

Consultation Response:

Call for Evidence On the Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill

By the
Northern Ireland Assembly
Committee for Justice

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INTRODUCTION

Men's Alliance Northern Ireland

[Men's Alliance \(NI\)](#) supports male victims and survivors of domestic abuse. We provide support to over 2000 men in NI, providing them with 1-2-1 and peer support, signposting to services, and help with Legal issues and Social Services. We also advocate on behalf of male victims and survivors, raising awareness of their experiences, the challenges they encounter and the gaps in support available to them.

Male victim visibility can be minimised or ignored. PSNI, NISRA and ONS data consistently show that one in three domestic abuse victims are male, and yet research, human rights advocacy and state interventions often centre exclusively on female victims. [Domestic abuse is not a gendered crime](#). The Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (NI) 2021 applies equally to all victims and perpetrators.

Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill

The NI Assembly Committee for Justice has [called for evidence on the draft Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill](#). Introduced by the Minister of Justice in June 2026, the Bill aims to improve how victims and witnesses are supported, safeguarded, and represented as they navigate legal proceedings and the criminal justice system.

At its core are five key aims, which are to:

- establish a statutory Commissioner for Victims and Witnesses of Crime for NI;
- improve transparency, accountability and performance in victim- and witness-related services by requiring mandatory provision of statistics;
- strengthen protections for those affected by hate crime through extending special measures and prohibiting cross-examination by defendants;
- enhance privacy, dignity and protection for complainants in serious sexual offence cases by providing a right to pre-trial independent legal representation and to strengthen safeguards around disclosure of records for which complainants could have a reasonable expectation of privacy in relation to; and
- ensure procedural fairness and integrity in criminal proceedings with provisions that apply to defendants in cases involving the death or serious physical harm of a vulnerable person.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Explicit Inclusivity Mandate.** The legislative framework establishing the Commissioner should include an explicit statutory duty to monitor and report on the accessibility and effectiveness of justice services for *all* demographic groups, specifically including male victims of domestic and sexual abuse.
2. **Targeted Strategy and Engagement.** The Commissioner's office should be mandated to establish a dedicated panel or advisory workstream focused on male victims, promoting close collaboration with community and public sector organisations that support men. Annual reports should track progress on addressing identified service gaps.
3. **Mandatory Intersectional Disaggregation.** Regulations under Clause 11 (and any extension to the Witness Charter) should mandate that all published victim-related statistics must be fully disaggregated by sex, age, and type of offence. As far as practicable, data should also be disaggregated by additional protected characteristics, including disability, race, sexual orientation, gender identity and dependents status.
4. **Attrition and Experience Tracking.** Statistics should explicitly track the "justice journey" of male complainants from initial report to disposal, measuring attrition rates at each stage to identify where and why male victims disengage from the criminal justice system.
5. **Gender-Informed Legal Training.** Ensure that legal representatives funded under the pre-trial legal representation scheme receive specialized, evidence-based training on the dynamics of male victimization, domestic abuse coercive control patterns targeting men, and male responses to trauma.
6. **Robust Enforcement of Privacy Safeguards:** Ensure that the mechanisms regulating access to complainants' private information apply strictly and equitably to male victims, safeguarding their therapeutic and medical records from speculative "fishing expeditions" by defense counsel.
7. **Proactive Opt-Out System.** Implement a presumption of vulnerability or a proactive "opt-out" framework for special measures for all victims of domestic abuse and sexual offences, ensuring male victims do not have to explicitly request or justify their need for protection.
8. **Standardized Court Support.** Ensure court witness services are systematically trained to recognize signs of trauma and intimidation in male witnesses, who may display and experience distress differently than female counterparts.

FULL RESPONSE TO THE DRAFT BILL

1. Overview & Response Focus

This response addresses the statutory protections, support mechanisms, and procedural changes required to ensure that the Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill equitably serves male victims of domestic abuse and sexual violence in NI.

While welcoming the Bill's overall objectives to strengthen victim rights, this response highlights gaps where male victims risk being underserved due to structural biases, lower public awareness, and gender-specific barriers to reporting.

Male victims of domestic abuse can experience the same core harms (physical, psychological, coercive control, sexual violence) but often face differently gendered barriers to accessing justice and support. Gender-neutral framing in law and policy is welcome in principle. In practice male victims can often be deprioritised or rendered invisible by frameworks, funding, training, policy and commissioning practices that prioritise violence against women and girls.

Under-reporting is acute: research indicates more than half of male victims of intimate partner abuse do not disclose it. Stigma, fear of not being believed and false allegations, concerns about children / contact arrangements, and perceptions that victims services are “not for men” are major barriers.

