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**Call for submissions by the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women on COVID-19 and the increase of domestic violence against women**

**30 June 2020**

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# **Women’s Aid Information & Statistics**

**Who We Are**

Women’s Aid is the lead voluntary organisation in Northern Ireland addressing domestic and sexual violence and providing services for women and children. Women’s Aid exists to challenge attitudes and beliefs which perpetuate domestic violence. We work to promote healthy, non-abusive relationships.

**Our vision is the elimination of domestic and sexual violence**

**What We Do**

Women’s Aid supports all women and children affected by domestic violence. We work to help women and children be safe, to break free from the cycle of violence, and to rebuild their lives. Women’s Aid has nine local groups and one regional umbrella body covering the whole of Northern Ireland, and our wraparound services are available across Northern Ireland. Our core work includes:

* Refuge accommodation for women and their children suffering domestic violence.
* Support services to enable women affected by domestic and/or sexual violence to rebuild their lives and the lives of their children.
* Support services for children and young people who have experienced domestic violence.
* Preventative education programmes in schools and other settings.
* Educating and raising awareness among the public, media, police, courts, social services and other agencies of the impact of domestic and sexual violence.
* Advising and supporting other agencies in responding to domestic & sexual violence.
* Working in partnership with other agencies to ensure a joined-up response to domestic and sexual violence.

Throughout this response, the term “Women’s Aid” refers to the overall Women’s Aid movement in Northern Ireland, including our local groups and Women’s Aid Federation.

**Domestic & Sexual Violence in 2018-19: a year in numbers**

* **654** women and **421** children stayed in a Women’s Aid refuge.
* **49** pregnant women were supported in refuge and **159** pregnant women accessed outreach services.
* **10** babies were born to women in refuge.
* **6,308** women and **5,966** children accessed Women’s Aid outreach services, enabling them to get support while staying in their own homes.
* **704** women took part in programmes run by Women’s Aid, including our *Journey to Freedom*and *You and Me, Mum* programmes.
* We trained **161** teachers across **102** primary schools to deliver the *Helping Hands* preventative education programme.

**Domestic Violence in Northern Ireland: Trends**

* Domestic violence is a violation of Article 5 of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights – that “*no one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment*”.
* The *Stopping Domestic & Sexual Violence and Abuse Strategy* estimates the cost of domestic and sexual violence in Northern Ireland to be **£931 million**.
* UNICEF research released in 2006, showing per capita incidence, indicates that there are up to **32,000 children** and young people living with domestic violence in Northern Ireland.
* **69%** of all domestic abuse crimes were female and 31% were male. Of all offenders dealt with by police in 2018/19 in connection with domestic abuse crimes that resulted in an outcome, 86% were male and 12% were female. [[1]](#footnote-1)
* Victims of domestic abuse

**Crime Statistics 2018-19**

* Domestic Violence is a crime. Domestic abuse crimes **(31,682)** accounted for **16% of all crime** reported to the PSNI.
* There were two and a half times as many domestic abuse crimes as drug offences (**16,182** as opposed to **5,577**), and twice as many domestic abuse crimes as shoplifting offences (**6,773**).
* Police responded to a domestic incident **every 17 minutes** of every day of the year.
* Between 2018 – 2019, there were **4 murders** with a domestic abuse motivation in Northern Ireland and all victims were female. In 2017 Northern Ireland there was the joint highest level of femicide in Europe per 100,000 people.

# **Introduction**

Women’s Aid welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence and information on Covid-19 and domestic violence against women in Norther Ireland to the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, Ms. Dubravka Šimonović. There has been a marked increase in domestic abuse rates across Northern Ireland since the beginning of lockdown on 23rd March 2020 and our organisation appreciates all effort to highlight this gender-based harm internationally. Domestic abuse is another way in which women have been disproportionately impacted by Covid-19 and it is integral to acknowledge that in order to address this issue.

Our thanks to Northern Ireland Women’s European Platform (NIWEP) for their administrative support around the submission of this document. NIWEP is a membership organisation of women’s NGOs in Northern Ireland, working to ensure the voice of women in Northern Ireland is heard at the national and international level. Established as the Northern Ireland link to the European Women’s Lobby, the EU’s expert body on women’s rights and gender equality, NIWEP also has special consultative status with the UN. NIWEP’s core objectives involve raising awareness and promoting implementation of key international human rights treaties and initiatives, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Another key role for NIWEP is ensuring women and girls are engaged in policy and decision making, as well as promoting gender responsive policy and decision making at local, regional and national level taking account of the state’s international obligations.

