

## The Executive is Failing in Their Job to End Violence Against Women and Girls

Northern Ireland is now per capita one of the most dangerous places in Europe to be a woman. I can't think of a single woman who wouldn't be terrified by that fact. In late 2024 five women were killed in the space of seven weeks. A figure that by the promises of the Executive should be far less.

The murder of Sarah Everard in 2021 placed a strain on the amount of trust the public has for the PSNI and the justice system, especially with women, as a shocking 98% of women in Northern Ireland have experienced at least one form of violence or abuse in their lifetime, with half experiencing it before they were eleven. Moreover, in a study conducted of 542 women on violence or abuse they received, almost three quarters of respondents were 'not confident at all' or 'slightly confident' in reporting physical violence to the PSNI. Additionally, only 9% reported that professional support including victim support helped them with their experience, and an even more appalling 2.8% said charges brought against the perpetrator helped.

These statistics are concrete evidence of an incompetent devolved government that falls exceedingly short of providing measures to prevent this kind of horrifying event, more often than not a life ending event, from happening to women in this country. The executive has failed in delivering upon their Programme for Government, which makes specific reference in its nine priorities to "end violence against women and girls", which might have made an effort to reduce the death and abuse suffered by women in Northern Ireland recently. Despite £3 million being attached to the Ending Violence Against Women And Girls Strategy and First Minister Michelle O'Neill stressing a focus on prevention and working through the justice system the executive admitted the payment was not nearly sufficient to the cause. Haileigh Ashton Lamont, a victim of sexual abuse by her stepfather, was invited to a consultation panel on strategy for this violence and she relayed her concerns that not enough emphasis was being placed on criminal justice reforms and solutions. This clearly highlights the inadequate actions and skills of the executive in

tackling violence against women and girls. On the Monday of the Programme for Government being released, that Friday the body of 43 year old Rachel Simpson was found murdered by a 21 year old man in East Belfast. This horrendous event coinciding with a visibly lacklustre commitment by the Executive to ending this kind of violence is exactly the wake up call the government of Northern Ireland should be treating with the utmost importance and time dedication. However, despite the fact that this is only the second time two women have been in the positions of First and Deputy First Minister, the vicious cycle of abuse continues and is almost being ignored by those in power. Another startling, but certainly not surprising given their track record of incompetency, fact is the Gillen Review commissioned by the Department of Justice made 253 recommendations in 2019, many of which are yet to reach completion. It did successfully limit the number of people permitted into a courtroom during a sexual offence trial and increase training for people working within the justice system. However, the publisher of the document,

Sir John Gillen, former Lord Justice of Appeal, called for steps to be taken to fight delays in the judicial system. A BBC report confirms sexual crimes take two times longer to reach the end of the criminal justice process. Taking six years to not even complete recommendations made that have so far proven to benefit the justice system in Northern Ireland is a disgrace to the effectiveness of our assembly.

The problem of violence against women and girls is an epidemic affecting every country in the world, which means tackling it is an enormous undertaking. Yet, for a country with a population of under two million which only makes up 2.9% of the UK population, this problem should be much more manageable.

When you elect someone in your constituency to represent you in your government, it's standard practice that the needs of constituents would be met or at least try to be met. Based on the figures I have presented to you, this is certainly not the case in the Northern Ireland Executive when it comes to violence against women and girls. On an issue that can cause lifelong trauma and such high levels of social unrest it surely deserves more

consideration and awareness from those in power. The executive has confirmed that they are incapable of providing accurate and efficient measures of preventing violence against women and girls, contrary to the commitments made in recent years.