

Response to:

Department of Justice consultation on the introduction of Domestic Homicide Reviews to Northern Ireland

28th September 2018

Contact:

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To Whom It May Concern,

The Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA) is a regional organisation operating across Northern Ireland, with a mission to advance women's equality and participation in society by working to transform political, economic, social and cultural conditions. The organisation was established in 1983 and focuses on working with women and community organisations located in disadvantaged and rural areas. WRDA is a membership organisation with over 190 members including women's groups, organizations and individual members.

Meeting with DOJ Officials

WRDA wishes to note our thanks to officials from DOJ who met face to face with policy and advocacy workers in the women's sector in September 2018 through the Women's Policy Group. This provided an excellent opportunity for us to better understand the proposals contained within the consultation and to highlight areas that we felt might need further attention. As a membership organisation that represents the views of many women in grassroots community groups and organisations and seeks to ensure their experiences and stories help shape policy making, we valued this opportunity to help shape such an important development in protecting women from violence.

We Welcome the Proposals as an Opportunity for Societal Change

As a lead organisation within the women's sector WRDA welcomes the proposals set out in the consultation document. As noted by the DOJ officials we met with, domestic homicide reviews have long been overdue in Northern Ireland and despite having been named as a priority action for over 6 years, they have only more recently had the resourcing necessary to bring about significant progress.

Our organisation has played a role in challenging the cultural myths surrounding violence against women and promoting greater understanding of what gender based violence and abuse looks like, and how misogyny and sexist assumptions create those myths. We are deeply concerned that the key messages influencing the public discourse on domestic violence and abuse are often laden with victim blaming myths, misunderstandings about perpetrator motivations or belittling the experiences of women who've been abused.

We're also extremely concerned about the performance of the criminal justice system when it comes to dealing with all types of gender based violence including domestic abuse which overwhelmingly affects women. The adversarial nature of the criminal justice process may be necessary in order to ensure due process but it is a system that is not only failing to deliver safety and justice for many women but it also means that media reporting on domestic abuse, including homicides, tends to inaccurately caricature both perpetrators and victims. For example, perpetrators are often sympathetically perceived to be 'good men who snapped' when in fact the majority are coercive, violent abusers with the homicide being the culmination of years of abusive behaviour.

For this reason we believe that the introduction of domestic homicide reviews in Northern Ireland has the potential to radically change the public understanding of domestic violence by putting the victim and their children at the heart of the conversation, telling their story through their eyes. We commend the officials we met with for their careful consideration around how best to publish the reviews; the balance to be struck between full public disclosure of the report and the avoidance of unnecessary detail that invades the privacy of victims and their families. It is another unhelpful side-effect of the criminal justice process that certain details can be reported on in a way that is far from value neutral and which serves to perpetuate further the myths around how and why domestic abuse happens. We would urge the Department to continue to remain aware of the context into which published reviews will be released in order to engage in myth busting rather than inadvertently perpetuating them.

While the key purpose of domestic homicide reviews is to provide opportunities for organisational learning for all agencies involved in the prevention of such crimes and the protection of vulnerable people, we are confident that if done properly they can also generate huge learning for society more generally. WRDA welcomes this progress and the potential that it contains to prevent future deaths by changing the culture through accurate information and centering the victims' stories.

Endorsement of the Response by Women's Aid Federation

As the lead agency in our sector with expertise in domestic and sexual violence, WRDA has engaged in discussions with Women's Aid Federation NI and fed our views and concerns into their consultation response. We therefore wish to fully endorse the submission made by WAFNI submitted by their policy worker Louise Kennedy.

In particular we wish to reiterate:

- It is crucial that the DHR process remains victim centred and does not become a mere 'tick box exercise', only looking at whether agencies followed their policies. It should genuinely engage with the question of what might have made a difference in the responses of agencies, or the way their services are accessed if the victim/perpetrator/ their children did not have any contact with services.
- While we accept it is necessary to keep suicide outside the scope of the DHR mechanism while the system becomes established and the panel gain experience, we agree with WAFNI that it should eventually be included. We look forward to hearing more concrete plans as to how this exclusion is to be kept under review.
- We welcome the proposal for the community and voluntary sector to be part of the core panel membership. We recommend that every DHR panel should contain at least one expert on domestic violence with practical front-line experience. We welcome the reassurances from DOJ officials that the community and voluntary sector would have a strong 'challenge function' in relation to the panel.
- We are aware that organisations supporting rural and BME people are extremely stretched following cuts to funding and staffing. It would be useful to consult with organisations like Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN) and BME women's network and NICRE to ascertain the best means of ensuring diversity on

the panel and adequate representation of those issues when and where relevant. While the organisations themselves may not have the capacity to sit on a panel, they will certainly have important views as to how the voices of rural and BME women can be heard more effectively.

We look forward to the next step of the process and will be happy to work with officials in any way to support the progress of this important initiative.

Yours faithfully,

[redacted - personal information]

Women's Sector Lobbyist

On behalf of:

Women's Resource and Development Agency