This submission will be structured around the eleven questions outlined by the Special Rapporteur. Some questions do not fall under the expertise of our organisation and as a result have been left out of the submission.

# **Submission Evidence**

* + - 1. **To what extent has there been an increase of violence against women, especially domestic violence in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns? Please provide all available data on the increase of violence against women, including domestic violence and femicides, registered during the COVID-19 crisis.**

Since the beginning of the lockdown as a result of Covid-19 there has been a marked increase in calls to the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) in relation to domestic abuse. The PSNI recorded 2000 calls in the first three weeks of lockdown and have noted a 10% increase in calls per week[[2]](#footnote-2). The PSNI have produced a graph tracking the increase in calls in relation to domestic abuse per week compared to the same period last year. Please see the table below for information published 23rd June 2020[[3]](#footnote-3):

The regional 24hr Domestic and Sexual Abuse Helpline (managed by NEXUS NI) reported a 40% increase in calls at the beginning of the lockdown. Women’s Aid websites have seen higher traffic, with Belfast and Lisburn Women’s Aid identifying a 27% increase in traffic to their website specifically. Women’s Aid services have spoken about the increase in demand for services expected to increase after lockdown, as society begins to recover from the effects of the lockdown.

The above PSNI statistics have yet to be broken down by gender, this is usually part of the PSNI’s annual trends reports. However, the breakdown of victims of domestic abuse crimes by gender in Northern Ireland in 2018/19 was 69% female, 31% male, with males accounting for 86% of perpetrators. Therefore, if we assume a similar breakdown for the increased statistics, women are disproportionately the victims of domestic abuse in NI. There have also sadly been three homicides with a domestic motivation since lockdown began. All three victims were women and all three were murdered by a male partner or family member[[4]](#footnote-4). These women were murdered in March and April, during lockdown. For comparison there were 4 murders with a domestic motivation in Northern Ireland in total in 2018/19.

* + - 1. **Are helplines run by Government and/or civil society available? Has there been an increase in the number of calls in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?**

The 24 Hour Domestic and Sexual Abuse Helpline in government funded and managed by civil society organisation Nexus NI[[5]](#footnote-5). The funding is provided by Department of Justice, Department of Health and Department for Communities. It is a gender-neutral service. They have reported a 40% increase in calls during the March period of lockdown.

* + - 1. **Can women victims of domestic violence be exempted from restrictive measures to stay at home in isolation if they face domestic violence?**

Emergency legislation introduced at the beginning of lockdown, known as the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020, allows people to leave their homes to access critical public services including services provided to victims of crime[[6]](#footnote-6). The Justice Minister Naomi Long also stated publicly that victims of domestic abuse were not required to stay at home and would not be penalised for doing so[[7]](#footnote-7).

It should be noted that at the beginning of lockdown advice for women experiencing domestic abuse was not overly clear. It was after the marked spike in domestic abuse calls to the PSNI and an increased discourse on domestic abuse and violence against women by the women’s sector and media that advice was clarified.

It is also important to note here that coercive control is not yet a crime in Northern Ireland. The legislation meant to criminalise this mode of domestic abuse is currently going through our local Assembly but has not yet been enacted. It is already difficult for victims and survivors to process what they have been through as a result of abuse, it is even more difficult to process this when there is no legal precedent to criminalise what has been done to you. We would argue that this compounded confusion around what constitutes domestic abuse in Northern Ireland and made it difficult for victims to recognise that they were victims and could break lockdown restrictions.

However, it should be recognised that Department of Justice generated a social media campaign to promote the exemption from restrictions for victims of domestic abuse under lockdown, using their platforms to highlight civil society services that were still operational and available for support for victims through the pandemic.

* + - 1. **Are shelters open and available? Are there any alternatives to shelters available if they are closed or without sufficient capacity?**

Women’s Aid provides refuge accommodation for women and children experiencing domestic abuse in Northern Ireland. Our 9 local Women’s Aid groups manage 12 refuges across NI. Throughout lockdown our refuges have been open but operating slightly differently to account for the pandemic. Our groups created “crash pads” where women and children could go in an emergency. These crash pads where independent units where families could self-isolate, keeping themselves and other service users safe. They would stay for 48 hours while the NI Housing Executive arranged suitable accommodation and then the units where cleaned down ready for the next service user.

