Call for Evidence Response:

The Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill

By the Department of Justice

May 2026



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Response to Call for Evidence:
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INTRODUCTION

Men's Alliance Northern Ireland

Men's Alliance (NI) supports male victims and survivors of domestic abuse (DA). 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 can encounter when seeking help and the lack of Support Services available to them.

Domestic abuse is often described as '*gendered violence*' and '*overwhelmingly*' perpetrated by men. PSNI, NISRA and ONS data consistently report that one in three victims are male and yet research, advocacy and state interventions often centre exclusively on female victims. This means that men's experiences may be minimised or ignored.

The Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill

The Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill, introduced to the Northern Ireland Assembly in March 2026, aims to modernize the sentencing framework by establishing clear statutory principles like proportionality, fairness, and rehabilitation. It seeks to strengthen public confidence by ensuring sentences reflect the seriousness of crimes and the harm caused, including the introduction of "Charlotte's Law" for non-disclosure of victim remains and enhanced penalties for dangerous driving.

RESPONSE SUMMARY AND KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Bill contains important reforms to sentencing principles, suspended sentences, life sentence tariffs, sentence reviews, non-disclosure of victim remains, assaults on public workers, and sentencing aggravations (including for vulnerability and hostility), it presents a critical opportunity to ensure that non discrimination principles are hardwired into the criminal justice system.

Domestic abuse is not a gendered crime. The Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (NI) 2021 created a course-of-conduct offence that applies equally to all victims and perpetrators, irrespective of sex.

Male victims are significantly less likely than females to report abuse. Despite this, 1 in every three victims of DA that the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) come into contact with are male. Approximately 41% of domestic homicide victims in NI are male. Research indicates that when domestic homicides and estimated domestic abuse related suicides are considered together, as many as 58% of deaths where domestic abuse is a major factor are male, compared to 42% female

PSNI data shows a clear disparity in sanction rates: only 18.9% of DA crimes against men result in a sanction, compared to approximately 30.5% for women. PSNI data also indicates that 28% of perpetrators they encounter are female, despite this, only 9% of perpetrators convicted in NI courts are female. When female perpetrators are prosecuted, sentences are often lighter or non-custodial, reinforcing the perception that female violence is less serious.

Male victims face systemic disadvantages at every stage of the justice system: under-reporting driven by stigma; police reluctance to investigate or charge female perpetrators; prosecutorial and judicial bias rooted in outdated stereotypes; gendered vulnerabilities to false allegations and sentencing that fails to reflect the full seriousness of abuse against men. These disadvantages persist despite the gender-neutral framework of the 2021 Act and the PPS Policy for Prosecuting Cases of DA, which recognise male victims while noting that the majority of cases involve female victims.

We recommend that the following action is taken to address these systemic disadvantages:

- **Mandatory bias-training for sentencers.**
- **Explicit gender-neutral application of aggravations,**
- **Improved victim impact mechanisms for male victims,**
- **Data disaggregation by victim sex in all sentencing guidance.**

Without these changes, the Bill risks entrenching inequality rather than establishing a fair, evidence-based sentencing framework.

FULL RESPONSE TO THE DRAFT STRATEGY

1. Overview & Response Focus

This response addresses the Committee for Justice's Call for Evidence on the Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill, introduced by the Minister of Justice on 3 March 2026.

The Bill contains important reforms to sentencing principles, suspended sentences, life sentence tariffs, sentence reviews, non-disclosure of victim remains, assaults on public workers, and sentencing aggravations (including for vulnerability and hostility), it presents a critical opportunity to ensure that non discrimination principles are hardwired into the criminal justice system to ensure that the sentencing framework fully complies with equality and human rights law.

Domestic abuse (DA) is not a gendered crime in Northern Ireland law, and yet male victims and survivors face systemic disadvantages at every stage of the justice system.

