



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland



Shared Island
Dialogues

Shared Island Dialogue Series:

Tackling Gender Based Violence and Abuse



Dialogue Report

Introduction

The Shared Island Dialogue series was [launched](#) by An Taoiseach Micheál Martin TD on 22 October 2020 as part of the Government's Shared Island Initiative to foster constructive and inclusive civic dialogue on all aspects of a shared future on the island underpinned by the Good Friday Agreement.

The Dialogue Series brings people together from across the island to discuss key concerns for the future, opportunities for cross learning and understanding and harnessing the full potential of cooperation through the framework of the Good Friday Agreement.

The Dialogues actively seek a broad range of perspectives and experiences from civil society on the island and the inclusion of voices that have been under-represented in the Peace Process, including women, young people and ethnic minority communities on the island.

Previous Dialogues have focused on themes including New Generations and New Voices on the Good Friday Agreement; climate and environment; civil society cooperation; equality issues; economic recovery on the island; health cooperation; the future of education; tourism; sport; rural and community development; identities; and arts and culture. Reports and videos from previous Dialogues are available online [here](#).

The key themes from the second year of the Dialogue series were also in the report: *"Shared Island initiative report 2022: Action on a shared future for all communities"*, which can be read [here](#).

This Shared Island Dialogue took place on 4 November 2022 in Eureka House, Kells, Co Meath on the theme '[Tackling Gender Based Violence and Abuse](#)', with over 100 people joining this hybrid event in person and online.

[Minister for Justice Helen McEntee TD](#) and [Alliance Party Leader and former Minister of Justice Naomi Long MLA](#), participated in the event, delivering addresses and participating in a [Q&A discussion](#) with moderator, RTÉ journalist, Katie Hannon. Award-winning writer Louise O'Neill also delivered a guest address.

The Dialogue featured two panel discussions which addressed the topics of [Prevention and changing societal attitudes](#) and [Supporting the victim](#), respectively exploring North/South and East/West perspectives on eradication of the social and cultural norms that underpin and contribute to gender-based violence and on a victim/survivor-centred approach.

Discussion at the Dialogue was focused on how to enhance, develop and deepen all aspects of North/South cooperation in tackling the gender-based violence and abuse.

The Shared Island Dialogue series is organised by the Shared Island unit in the Department of the Taoiseach working with the Department of Foreign Affairs, other relevant Government Departments and Agencies and in consultation with civil society stakeholders across the island of Ireland.

Further information on the Shared Island Dialogue series including videos of the plenary sessions is available at [gov.ie](#).

Report: Tackling Gender-Based Violence and Abuse

Summary

Over the course of the Dialogue a number of key themes emerged from the discussions that took place:

- **The urgency and the scale of change required was repeatedly highlighted.** There is a need for **whole-of-society, systematic, cultural, attitudinal change**, specifically around the justice system, education, victim-centred services and more generally to how women are treated in society. **Cultural, institutional and structural misogyny and patriarchy must be recognised and addressed**; men too must be champions for change. While acknowledging positive developments such as the new and in-development DSGBV Strategies South and North respectively, as well as recent public conversations in relation to #MeToo and the Belfast Rape Trial, all speakers insisted that **we need more action now**.
- **Victims need to be at the heart of service and process design.** The negative impacts of the justice system on victims, such as significant processing delays, experience of victim shaming, use of rape myths in court, have resulted in **a lack of confidence**. Victims need to be empowered, supported and treated with empathy (for example through Sexual Offence Legal Advisors (SOLAs)) **to ensure a better victim journey, reduce attrition rates and achieve best evidence for convictions**.
- **Inclusive, mandatory, consent-centred sexual education is key** to prevention, unlearning cultural misogyny, and enabling attitude change on a whole-of-society level. Specifically, there is a **need to ensure front-line service providers, including the Gardaí and the PSNI, as well as professionals in the justice system such as judges and barristers are adequately trained** to counter unconscious bias and deliver victim-sensitive services/processes.
- **Increased funding is necessary** as services are being stretched thin, North and South, in response to increased demands. While the recent and ongoing development of new DSGBV strategies North and South are welcome, without adequate resourcing nothing will change. **Funding is also a sign of political commitment and prioritisation of the issue**.
- Certain cohorts such as LGBTQ+, migrants, those with disabilities and others are far less visible, with a consequent risk that their needs may not be addressed by services/policy interventions; **there needs to be a full picture of the intersectionality of victims. Migrant and other minority communities need to be reached out to and included** to ensure awareness of and access to services for all, while **service providers must be trained in cultural sensitivity**. The **experiences of children** of gender-based violence must also be addressed and considered.
- **While it is clear that change is needed urgently across the island, equally there has been progress on different fronts across both jurisdictions, with significant opportunities for cross-border learning and cooperation.** Although there are some differences of context, there are a lot of broad similarities, including around societal attitudes North and South. **There is support for further all-island cooperation and a desire for laws and systems to coincide to ensure that women and girls feel safe wherever they may be on the island.**

