

**NORTHERN IRELAND CATHOLIC COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL AFFAIRS**  
**(NICCOSA) SUBMISSION RE Justice (Sexual Offences and Trafficking Victims) Bill**

The Northern Ireland Catholic Council for Social Affairs (NICCOSA), a body of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference and working with the Northern Catholic Bishops welcomes the provisions of the above bill and the amendments proposed.

There are a number of areas, however, which we believe merit further consideration and attention and we urge members of the Northern Ireland Assembly to take these on board at the Committee Stage of the bill.

*Trafficking Victims:*

We feel that much more needs to be done at an official level to address the problems of people being trafficked into Northern Ireland (and other places too). The increase in the problem is not only highlighted by recent reports at an official level but is being made clear daily to Catholic organisations and to people of other faiths who are working with trafficked people on a one-to-one basis and within the wider community.

This development comes in the light of recent media reports which showed a 750% increase in the number of trafficked people being identified in Northern Ireland. In 2012, there were 15 referrals in Northern Ireland to the NRM. By 2020 this had increased to 128 (e.g. *Irish Independent*, 4 August 2021). Suspected victims of human trafficking enter the UK Government's National Referral Mechanism (NRM), a framework for identifying and referring potential victims to the Home Office's Single Competent Authority (SCA) to ensure they receive the appropriate support.

Any plan to counter slavery and trafficking has to intersect with other strategies such as the anti-poverty strategy of the Department of Communities and use multi-agency mechanisms. These must include having an immigration policy that recognises the dignity of all people and their rights. It also intersects with strategies and approaches of other bodies and agencies such as police and social care.

We note too a recent *Inspection on how the Criminal Justice System deals with Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking in Northern Ireland* (October 2020) which showed that there were 91 referrals in 2019. These offences, it stated, 'are often described as being 'hidden in plain sight.' They can involve people working on farms, in food production, in the fishing industry, at car washes, in nail bars, in domestic settings cleaning homes and providing childcare, as well as children who are trafficked across Northern Ireland for sexual exploitation.' We agree that there needs to be a greater strategic focus on pursuing perpetrators of trafficking offences against children, with frontline police being given greater training in terms of understanding modern slavery as child abuse and applying the appropriate child protection referral arrangements.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the bill should give specific expression to reflect the focus required. This need is borne out daily by the experience of Church volunteers and others who work with people who are trafficked and who are seeing the manner in which so many people are being abused across a range of sectors.

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<sup>1</sup> See, [CJINI - Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland - Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking](#) [Accessed 14 September 2021].

Physical Punishment:

The debate on this bill is also an opportunity for the inclusion of an amendment to provide for the abolition of the defence of reasonable punishment in Northern Ireland. We see this as an extremely important chance to change the law in Northern Ireland to better protect our infants, children and young people from the harmful effects of physical punishment. Removing this defence would bring NI into line with more than 60 countries including Ireland, Wales and Scotland.

Reasons why the defence should be removed:

- Research evidence shows that physical punishment damages children's wellbeing and is linked to poorer outcomes in childhood and adulthood.
- Physical punishment is linked to aggression, anti-social behaviour, delinquency, anxiety and depression.
- It is not effective in achieving parental goals
- There is a danger of escalation from physical punishment to physical abuse.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, we believe that inclusion of amendments as outlined above would add to the impact of the legislation and give clear demonstrable evidence of the commitment of the whole community in Northern Ireland to making this place a safer place for all people, men and women, young and old.

Yours faithfully,

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