A landmark study by QUB into male experiences of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) in NI concluded that the issue is **'*a significant public health issue which warrants immediate attention***', that Public Authorities, including the Department of Justice should act to support male victims and that the creation of an Executive task force would be 'invaluable'.[1]

This submission draws attention to these disadvantages and proposes targeted amendments and guidance linked to the Bill's provisions .

2. Prevalence of Domestic Abuse Against Male Victims in NI

PSNI statistics for 2024/25 record 18,453 DA crimes, with male victims accounting for 33%. Violence against the person comprised 86% of these.[2] Under-reporting is acute. ONS survey data indicates that men are 3 times less likely than women to report abuse.[3] Queen's University Belfast research (2024) found that more than half of male DA victims in NI do not disclose to anyone, citing stigma, fear of disbelief, and concerns about being labelled the perpetrator.

The level of under-reporting is further impacted by the limited services and support available to male victims arising from the NI Executive's uniquely sex segregated approach to service provision in this area.

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[1] Spikol et al (2025): Male Experiences of Intimate Partner Violence
[2] PSNI (2025): Domestic Abuse Incidents and Crimes
[3] Mankind Initiative (2023): Key Facts about Male Victims of Abuse.

Approximately 41% of domestic homicide victims in NI are male. Between November 2024 and October 2025, three DA-motivated homicides occurred involving male victims. Since 2020, 12 adult men and three male children have died in DA incidents, with five adult male murders occurring in the victim's own home.[4]

In Northern Ireland, males consistently account for three-quarters (75%–80%) of all registered suicide deaths. A significant portion of those are due to domestic abuse, issues around child contact, Child Maintenance payments and false allegations to Police, Social Service and Courts.[5]

Research undertaken by the Men's Alliance shows that when domestic homicides and estimated domestic abuse related suicides are considered together, as many as 58 percent of deaths where domestic abuse is a major factor are male, compared to 42 percent female.[6]

Male victims experience the same spectrum of coercive control, psychological, emotional, financial, and physical abuse as female victims. However, societal and institutional framing of DA as "gendered" (predominantly male-on-female) leads to minimisation of female-perpetrated abuse. Men report being laughed at by police, advised to "man up," or threatened with arrest when they disclose. False counter-allegations are a common tactic, often weaponised in family proceedings.

These patterns are not unique to NI but are exacerbated by local factors such as: limited male-specific services, training that historically prioritises female victims, and a post-2021 Act implementation focus that, while legally gender-neutral, has not translated into equitable outcomes in practice. The Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill must therefore explicitly address this evidence gap to prevent the legislation from inadvertently reinforcing systemic bias.

[4] Men's Alliance (2025): 58% 0f Deaths Relating to Domestic Abuse in NI are Men (and Other Realities).
[5] Ibid
[6] Ibid

3. Disadvantages in Reporting and Initial Police Response

The first point of contact with the justice system is often the most damaging for male victims. PSNI data shows a clear disparity in sanction rates: only 18.9% of DA crimes against men result in a sanction, compared to approximately 30.5% for women.[7] This gap persists despite the 2021 Act's emphasis on coercive control and the PSNI's adoption of a gender-neutral definition.

Male victims report routine disbelief: officers assume the man is the aggressor based on physical size or societal stereotypes ("men can't be victims"). Qualitative accounts describe officers refusing to take statements, suggesting couples counselling instead of criminal investigation, or arresting the male complainant when the female perpetrator self-reports first.

Research from the US Domestic Abuse Helpline (mirrored in NI experiences) shows 72% of male callers experienced court-system manipulation via false accusations.[8] This is not NI data and should not be treated as prevalence, but it illustrates a pattern frequently described by male victims and highlights the need for NI specific measurement of 'systems abuse' (e.g. misuse of allegations and protective orders in family proceedings).

