

⁴⁵ Split the Difference February 2022 Briefing Paper on NI, page 8.

TEO's Proposed Gender Exclusive VAWG Strategy

The Executive Office have already committed significant resources to establish an [Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Unit](#) and have indicated a clear direction of travel towards the development of a VAWG strategy for Northern Ireland.

The NI Women's Policy Group (of which we note NIHRC is a member⁴⁶) have flagged concerns regarding how Domestic and Sexual Abuse can be addressed separate from a strategy to reduce Violence Against Women and Girls. They also argue that the VAWG strategy must include domestic and sexual abuse and recognise it's 'gendered' nature.⁴⁷

We would be concerned that the proposed NI VAWG strategy will significantly undermine the Executive's supposedly 'gender neutral' strategy to tackle intimate violence⁴⁸. We are also concerned the DSVA Strategy may ultimately be consumed into the NI VAWG strategy and note that Senior Civil servants have indicated that they are open to mirroring the approaches adopted in Scotland, England and Wales⁴⁹.

Senior figures within the NI Executive also openly acknowledge that the proposed approach will be perceived by many as a political signal that tackling abuse experienced by boys and men is less important⁵⁰. Despite this they have yet to conduct a screening exercise, let alone conduct impact assessment exercises to identify if there are any human rights and / or equality implications arising from their approach.

We ask that the NIHRC call on the NI Executive to clarify how they envision the 'gender exclusive' and 'gender neutral' strategies will interact.

We also ask that the NIHRC urge the NI Executive to conduct impact assessments as soon as possible so that they can adequately consider how best to address adverse impacts arising from this approach at as early a planning stage as is now possible.

⁴⁶ [WRDA Membership](#).

⁴⁷ WRDA (2022): [Response-to-Call-for-Views-New-Strategies-Domestic-and-Sexual-Abuse-and-VAWG](#)

⁴⁸ For example: both DOJ and DOH have recently registered with the NI White Ribbon Campaign.

⁴⁹ In August 2021, [the outgoing Head of the NICS indicated that she may seek to encourage Departments to largely mirror the Home Office VAWG strategy approach, the incumbent Head of the NICS also appeared to indicate support for this approach](#).

⁵⁰ The recent [Call for Views](#) notes that The Executive are: "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." Also: 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](#).

DOJ / DOH's Proposed Gender Neutral DSVVA Strategy

We note that NIHRC have recommended that The Executive and Departments should: *'reconsider their gender-neutral approach to the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy and ensure the strategy includes specialised, gender-sensitive accessible support and actions for victims of domestic and sexual abuse'⁵¹*; and that they also ensure that 'both strategies include measures to target marginalised and vulnerable women and girls.'

We believe that the best way to achieve this is by the development of two interconnecting strategies that aim to tackle intimate violence against women and girls, and boys and men respectively.

We believe that this approach will best enable the Executive and Departments to objectively justify any 'gender sensitive' actions required to address the unique challenges victims experience arising, through no fault of their own, from immutable characteristics such as sex.

We ask that NIHRC urge the Executive and Departments to adopt this approach.

We also ask that NIHRC call on the Executive and Departments to include measures to target marginalised boys and men.

We also ask that NIHRC meet with the Executive and Departments to discuss the concerns we have flagged about gaps in service, stereotyping, victim blaming and possible discrimination that may be adversely impacting on adult male victims, children and women who's experiences do not match mainstreamed 'gendered violence' perspectives.

⁵¹ NIHRC (2022): [Response to Call for Views: Domestic Abuse Strategy and Equally Safe Strategy](#)

International Human Rights Instruments

Council of Europe Convention on Preventing & Combating Violence Against Women & Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention).

The 'Istanbul Convention' has significantly informed the VAWG strategy approach first adopted by the Home Office and then replicated in Scotland

The UK Government recently confirmed ratification of the Convention which to at least some extent establishes a hierarchy of victims into UK law. Beyond legal obligations, the Convention also gives an important political signal to society as a whole that violence against women is unacceptable.

Boys and men do not fall within the scope of protection afforded by the Convention and we are currently uncertain as to the scale of potential detriments male victims may experience as a consequence of ratification.