Ministerial Contribution

Shared Island Dialogue on Tackling Gender-Based Violence and Abuse

- In her [address](#), Minister for Justice Helen McEntee TD, welcomed attendees and the participation also of Naomi Long MLA, noting that this is the first time that government and civil society, North and South, have gathered to look at how to meet the urgent societal challenge of ending gender-based violence and abuse. The Minister referred to her strong cooperation with Naomi Long in recent years in her role as NI Minister of Justice, including on tackling gender-based violence.
- Minister McEntee referenced that the Government's Shared Island initiative is founded on the Good Friday Agreement, which affirms the right to equal opportunity regardless of class, creed, disability, gender or ethnicity; and, the right of women to full and equal political participation as well as the pivotal principle of respect as enshrined within the Agreement as an intrinsic right of everybody as individuals in the community regardless of gender identity, community, sexuality. **'Accordingly, ending gender-based violence falls [...] within the vision and commitment of the agreement'.**
- As well as acknowledging the essential work of organisations across the sector, as champions in the fight against gender-based violence, Minister McEntee acknowledged the work of the All-Island Women's Forum, the first report of which highlighted the need to focus on ending violence against women and girls across the island.
- Minister McEntee stressed that the Government prioritises this issue on an international level also, referencing recent work through the Council of Europe, resulting in the adoption of the Dublin Declaration on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, with 38 of the 46 EU member states supporting it.
- Minister McEntee discussed the recently launched Zero Tolerance, the Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence, which is a whole of Government, whole of society strategy which seeks to change attitudes and social norms, to bring about widespread systematic change. Enabled by the implementation plan containing 144 detailed actions, Zero Tolerance will:
 - Address the specific role of men and boys in preventing violence against women
 - Support victims with compassion
 - Ensure greater education and awareness to change attitudes
 - Ensure effective training for all relevant professionals who come into contact with victims
 - Enhancing the judiciary system with specialist judges
 - Establish a statutory DSGBV agency to drive this work
- Additionally, new laws around stalking and non-fatal strangulation are being introduced, and the maximum sentence for assault causing harm is being increased.
- Noting that new offences have already been introduced in the North to positive impact, the Minister expressed a desire to see similar laws across both jurisdictions in this area to ensure that people have access to the same level of supports North and South.
- However, while criminal justice reform is essential and necessary, equally, there also needs to be a focus on changing societal behaviours and attitudes. **"If we are not focusing on the preventive side of things, then we are really failing current victims, survivors and future victims".**