There was also an agreement across the UK that victims of domestic abuse could be housed in hotels through lockdown. Ours and other organisations have been critical of this programme as it fails to provide the “wrap around service” of refuge that benefits service users. Women who have just left abusive situations need support, placing them in hotels, isolated from family and friends and other support networks is not a safe way to leave abusive relationships. This is particularly evident when one examines statistics around femicide in the UK, which identify that a woman is most at risk of being murdered by her male partner just after she leaves or as she begins to take steps to leave him. The Femicide Census 2019 identifies that 41% of women murdered by male partners or ex partners that year had either separated or taken steps to separate from him[[8]](#footnote-8). These wrap around services are integral to ensuring that women who have left abusive relationships remain safe in protected addresses.

Northern Ireland has an issue with a lack of social housing, which increases pressure on refuge to house women who are ready to move on from our services for longer than is necessary. This is an issue generally, for example, in 2018/19 381 women could not avail of refuge because they were full[[9]](#footnote-9). However, this issue has been further highlighted by the Covid-19 crisis as many of our refuges were full and struggled to accept women who were fleeing abuse at this time. We also anticipate an increased need for service provision post-lockdown as women start to process the abuse they have experienced. This will place further strain on refuge provision and the issue of social housing will further impact on that.

* + - 1. **Are protection orders available and accessible in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?**

In Northern Ireland, victims of domestic abuse can apply for two types of protection orders, Non-Molestation Orders and Occupation Orders. Courts have stayed open to facilitate the application and receipt of both of these orders.

While these protection orders are still available to apply for and get, there have been some issues around this process. Only four courts were open to grant these applications. There was also issues around clarity in relation to extensions of existing orders. In provisional figures for applications for Non-Molestation and Occupation Orders released by DoJ, there has been an overall 3% increase in applications for non-molestations orders between 23rd March and 22nd May 2020 compared with the same period in 2019. A 3% increase in applications for protection orders does not match the overall 10% increase in domestic abuse reports recorded by PSNI. This information also indicates that 24%, roughly 1 in 4, applications for non-molestation orders made during Covid-19 lockdown have been refused or dismissed. During the same period in 2019, 13% of applications were refused or dismissed. This shows a significant increase in applications being refused during Covid-19. We know that reports of domestic abuse have increased but this has not been reflected in applications for protective orders while there has been a noticeable increase in applications that our received being refused.

Northern Ireland remains the only area of the UK without anti-stalking legislation, so victims remain less protected here under the best of circumstances. The implications of this are heightened due to the pandemic. Victims of stalking in NI can seek protection through Protection from Harassment Orders but these do not have the same legal protections as Stalking Protection Orders available in England and Wales.

* + - 1. **What are the impacts on women's access to justice? Are courts open and providing protection and decisions in cases of domestic violence?**

Guidance for courts was issued by the Lord Chief Justice’s office which identified that courts would remain open for urgent matters which would typically include “the immediate liberty, health, safety and wellbeing of individuals”[[10]](#footnote-10). This guidance includes urgent matters concerning domestic abuse.

* + - 1. **Non Applicable to this organisation.**
			2. **Please provide examples of obstacles encountered to prevent and combat domestic violence during the COVID-19 lockdowns.**

Issues discussed above concerning the lack of immediately clear guidance around leaving lockdown in circumstances of domestic abuse was an issue for women experiencing domestic abuse. Arguably this advice should have been made clear from the beginning of lockdown instead of coming after pressure from civil society. It is our position that this stems from Northern Ireland’s gender-neutral approach to policy making, which fails to take into consideration the impact of gender. Domestic abuse is a form of gender-based violence which disproportionately happens to women because they are women. Any response to crisis and subsequent crisis recovery plans must use a gendered lens to ascertain how emergency measures will impact upon marginalised groups. If this had been done from the beginning of lockdown a lot of these issues could have been addressed sooner and with more clarity.

This also extends to an issue Women’s Aid had around key worker status at the beginning of lockdown. Our support staff provide a vital service to many women and children and yet it took over a week to clarify their status as key workers, which was important to establish so that they could access childcare, leave their homes for work, use public transport etc. This issue was clarified in England and Wales significantly faster when their Domestic Abuse Commissioner stepped in, there is not currently an equivalent role in NI that could have provided similar assistance.