The absence of male-specific risk assessment tools compounds this. While DASH (Domestic Abuse, Stalking and Harassment) risk assessments are used, training materials and guidance often default to female-victim templates. Male victims are less likely to be offered specialist DA officer support or referred to appropriate services.[9] Testimonies from service users indicate that when men do report, they frequently withdraw because of secondary victimisation by the system itself.[10]

These barriers directly undermine the Bill's sentencing aims. If cases never reach court due to poor initial response, the enhanced sentencing framework (Clauses 1–2) cannot be applied.

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[7] PSNI Domestic Abuse Incidents and Crimes in Northern Ireland 2004/05 to 2024/25.
[8] Dim, E. E. (2021). "Male Victims' Experiences With and Perceptions of the Criminal Justice Response to Intimate Partner Abuse," Journal of Family Violence.
[9] Bates, E. A., et al (2021). "What can we learn from Domestic Homicide Reviews with male victims?".
[10] Hine, B., et al. (2020). "'Men's Experiences of Domestic Violence and Abuse in the UK".

4. Prosecution and Court Process Disadvantages

The Public Prosecution Service (PPS) Policy for Prosecuting Cases of Domestic Abuse (2024) is progressive in recognising male victims but still frames DA primarily as male-perpetrated. Prosecution files involving male victims are more likely to be discontinued due to "evidential difficulties" or victim non-support—often because the male victim has been further traumatised or faces counter-allegations in family courts.[11]

Court bias is well-documented internationally and echoed in NI. Studies show male victims are not given a fair hearing; judges and magistrates apply gender stereotypes unconsciously ("surely he could have stopped it").[12] False allegations of abuse or child harm are used to discredit male complainants, particularly in linked family proceedings.[13] Special measures (available under the 2021 Act) are under-used for male victims because risk assessments default to female vulnerability.[14]

Conviction data for DA cases in NI (2023/24) shows 90.8% of convicted offenders are male, but this reflects charging decisions rather than true perpetration rates. When female perpetrators are prosecuted, sentences are often lighter or non-custodial, reinforcing the perception that female violence is less serious.[15]

Breaches of Article 8 residence and contact orders under the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 are treated as contempt of court (a criminal matter) yet are enforced inconsistently and ineffectively.

Enforcement applications are filed overwhelmingly by non-resident fathers against resident mothers. When breaches occur, the current system effectively shields the non-complying parent from meaningful sanction.

The Gillen Review (2017) described enforcement of contact orders as "a real difficulty" and noted that the contempt process is "cumbersome and ineffective". Between 2011–2014 only 22 defendants were convicted on any charge relating to breach of a children or family order. Repeat applications due to breaches are common; orders become "worthless" when courts "buckle every time their orders meet disobedience".[16]

The 2024 judicial working group was established precisely to revive these unimplemented recommendations. No substantive legislative action has followed.

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[11] PPS (2024): Policy for Prosecuting Cases of Domestic Abuse
[12] See: Ambrozewicz et al (2024): Ending the stigma of male domestic violence and abuse victims; Dim & Lysova (2021): Male Victims' Experiences & Perceptions of the Criminal Justice Response to IPV; and Spikol et al (2025): Male Experiences of Intimate Partner Violence
[13] William Collins (2020): False Allegations in the Family Courts
[14] See: MoJ (2020): Assessing Risk of Harm to Children and Parents in Private Law Children Cases and Abraham & Pearson (2024): An Exploration of Judgments of Gender in Bidirectional IPV
[15] DoJ (2025): Domestic Abuse Prosecutions, Convictions and Case Processing Time Statistics 2023/24
[16] Gillen (2017): Report into the Review of Civil and Family Justice in Northern Ireland

5. Sentencing Disparities and Opportunities in the Bill

Current sentencing in DA cases against male victims frequently fails to reflect harm. Suspended sentences (Clauses 3–14) are over-used for female perpetrators, while male victims report feeling that "*the system punished me twice*." Life-sentence tariffs (Clauses 18–19 and Schedule 3) already include aggravating factors for murders involving personal connection or coercive control under the 2021 Act, this is to be welcomed, but guidance must explicitly state these apply equally to victims of both sex.