Contribution by Alliance Party leader, Naomi Long MLA

- In her [address](#), Alliance Party Leader, Naomi Long MLA discussed how she had prioritised tackling gender-based violence in her role as Northern Ireland Minister of Justice.
- Noting recent high-profile cases that have sparked conversations on misogyny, sexual violence, consent and rape myths, as well as the vulnerability of women both in their daily lives and in their interactions with the justice system, Ms. Long **cited the need to deal with the root causes of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence on a whole of societal level**. A strategy to tackle male violence against women and girls is currently being co-designed by the Executive Office for this purpose, building on ongoing work.
- Other progress in NI, includes the recently launched PSNI violence against women and girls strategy which focuses on pursuing perpetrators, supporting victims and creating safer spaces as well as challenging attitudes and improving standards within the police service itself, as well as new legislation brought in following the Gillen Report on domestic abuse, stalking, sexual offences, trafficking victims, sharing intimate images and non-fatal strangulation. There is a requirement for training and raising awareness among Justice partners in new offences. A public awareness campaign is also being developed aimed at challenging societal attitudes and behaviours that effectively perpetuate or facilitate gender-based violence.
- Naomi Long also affirmed the **need to better support victims**, in terms of services and in the ordeal they face as witnesses in criminal court proceedings. Sexual offences legal advisors, a victims of crime commissioner designate and other provisions to support victims have been progressed, and the Gillen Training Group is working towards a more trauma informed Justice system.
- Ms Long also discussed **the importance of language**, which is often gendered with regards offenses around image sharing, noting how the devastating and life-changing impact of these violations can often be dismissed as a joke. Additionally, Naomi noted that since the implementation of the stalking offense legislation in Northern Ireland, cases have risen exponentially, suggesting that having an offence to associate with the issue has given a voice to victims to report it, as well as enabling the police to address it more directly. However, the resourcing to respond to that need is a further challenge.
- Ms. Long detailed the **considerable cross-border engagement between the two Departments of Justice** on gender-based violence issues, primarily through experience-sharing under the inter-governmental agreement, and with policy and operational cooperation also aimed at making the island a safer place for women and girls. The cross-border dimension is also important with regards certain offences, such as domestic abuse and stalking, which include extra-territorial clauses.
- While acknowledging the real progress made to date as a result of both the efforts of activists as well as whole-of-society momentum, Naomi underscored the need for more work, to deliver **‘not just better law and policy, but a sea change in how women are treated on this island’**. Given the continued prevalence of violence and abuse against women, we need to urgently tackle this issue, **‘the time to act is now’**.
- Finally, Naomi Long reflected on the **challenges posed by ongoing political instability** and the recurrent absence of the Executive in NI which has already significantly delayed urgently required change (such as the coercive control offence), hinders north/south cooperation due to lack of ministerial leadership, and restricts funding for important new projects. **The current political stalemate poses a real risk to necessary reform**.

Guest Contribution

The Dialogue featured a guest contribution from award-winning writer Louise O'Neill. Louise spoke of her research into sexual violence and domestic abuse/coercive control when writing her novels *Asking for It* (2015) and *After the Silence* (2020) respectively, describing how survivors often feel failed by the judicial system and focusing specifically on the importance of education both in schools and across the judicial system in tackling this societal issue.

Some of the key points of this address included:

- Louise discussed the real-life inspiration behind *Asking for It*, specifically citing cases from the USA as well as Irish cases such as Listowel Rape Case 2009 and Slane Girl, as emblematic of rape culture. Shocked by her further research into the judicial process – as experienced by victims – and after speaking to survivors, Louise chose to end *Asking for It* with Emma – the victim of a brutal gang rape – deciding to withdraw her claim, on the basis that **'that was the only ending that felt truthful'**.
- Published in 2015, the stage adaptation of *Asking for It* premiered in 2019, with an educational programme developed alongside, for schools to discuss issues raised in the novel. Before seeing the play, students from girls and boys' schools engaged in victim blaming; after seeing the play, the same students were so moved, not only were they better able to understand the victim's perspective, but they also wanted more guidance on consent.
- **'Nothing will change without education'**, Louise spoke about the importance of a mandatory, comprehensive, inclusive, consent-based sex education programme from age 4 to 18, noting both the shortcomings of sex education for her generation, including the lack of teaching around consent, and that still today sex education in secondary schools is lacking, with young people being failed.
- Louise outlined that mandatory sex education would of course be age-appropriate throughout school, but also that sex education needs to go beyond schools, referencing the need for more professional training in relevant sectors, including the judicial system.
- In researching her novel, *After the Silence*, working with the West Cork women against violence project, Louise spoke to service users who felt failed by the judicial system. There were too many examples of victims not only being let down by the courts, but of barristers and judges displaying outdated and effectively misogynistic behaviour. **"A system is only as good as the people in it. And when those people from the police and the solicitors to the judges and that jury of your peers have all been raised in misogynistic society that normalises gendered violence against women, why would we assume that such a system would be in any way functional."**
- Louise discussed drink driving as an example of how widespread social change can happen within a generation, and how this is what we should be striving for with misogyny, through education, funding, awareness campaigns and public policy.
- "It feels like a fantasy", Louise spoke about how the fact that eradicating sexual violence in Ireland sounds unrealistic only speaks to how normalised gender-based violence is. Noting the decades spent by activists in the field campaigning for this issue, Louise spoke powerfully of the urgency of change, the need for whole-of-society, cross political buy-in and to move from conversation to action. **"There has to be movement: there has to be action. And it needs to happen now"**.