As previously mentioned, Northern Ireland is still without coercive control and domestic abuse legislation needed to criminalise abusive behaviour. Although the legislation meant to address this is currently being scrutinised by our Assembly, we remain the only part of the United Kingdom and Ireland without these important provisions. This impacts on women who experience emotional abuse and coercive control generally, but it has further impacted on women living in Northern Ireland. Women who are experiencing this abuse in lockdown but are unaware that it is wrong because it is not technically a crime may not have known that they are legally allowed to leave the house under lockdown. It also limits what police can do to intervene.

As discussed above, a lack of social housing in Northern Ireland provides a consistent issue pertaining to domestic abuse. If there is no suitable housing for women and their children to move on to after refuge then refuges become backlogged and women in need of emergency accommodation cannot avail of our services. This issue has been further exasperated by Covid-19 lockdown as we see women in need of emergency accommodation but with nowhere to go.

Fears around being overheard making a call to police or to support services by a perpetrator at home have become more obvious because of lockdown. Women who are in danger at home or who need support cannot make these vital, and in some cases lifesaving, calls in lockdown because their abusive partners are always at home. This means that other methods of communication are vital to address this. The PSNI have a service to enable women to contact them silently by dialling 999 and then dialling 55. This will alert the police that you are in danger but cannot speak. Efforts were made during lockdown to publicise this service via social media. However, the success of these campaigns relies on women having access to the internet to see them, this may not be the case for many women including rural and older women and women living in poverty.

Covid-19 has impacted on all marginalised women experiencing domestic abuse. Disabled women, who are already twice as likely to experience domestic abuse than non-disabled women[[11]](#footnote-11), have potentially lost the assistance of outside carers and are now solely reliant on their partners. This increases the risk of domestic abuse and lowers the likelihood of detection from outside care staff. Women from minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland are less likely to have family support networks around them and have been further isolated because of lockdown. The impact of these issues on marginalised women must be considered when addressing any recovery plan post-lockdown.

There were a number of issues concerning child contact where a parent had been abusive that were not addressed. Child contact is a difficult issue for many women who have been victims of domestic abuse. Often an abuser will use children to continue to victimise their partner or ex-partner. As a result, many women do not have any contact with their abuser through this process. Instead they may use a contact centre or a third party me drop a child off with their parent and pick them up. This was made more difficult under lockdown as this third party is often a grandparent who was then considered vulnerable to Covid-19 and had to shield. Contact centres were closed because of lockdown and so many women had to confront their abusers. Furthermore, some women feared that their children would not be returned by their abusive partner to control them through their children. These issues made it difficult to combat the further victimisation of women who had left their abusive partners. This is further compounded by the perception of “parental alienation”, a concept which is often used to claim that a mother who has been abused by their partner is being obstructive to the relationship between a child and their abusive parent, when in reality the child is being used to revictimise the woman[[12]](#footnote-12).

* + - 1. **Please provide examples of good practices to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence and to combat other gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic by Governments.**

Northern Ireland’s government has set up safe spaces in Boots pharmacies where women can go and ask for help if they are experiencing domestic abuse. There are also “codewords” that they can say to alert staff to their situation. This is an example of good practice but is dependent on a woman being able to leave the house to go to the pharmacy and having access to transport to get there. It also does not account for women who are shielding because they are high risk.

The PSNI have started releasing monthly statistics on the amount of calls relating to domestic abuse during Covid-19. This allows us to better track the increase in domestic abuse. However, the data does not identify victims/perpetrators by gender so we cannot get a complete picture of the rates of violence against women.

Northern Ireland civil society benefits from a good working relationship with our devolved government more so than other parts of the UK. This has meant that various Departments have been able to link in with third sector organisations and utilise that expertise when responding to the pandemic.

As of 26th June 2020, the Department of Health announced £60k additional funding to Women’s Aid NI to help with the impact of Covid-19 on women experiencing domestic abuse[[13]](#footnote-13).

* + - 1. **Please provide examples of good practices to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence and to combat other gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic by NGOs and NHRIs or equality bodies.**

Women’s Aid groups in NI started a web chat service for women experiencing domestic abuse[[14]](#footnote-14). This service utilises written communication online through a website and allows service users to access support without having to call a service. This combats the communication issue of not being able to use the phone while stuck at home with an abusive partner. Our groups have also utilised Zoom to provide support services and group work to women who are at home. Our children’s workers are using a range of communication technology to reach children in our services to provide support to them during lockdown.

One Women’s Aid group set up an online survey to directly ask their service users what they needed. They asked what they were doing right and what they could be doing better to help women and children within their services.

Women’s Aid has consistently maintained a social media presence to promote key messages around services remaining open, women being able to leave home if they are experiencing domestic abuse and identifying key numbers to call in an emergency.