The general sentencing principles in Clause 1 (punishment, public protection, deterrence, rehabilitation, reparation) and proportionality (Clause 1(3)–(4)) provide a foundation, but without mandatory consideration of gender bias in pre-sentence reports or victim personal statements, male victims remain invisible. Clause 36's vulnerability aggravation (victim under 18 or with impaired ability) should be expanded by guidance to include adult male victims experiencing coercive control that impairs reporting or safety-seeking.

Unduly lenient sentence reviews (Clauses 20–23) are rarely used in male-victim DA cases, partly because victims lack confidence to request referral. Non-disclosure of remains provisions (Clauses 24–32) are gender-neutral but must be publicised to male victims in homicide cases.

Overall, the Bill risks missing an opportunity to embed equality unless sentencing guidelines (Clause 2) require explicit disaggregation of data by victim sex and mandatory training on male victim myths.

6. Evidence of Systemic Bias Adversely Impacting Victims

The recently published independent review into the death of showjumper Katie Simpson has highlighted the tragic reality that female DA victims still encounter gendered perceptions and barriers when seeking support and justice.[17] Men's Alliance NI stand in solidarity with all victims and survivors of DA and support the call for action to be taken to address the systemic failures in policing and safeguarding practices that have been exposed by this review.

The review highlights a pattern of investigative biases that prioritised the perpetrator while dismissing the victim's experiences. Such patterns are extremely familiar to many of the victims that Men's Alliance NI support. They also mirror the experiences and testimonies of male victims globally.

Research and data from multiple countries (including the US, UK, Canada, Portugal, Australia, and others) consistently document patterns of investigative and response biases by police and safeguarding services that disadvantage male victims of intimate partner violence (IPV) while often also prioritising or minimising the actions of female perpetrators.[18]

These biases stem from longstanding gendered stereotypes framing IPV primarily as male-perpetrated against female victims, leading to assumptions that men cannot be (serious) victims or that female aggression is less harmful or defensive.

A common trend is that Police officers' discourses can be found to reflect stereotypes that minimise impacts on male victims (e.g., "man up," assumptions based on physical size/strength). Male victims experience reports being dismissed, ridiculed, or not taken as seriously as equivalent female victim cases.[19] Qualitative studies of male victims describe negative experiences with police, courts, and services, including being mocked or advised to leave rather than receive protection.[20]

A recent study commissioned by the Home Office found that female offenders are less likely to be arrested, charged, or convicted than male offenders, even when evidence is similar.[21] This trend is consistent with the PSNI and Court Service data we have highlighted in this response.

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[17] Melia (2026): The Katie Simpson Review
[18] Machado & Santiago (2025): Police Responses to Male Victims of Intimate Partner Violence.
[19] Machado et al. (2021): Police officers' discourses about male victims of intimate partner violence
[20] Machado et al. (2021): Male Victims of Female-Perpetrated Partner Violence: A Qualitative Analysis of Men's Experiences, the Impact of Violence, and Perceptions of Their Worth
[21] Barton-Crosby and Hudson (2021): Female perpetrators of intimate partner violence

Male victims also frequently report being treated as the perpetrator by police. In one Canadian study, 64% of male survivors who contacted police were assumed to be the abuser.[22] Similar findings appear in UK and US studies, where men are arrested at higher rates than female perpetrators in comparable situations.[23]

An analysis of 22 Domestic Homicide Reviews involving male victims in England and Wales found missed opportunities due to gender bias, dismissal of female-perpetrated abuse, insufficient guidance on male victims, and men being more likely to be arrested than supported.[24] The NI Department of Justice have yet to make public the findings of any of the limited number of NI based Domestic Homicide Reviews undertaken to date where the victim was male. We urge the Department to do so.