Panel 1: Prevention and changing societal attitudes

Key Messages:

This panel was moderated by Katie Hannon, and had the following panellists

- Noeline Blackwell, CEO, Dublin Rape Crisis Centre
- Elaine Crory, Advocacy and Policy Co-Ordinator, Women's Resource & Development Agency
- Sarah Mason, CEO, Women's Aid NI
- Sean Cooke, CEO, Men's Development Network
- Dr Jennifer Okeke, Anti-Trafficking Coordinator, Immigrant Council of Ireland

This discussion is available online and can be watched back [here](#)

Key Themes of the discussion:

- The panel discussed gender-based violence in relation to wider **themes of gender equality and respect**. Changing attitudes is a slow and lengthy process; less than 50 years ago women were considered property or 'chattel'.
- **Education - specifically preventative education** – is **key to eliminating gender-based violence**, by tackling the cultural and societal attitudes at the root of the problem. Preventative education is necessary not just in schools, but also in families, sports clubs and other community settings.
- The panel discussed the **Gillen Review**, which was welcomed in Northern Ireland, looking beyond Britain and Ireland **and taking best practice around the world**, for the basis of its 250 recommendations.
- There are additional **barriers and cultural issues that affect migrant women**, who may also not be aware of their rights. It is important that **awareness campaigns that seek to reach migrant and minority communities include these communities** in early planning stages. As reaching migrant women through traditional campaigns is often not effective, campaigns could engage with these communities through churches and Mosques and other areas where communities congregate.
- The panel heard that a critical aspect of the **Men's Development Network** is about developing male allies. While we need to acknowledge that the majority of violence in society is perpetrated by men against women or men against men, **it's not about indicting all men, but inviting men to be advocates for change**. Men who are in positions of power must advocate for equality and champion ending gender-based violence. Conversations about male privilege (or other forms of privilege) must be inclusive rather than accusatory, to enable people to reflect on their privilege without being shunned.
- **Enabling victims to speak out is crucial**; recent events such as #MeToo and the Belfast Rape Case have changed the conversation around sexual violence by prompting victims to speak about their experiences. The panel reflected that arts programmes can empower victims' voices and be a powerful educational tool.
- The panel considered the **inclusion of children's experiences** within the Gillen Report as important, noting that children experience the court system as well as experiencing or witnessing abuse in the home. Women's Aid NI has a lot of children who come into contact with its services along with their mothers, and places the voice of women and children at the heart of their strategies.
- The panel also discussed **the importance of identifying structural causes, specifically patriarchy**. To change behaviours, problems need to be identified and called-out so they can be addressed, however there is a reluctance to talk about sensitive topics, in particular the fact of patriarchy. One of the major problems is the tendency to view gender-based violence as a private issue, not

a political issue. But **patriarchy is a political structure** related to power and the consequences of terms of gender-based violence and abuse will not be fully resolved without change at this political-societal level.

- The **ground-breaking impact of social media** was discussed as exemplified by the **#MeToo** movement, which enabled victims typically ignored by traditional media to speak out en masse, with huge impact. However, online platforms have a bigger role to play in creating online safe spaces, with online abuse and intimidation of women, both in public and private spheres, an endemic problem.
- The **difficulties in coming forward and speaking out** both in relation to personal experiences and general inequalities and abuses were acknowledged. There is a disconnect in society that needs to be addressed; almost half the population is insufficiently aware how these issues manifest and impact women and girls. This speaks to the need for greater education and public discussion.
- In order to challenge beliefs that domestic and gender-based abuse is natural, **a strong robust evidence base is needed**. As policy needs to be evidence-based and research-informed, the significant informational and data gaps, particularly in Northern Ireland (for example around the coercion of young girls) poses a huge challenge.
- **Funding is a key issue**, with increased demand and existing services and organisations across the sector stretched thin.
- **North-South cooperation is particularly important in the area of human trafficking**. Similar and coordinated approaches are crucial to ensuring perpetrators are stopped.
- **Lack of will, in particular, lack of sustained political will, as needed in both jurisdictions**, was cited as a major barrier to effectively working together to address gender-based violence.