The Commissioner Designate for Victims of Crime’s mapping exercise on services for male adult and child victim-survivors identified significant and enduring gaps: limited dedicated specialist provision, absence of refuges/shelters for male victims (across the Section 75 spectrum), inconsistent referral pathways, insufficient awareness of available supports, funding instability, and barriers linked to gender norms and stereotypes. Many of these gaps echo similar findings from previous decades.¹

There is an increasing body of evidence to support concerns that public policy, policing, criminal justice, safeguarding and public service provision outcomes in NI is significantly impacted by cognitive distortions and bias in how public servants, politicians and the general public perceive and display regard towards male and female victims respectively.²

¹ [Mapping Services for Male Adult and Child Victim-Survivors of Domestic and Sexual Abuse in NI](#)

² See: [Call for Evidence Response: The Criminal Justice \(Sentencing etc\) Bill](#)

Statutory Commissioner for Victims of Crime (Part 1)

The establishment of a statutory Commissioner with duties to promote rights and awareness, keep law and practice under review, advise departments, monitor Victim Charter compliance, and receive statistics is a major advance. The current Designate Commissioner has already demonstrated significant value by commissioning crucial and much needed research and mapping reports on male victims.³

The Bill's general duties and powers (Clauses 2–4 and related provisions) do not explicitly require attention to marginalised, under-served or intersectional groups (such as male victims across the full Section 75 spectrum). Without this, there is a risk that long term commissioning frameworks, strategic priorities, and public campaigns could adopt approaches that inadvertently sideline male victims, or come to reflect historic and contemporary prioritisation of female victims by Government Departments.

Clause 7 grants the Commissioner the authority to form dedicated advisory groups to supply advice and information on the exercise of their statutory functions. We welcome the potential opportunities this provides for championing partnership working and centering the voices of male victims-survivors.

Recommendation 1: Explicit Inclusivity Mandate.

The legislative framework establishing the Commissioner should include an explicit statutory duty to monitor and report on the accessibility and effectiveness of justice services for **all** demographic groups, specifically including male victims of domestic and sexual abuse.

Recommendation 2: Targeted Strategy and Engagement.

The Commissioner's office should be mandated to establish a dedicated panel or advisory workstream focused on male victims, promoting close collaboration with community and public sector organisations that support men. Annual reports should track progress on addressing identified service gaps.

³ See: [Male Experiences of Intimate Partner Violence: The ME-IPV Study](#) and [Mapping Services for Male Adult and Child Victim-Survivors of Domestic and Sexual Abuse in NI](#)

Mandatory Publication of Victim-Related Statistics

The mandatory publication of statistics is welcome, but aggregate data can mask specific attrition rates, reporting trends, and satisfaction levels among male victims.

Current criminal justice statistics only measure those who interact with the system. They do not capture the systemic drop-off rates where male victims disengage early due to a perceived lack of support or biased risk-assessment tools (for example, DASH assessments that may misidentify the primary victim and are not framed as a tool for identifying aggressors in contested or bidirectional cases).⁴

Our recent engagement with the Justice Committee on the related draft Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill has also highlighted gaps in availability of disaggregated data on perpetrators of crime.⁵

Recommendation 3: Mandatory Intersectional Disaggregation

Regulations under Clause 11 (and any extension to the Witness Charter) should mandate that all published victim-related statistics must be fully disaggregated by sex, age, and type of offence. As far as practicable, data should also be disaggregated by additional protected characteristics, including disability, race, sexual orientation, gender identity and persons with dependants.

Recommendation 4: Attrition and Experience Tracking.

Statistics should explicitly track the "justice journey" of male complainants from initial report to disposal, measuring attrition rates at each stage to identify where and why male victims disengage from the criminal justice system.

⁴ [The 'officer effect' in risk assessment for domestic abuse: Findings from a mixed methods study in England and Wales](#)

⁵ See: [Call for Evidence Response: The Criminal Justice \(Sentencing etc\) Bill](#)

Regulation of Access to Private Information and Pre-Trial Legal Representation

These provisions implement key elements of the Gillen Review recommendations. Male victims of serious sexual offences face particularly high levels of stigma, delayed reporting, and concerns about privacy and credibility. Ensuring the scheme is explicitly accessible, promoted, and culturally competent for male complainants is vital. The same applies to safeguards around third-party material and private information: male victims' medical, counselling, or digital records must receive equivalent robust protection.