Psychologists suggest that the worldwide phenomenon of male victims receiving less attention, research focus, and dedicated support, even though data shows substantial numbers of them, may be evidence of gamma bias on a systemic scale.[25]

There is an increasing body of evidence to support our concern that public policy, policing, criminal justice, safeguarding and public service provision outcomes are significantly impacted by cognitive distortions in how public servants and politicians in Northern Ireland perceive and display regard to male and female victims respectively.

Representatives for Men's Alliance NI recently met with the Deputy First Minister to discuss our concerns. Part of which was the legacy impact of actions by **the Executive Office**'s Equality Unit[26] that effectively undermined and 'buried' important research into male victims experiences in 1998.

At the recommendation of the Justice Minister, the Executive Office has introduced a strategy to tackle violence against women and girls. The Minister made this recommendation in response to a campaign by state funded women's sector lobbyists attracting significant media attention.[27] The month prior to this, the Minister had rejected calls for a gender sensitive strategy on the basis that it would send out a message that tackling abuse against men is less important.[28] Despite this, she has since repeatedly rejected calls for a parallel strategy to address violence experienced by men and boys.

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[22] Roebuck et al. (2020): Male Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence in Canada
[23] ICJIA (2023): Gender Differences in Intimate Partner Violence Service Use.
[24] Homicide research reveals society 'blind' to male victims of domestic violence
[25] **Gamma bias** is a hypothesized cognitive distortion in how societies perceive and discuss gender issues, proposed by psychologists Martin Seager and John Barry. It builds on earlier ideas of alpha bias (exaggerating/magnifying gender differences) and beta bias (minimizing/ignoring them). Gamma bias occurs when these operate simultaneously: certain gender differences or patterns are amplified while others are downplayed, often in ways that portray masculinity more negatively and femininity more positively overall. See: Seager & Barry (2019): Gamma bias and the gender distortion matrix.
[26] Then OFMDFM. See: The Lasting Impact of The 1998 'Abuse of Adult Males' Report Being Buried.
[27] See BBCNI (March 2021): Naomi Long: Executive 'must act on violence against women'.
[28] Question to the Justice Minister: AQW 13950/17-22

The Departments of Justice and Health rejected calls to establish sex specific strategic outcomes and actions to address the gendered needs and experiences of male and female victims.[29] This despite the fact that the Equality Commission NI have recommended that they do so.[30] Their nominally 'gender neutral' Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy is aligned to the parallel strategy to tackle violence against women and girls which has also been identified as a key priority in **the NI Executive**'s Programme for Government.[31]

DoJ/H's nominally 'gender neutral' strategy document acknowledges gendered barriers experienced by male and female victims (page 35). In relation to male victims the document states the following:

> "*Some men do not realise that support is available to them but may believe that services are for women only; this can act as a significant barrier.*"

The well understood reality is that vital NI Executive funded support services are currently provided to women only. On this basis the claim that men do not realise support is available could be unfavourably compared to 'gaslighting'.[32]

The current reality is that DoJ/H will fail to achieve some of their stated strategic goals and outcomes as a direct consequence of ongoing gaps in support for victims, based solely on the grounds of their sex. The common consensus is that urgent action is needed and yet, in the absence of any meaningful action, commitments expressed by the Ministers for Justice and Health,[33] could be perceived as essentially 'lip service'.[34]

The Department For Communities and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive have a significant role to play in the systemic sex discrimination encountered by many male victims. Their practices related to gender budgeting, objective needs assessments and service procurement mean that male victims are not provided the same standard or range of support through the supporting people programme.

Domestic abuse is the only area where regard is restricted to supporting female people only. Victim Support NI have highlighted the need to extend the availability of crucial floating support services funded through this programme to male victims [35] and Northern Ireland continues to be the only country in the UK without any refuge provision for male victims.