The UK is a 'dualist' state and existing equality and human rights law has at least ensured that male victims have not been excluded from recently introduced legislation such as the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021.

The Home Office have advised Parliament that ratification will entail no significant human rights implications, although incredibly this appears to be based on the incorrect assessment that '*the Convention applies to male victims as well as female ones*'⁵².

EHRC, SHRC and NICHRC have all encouraged the UK Government to ratify the 'Istanbul Convention', however we are not aware of any lobbying to fully extend the scope of protection to male victims.

We ask the NIHRC and their partners seek urgent clarification from the UK Government on their assessment of the Convention's compatibility with human rights⁵³ and take any steps necessary to extend the scope of protection to male victims.

⁵² [The Illustrated Empathy Gap - Istanbul Convention Ratified by UK](#)

⁵³ Required under Article 9 of the Human Rights Act

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

The Chief Commissioner requested that we keep the scope of this briefing to domestic violence. We have respected this request, however we will conclude by sharing a wider concern about the impact of CEDAW on the level of regard towards affording boys and men equitable human rights across all areas of public policy.

The overall aim of the CEDAW Convention is the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. Obviously boys and men do not fall within the purview of this aim. We are concerned that the tramlines set by this human rights instrument significantly dictates and informs the bulk of work undertaken in the area of gender equality by gatekeepers of human rights protections such as the NICHHR and the NI Executive.

For example, in 2019 The NI Assembly Research and Information Service conducted a [Review of Gender Issues in Northern Ireland](#). The research adopted ‘*a feminist perspective*⁵⁴ and only addressed inequalities impacting on women. In the section addressing ‘gender based violence’ they report PSNI data on the frequency of domestic abuse crimes but fail to note that 1 in every 3 victims were male.

This concern extends to the work undertaken by the Department of Communities to develop a [Gender Equality Action Plan](#). In 2020 The Department appointed an Expert Advisory Panel to help them identify the gender issues faced by people for whom the Strategy will deliver and make evidence-based recommendations to the Minister on the themes, content and key actions that should be included in the Strategy.

The Expert Panel consisted of four women, one social policy academic and three representatives from the women’s sector (including a lobbyist). Their report notes the importance of taking CEDAW obligations into account when developing the strategy, they have urged The Executive to ‘*apply a gender lens to all policy, legislative and budgetary decision-making*’ and not one of their key priority recommendations directly relate to boys and men, even in areas such as health and education where male inequalities are most widely acknowledged.

We ask that NICHHR seek reassurances from the Executive that they are showing sufficient due regard to the needs and human rights of boys and men when considering matters of gender equality.

⁵⁴ A feminist perspective, while much debated, generally refers to a position that views society as having been constructed for the benefit of men and to the disadvantage of women.

Summary of Requests

Split the Difference works solely from the perspective that governance has no place in supporting public agendas that marginalise or neglect anyone's human rights. Our aim is to support governance as a critical friend, supporting change through the appropriate pathway, whether that is through consultation, campaigning or legal challenge.

- 1. We ask that the that NIHRC consider the evidence set out in this briefing and review their own current positions on the perpetration, frequency, impact and needs of male victims of intimate violence.**
- 2. We ask that NIHRC seek reassurances from the Executive and Departments that they are showing sufficient due regard to the needs and human rights of boys and men when considering matters of gender equality in Northern Ireland.**
- 3. In relation to domestic and sexual violence, we ask that the NIHRC call on the NI Executive and relevant Departments to:**
 - Clarify how they envision the 'gender exclusive' and 'gender neutral' strategies will interact.**
 - Conduct Human Rights and Equality Impact Assessments as soon as possible so that they can adequately consider how best to address adverse impacts arising from this approach at as early a planning stage as is now possible.**
- 4. We also ask that NIHRC urge the Executive and relevant Departments to develop a specific strategy to tackle intimate violence against boys and men that:**
 - Addresses issues impacting on male victims including: gaps in service, stereotyping, victim blaming and discrimination.**
 - Includes measures to address the needs of marginalised boys and men.**
- 5. We ask the NIHRC and their GB partners seek urgent clarification from the UK Government on their assessment of the Convention's compatibility with human rights and take any steps necessary to extend the scope of protection to male victims.**