In domestic abuse scenarios involving male victims, female perpetrators frequently use counter-allegations as a coercive control tactic. Consequently, a male victim's digital devices and private therapeutic records are often disproportionately targeted for disclosure to undermine their credibility.

It is vital that provisions ensuring pre-trial legal representation regarding the disclosure of private medical or counseling data are fully accessible to male complainants of serious sexual offences, who may be less aware of their legal rights in these scenarios.

Recommendation 5: Gender-Informed Legal Training.

Ensure that legal representatives funded under the pre-trial legal representation scheme receive specialized, evidence-based training on the dynamics of male victimization, domestic abuse coercive control patterns targeting men, and male responses to trauma

Recommendation 6: Robust Enforcement of Privacy Safeguards.

Ensure that the mechanisms regulating access to complainants' private information apply strictly and equitably to male victims, safeguarding their therapeutic and medical records from speculative "fishing expeditions" by defense counsel.

Special Measures and Protection from Direct Cross-Examination

Special measures (e.g., screens, live video links) are often under-utilized by male victims due to internalised pressure to appear "strong" or a lack of proactive offers from witness support services.

Male victims experience high rates of PTSD, depression, anxiety, substance misuse, social isolation, and suicidal ideation. They can experience uniquely gendered barriers to seeking and securing justice, particularly when their partner is female and has been emboldened to weaponize state enforcement systems.

Links between CMS errors, economic abuse and suicide highlights how female perpetrators in particular can weaponize and exploit state enforcement systems including social services, police and courts against the male victim.⁶ Research highlights this as a particularly effective and gender-specific form of abuse against men, especially when systems are impacted by sex bias and default perceptions of men as presumed perpetrators and / or neglectful parents.⁷

The Bill introduces strict new statutory protections to prohibit defendants accused of hate crimes from directly questioning complainants in court. The extension of protections to witnesses in hate-crime aggravated offences must recognize that vulnerable men, including disabled, elderly, BAME, gay, bisexual, and transgender male victims of domestic or sexual abuse can face unique intersectional challenges or threats of intimidation.

Recommendation 7: Proactive Opt-Out System:

Implement a presumption of vulnerability or a proactive "opt-out" framework for special measures for all victims of domestic abuse and sexual offences, ensuring male victims do not have to explicitly request or justify their need for protection.

Recommendation 8: Standardized Court Support

Ensure court witness services are systematically trained to recognize signs of trauma and intimidation in male witnesses, who may display distress differently than female counterparts.

⁶ DWP. (2023). [Independent review of the Child Maintenance Service response to domestic abuse..](#)

⁷ Systematic reviews and qualitative studies identify barriers such as stigma, invisibility of male victims in services (many of which are women-focused), fear of disclosure, and negative responses from professionals (e.g., being turned away, accused, or not taken seriously). Nearly half of male IPV victims in some U.S. data who contacted domestic violence agencies were told support was only for women; over 40% were accused of being abusers. See: Hines (2025): [Male victims of intimate partner violence: Insights from twenty years of research.](#)

APPENDIX 1 - THE DUTY TO COMBAT SEX DISCRIMINATION

We urge all Northern Ireland Executive Ministers, Members of the Legislative Assembly and Department Officials to be mindful of their statutory duty to combat sex discrimination and promote equality of opportunity between women and men.

Domestic and sexual abuse are grave violations of human rights, against which victims have a legal right to protection and redress through the courts. They can involve the breach of a number of rights protected by [The Human Rights Act 1998](#), most particularly:

- [Article 2](#) - the right to life;
- [Article 3](#) - the right not to be tortured / subject to degrading treatment;
- [Article 8](#) - the right to respect for private and family life;
- [Article 14](#) - the right to be free from discrimination.

[Sex discrimination](#) in service provision and public policy has been illegal in Northern Ireland since the 1970's.

[Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998](#) requires public authorities to show due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between nine equality grounds, including between men and women.

Public authorities must also address the intersecting needs and experiences of people with more than one protected characteristic. For example, the provision of accessible and equitable support services for older men with disabilities experiencing domestic abuse, or young men from an ethnic minority background at risk of forced marriage.

[The NI Victims Charter 2015](#) establishes that women and men are entitled to be recognised and treated in a respectful, dignified, courteous, sensitive, tailored, professional and non-discriminatory manner by the service providers.

[The European Convention of Human Rights](#); [UN Conventions on both the Rights of the Child](#), and [Rights of People with Disabilities](#); [The Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children Against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse](#) and [The EU Victims Directive](#) all contain articles asserting protection from discrimination due to personal characteristics. Even [The Istanbul Convention](#) encourages State Parties to apply the Convention to all victims of domestic violence, including male children.