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[29] DoJ (2023): Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy Consultation Summary Report.
[30] ECNI (2023): Response to consultation: Domestic and Sexual Abuse draft Strategy.
[31] Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most - NI Executive Programme for Government 2024-2027.
[32] **Gaslighting** is a form of persistent psychological manipulation and emotional abuse where a perpetrator makes someone question their own reality, memory, or perceptions.
[33] Male Experience of Intimate Partner Violence a 'Major Issue'.
[34] **Lip service**: insincere support expressed in words but not backed up by actions. It is a form of hypocrisy where someone says they care about a matter but do nothing meaningful to implement support.
[35] Victim Support NI - Response to the Draft Domestic & Sexual Abuse Strategy.

7. Human Rights and Statutory Duties

We urge 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 in the provision of support services to 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.

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 should also consider the intersecting needs and experiences of people with more than one relevant protected characteristic. For example, the provision of accessible and equitable support services for older men with disabilities experiencing IPV, 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 covered by the Charter, irrespective of their gender.

Direct sex discrimination in service provision and public policy has been illegal in Northern Ireland since the 1970's.

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.

8. Recommendations for Improvement

The following recommendations are designed to integrate directly with the Bill's provisions while addressing systemic disadvantages:

1. Mandatory Bias-Training for Sentencers

- **Targeted Judicial Training:** Introduce a new clause requiring annual training for all sentencers and prosecutors on the specific experiences of male DA victims.
- **Myth-Busting Guidelines:** Require the Sentencing Group to produce guidance that explicitly debunks harmful stereotypes, such as the "men cannot be victims" myth and the perception that female-perpetrated abuse is less severe.
- **Article 8 Context:** Ensure training covers the "legal abuse" often seen in family proceedings, where contact and residence orders are weaponised by perpetrators.

2. Explicit Gender-Neutral Application of Aggravations

- **Vulnerability Extensions (Clause 36):** Expand the definition of "impaired ability" to include psychological impairment from coercive control, protecting men who delay reporting due to social stigma.
- **Life-Sentence Tariffs (Schedule 3):** Mandate that statutory guidance explicitly states DA aggravators apply regardless of victim sex, ensuring consistency for male victims of homicide or serious violence.
- **Children as Direct Victims:** Create a statutory aggravation for the breach of any court order where children are involved or present, formally recognising them as victims of the perpetrator's coercive behaviour.

3. Improved Victim Impact Mechanisms & Article 8 Enforcement

- **Enforceable Article 8 Sanctions:** Mirroring models in Australia and New Zealand, introduce community-service or unpaid-work sanctions for proven breaches of residence and contact orders to prevent them from becoming "worthless".
- **Clause 1 Reparation Principles:** Amend sentencing principles to require courts to consider unique male-victim barriers, such as potential custody loss, employment impact, and stigma when assessing harm.
- **Safety-Linked Suspended Sentences:** Require pre-sentence reports for Clauses 3–14 to assess risks to male victims and children, specifically consulting with male-specific advocacy services before sentencing decisions.

4. Data Disaggregation by Victim Sex in All Sentencing Guidance

- **Mandatory Statistical Reporting:** Require all published sentencing statistics to be disaggregated by victim sex to monitor for systemic bias and ensure transparency in how male-victim cases are handled.
- **Benchmarking Disparities:** Mandate that all DA-related sentencing guidance (Clause 2) includes up-to-date data on male victim sanction rates to alert sentencers to potential prosecution gaps.
- **Annual Review & Impact Assessment:** Require a formal Department of Justice (DoJ) review within 12 months of the Bill's enactment to assess the impact of these reforms on justice outcomes for men.

These changes will ensure the Bill delivers proportionate, fair sentencing that protects all victims.

Male victims in NI face documented disadvantages that undermine public confidence and victim safety. The evidence is clear: 33% of reported DA crimes, lower sanction rates, half of victims silent, and persistent bias. The Bill must not perpetuate this. We urge the Committee to incorporate the recommendations above during scrutiny. We stand ready to provide oral evidence or further data.