* + - 1. **Please send any additional information on the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on domestic violence against women not covered by the questions above.**

There has been an economic impact on domestic abuse service provisions by Covid-19. There is a cost that comes along with having to set up safety procedures to keep staff and service users safe during this pandemic, such as the purchase of screens, PPE and hand sanitising stations. There were cost incursions required to set up new methods of communications with service users and among staff teams, purchasing platforms like Zoom for example. There are projected costs to deal with as lockdown ends and there is an increase in demand for domestic abuse services as women begin to process the abuse that they have experienced. This will require additional money that could not have been projected.

Under emergency Covid-19 funding decisions, domestic abuse services in England and Wales were given £76m in additional emergency funding to deal with the increase demand for services through lockdown. This funding was part of the £750m emergency package for charities announced by the Treasury at the start of lockdown. The Treasury stated that, because Northern Ireland had received a Barnett Consequential allocation from the original £750m funding package, they were not entitled to any additional funding. While NI was allocated £20m in additional funding for charities on 8th April, DfC made the decision to allocate that funding by application. We believe that this funding should have been allocated based on need, not based on the capacity of a charity to prove need. Again, we must infer that gender-neutral policy making is responsible for oversights in how funding should be most effectively spent in order to mitigate the gendered impact of Covid-19 lockdown. There has clearly been a marked increase in domestic violence against women and that has put pressure on service provisions, especially services for women, and decisions regarding emergency funding should reflect that.

# **Conclusion**

There has been a clear increase in reports of domestic abuse as a result of Covid-19 and the resulting lockdown. Northern Ireland’s government has responded to that with legislation and guidance that allows women experiencing domestic abuse to leave their home without fear of legal ramifications and access justice through courts in matters of urgency. Government and civil society in NI have a good working relationship which has allowed for communication around problems facing the sector because of Covid-19 to be addressed. However, these issues needed to be addressed faster and with more clarity. Ultimately, the response to increases in reports of domestic abuse was hampered by a gender-neutral response to this crisis. It is our position that moving forward, any recovery plan must be assessed through a gendered lens in order to counter the disproportionately negative impact of this lockdown on women, particularly those subjected to increased violence as a result.

1. Findings from the PSNI Trends in Domestic Abuse Incidents and Crimes Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland 31 March 2019 N.B. “Adult” defined as aged 18 and over [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. BBCNI (2020) ‘Coronavirus: Three Domestic Killings Since Lockdown Began’ <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-52440662> > [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Police Service Northern Ireland (2020) ‘Domestic Abuse Calls Received by Police in Northern Ireland’ <<https://www.psni.police.uk/globalassets/inside-the-psni/our-statistics/domestic-abuse-statistics/covid-19/domestic-abuse-calls-to-23.06.20.pdf> > [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. BBCNI (2020) ‘Coronavirus: Three Domestic Killings Since Lockdown Began’ <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-52440662> >

See also <https://www.psni.police.uk/news/Latest-News/020420-man-charged-with-murder-of-82-year-old-woman-in-larne/> , <https://www.thejournal.ie/woman-39-dies-in-belfast-5082154-Apr2020/> , <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-52137716> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://dsahelpline.org/> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020, art 5(i)(iv) < <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisr/2020/55/regulation/5/made>> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/news/long-stay-home-does-not-mean-suffer-home> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The Femicide Census 2018 < <https://femicidescensus.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Femicide-Census-Report-on-2018-Femicides-.pdf>> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Women’s Aid Federation Annual Report 2018/19 <<http://www.womensaidni.org/assets/uploads/2020/01/A4-Womens-Aid-Annual-Report-2018-19.pdf>> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Lord Chief Justice (2020) ‘Coronavirus (Covid-19) Pandemic – Court Business Continuity Arrangements’ <<https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/news/coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic-court-business-continuity-arrangements>> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Women’s Aid Federation England ‘Support for Disabled Women’ < <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/the-survivors-handbook/the-survivors-handbook-disabled-women/>> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Women’s Aid Federation Northern Ireland ‘Parental Alienation Briefing’ <<https://www.womensaidni.org/parental-alienation-briefing/>> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Department of Health <<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/news/cross-government-response-tackling-domestic-and-sexual-abuse-during-covid-19-0>> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Belfast and Lisburn Women’s Aid ‘Launch of New Web Chat Service’ <<https://belfastwomensaid.org.uk/launch-of-new-web-chat-service/>> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)