Panel Discussion 2: Supporting the victim

Key Messages:

This panel was also moderated by Katie Hannon and had the following panellists:

- Marie Brown, Director, Foyle Family Justice Centre
- Louise Kennedy, Policy & Communications Manager, Victim Support NI
- Mary McDermott, CEO, Safe Ireland
- Detective Chief Superintendent Colm Noonan, Garda National Protective Services Bureau
- Aisling Playford, Policy and Advocacy Manager, Rainbow NI

This panel is available online and can be watched back [here](#).

Key themes that emerged from the discussion included:

- **The importance of education** was discussed extensively throughout this panel - education around terminology, education for children, education for adults around consent, and education for first responders.
- The panel also discussed **patriarchal and sexist ideology**, and the use of both sexuality and social or religious mores as a form of control. New patriarchies and new forms of sexism are emerging; there is a need to fully understand the nature of patriarchy, and the root of the problem. This can be linked back to the language we use around, and the conflation between sex, gender and sexuality.
- **The experience of support services North and South** was discussed. In the North, the impacts of a post-conflict society, the lack of a stable Executive to plan and address issues, and a relatively conservative stance of Ministers was seen to impact. Coercive control in communities was also raised as a particular factor in NI. Sexual and domestic violence needs to be addressed more effectively when there is a new Executive in place.
- **Underreporting by LGBTQ+ victims of domestic and sexual violence.** The invisibility of LGBTQI+ voices in discussions is evident including in education. A report of the experiences of LGBTQI+ children in post primary education found that nearly 66 per cent did not feel safe or welcomed in their school. Their identities need to be included in discussions around relationships and sex education. And an understanding that Domestic Violence can happen in any relationship, not just heterosexual relationships, needs to be reinforced. Trans women, migrant women and women with disabilities are also largely missing from the conversation.
- **The implications of the Belfast Rape Trial** was a discussion point in this panel. Despite the reform and progress being made under the Gillen review process, it was discussed how for some women, **the negative public commentary on the victim had created a lot of fear** about coming forward with their experiences. The Bearing Witness project, in which members of the public were asked to observe trials, highlighted lengthy delays and widespread use of rape myths, with inconsistency on whether or not these were challenged. Moreover, the Gillen review found that **the cases that experienced most delay were those involving minors**; and the impact of delays on young person's development can be very serious. The use of Sexual Offence Legal Advisors (SOLAs) was highlighted as a positive. Extending their use further would ensure that the victim's voice is better heard in a prosecutorial system that is very process driven.
- It is important that **police and other service providers have appropriate education to ensure that front line responders are equipped to support the victims** who have taken the step to reach out

to them and assess any risks. Consistency of services across both rural and urban areas is also an important factor.

- **Training in cultural sensitivities for frontline responders is necessary**, with experiences of lack of empathy from police for women of colour highlighted. **Empathy and compassion** help make victims' experience less traumatic and can assist in achieving best evidence. A change in the culture of organisations' thinking needs to come from the top down and be taken seriously – not just for police but all relevant agencies.
- Panel members noted that from a victim support perspective, **the rehabilitation of offenders is extremely important**. Victims' feedback is that what they really want is for no one else to have to go through it again. There is a need to focus on rehabilitation, as just seeing justice as being punitive will not get to the crux of the problem and there will continue to be victims.
- **Cross-border cooperation to identify and assess the risk posed by offenders** was outlined. There are statutory structures to monitor sex offenders and while the same basis is not there for domestic offenders, both police forces work very closely together to properly assess risk and support the victim and the offender in the rehabilitation space.
- We **need to have a comprehensive understanding of the intersectionality of victims**. There is a lot of information but no collective bringing all of the research together. There is a need to know how many victims are living with a disability, how many are women from a migrant background, how many of are lesbian or bisexual or trans women or non-binary individuals? There is also a need to more **conscious of how children and young people are being consumed by social media**. To make a real change in the toxic negative space created online, there is a need to have online providers taking more responsibility.
- The need to **include victims in the co-design of systems** was also highlighted.

