



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Justice

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Justice (Sexual Offences and Trafficking  
Victims) Bill: South Eastern Domestic and  
Sexual Violence Partnership

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dealing with harmful sexual behaviours, including the Aim to Change (ATC) project, which focuses on young people who display harmful sexual behaviours, and adult risk assessments for those who present with violent or sexual behaviours. I am the regional lead on child sexual exploitation (CSE), working closely with the child sexual exploitation leads across the five health and social care (HSC) trusts. All those services coalesce in addressing concerns in relation to domestic and sexual violence and abuse in its many forms, both offline and online.

I sat on the management board of Belfast and Lisburn Women's Aid for seven years. All the roles that I have held at operational and strategic levels have allowed me to gain insight into the devastating harm that sexual and domestic violence and abuse has on a person. That abuse can transcend both intergenerational and intra-generational boundaries. We have worked with some families in which we have been able to track the abuse back through four generations.

In 2019, I was awarded an MBE in acknowledgement of my services to women and children. I am a very strong proponent of early intervention/education and helping children and young people to understand what a healthy relationship is like. The majority of children spend most of their formative years in full-time education. It is within the safe confines of school that I believe that they should be taught about relationships, including consent, in accordance with their age and stage of development.

Violence against women is at epidemic levels. The most likely danger to men is another man, and, for a woman, it is a man with whom she is or has been in an intimate relationship. Violence thrives in contact and is defined as being about dominance, toughness, male honour and the idea that "big boys don't cry". While boys and men are the large majority of perpetrators of violence, they often are also the victims. Males get assaulted, bullied and sexually assaulted. Boys and men are most at risk of violence from other boys and men.

I want to draw your attention to a case in England. Reynhard Sinaga was convicted at age 32, but it is believed that his crimes started when he was in his early 20s. He was convicted of 159 sex offences, including 136 rapes of young men, which were committed in Manchester. He is believed to be Britain's worst rapist. I highlight the concern that those crimes started when he was a very young adult.

Ending violence to girls and women and violence to boys and men are parts of the same struggle. We need to create a world based on equality, justice and non-violence. We need strong legislation in place to reinforce the fact that violence and abuse are not acceptable and will not be tolerated in their many forms and that perpetrators will be held to account.

One of my biggest concerns is around online offending. It is escalating year-on-year, and new harmful behaviours are coming to light, which we need to be able to challenge through the courts. In Northern Ireland, we have the biggest case of catfishing across Europe. That was a young man who was only 21 years of age and a student from Newry. His offending seems to have started in 2017, when he was around 18 or 19 years of age. There were 410 charges, including making and distributing indecent images of children, sexual communication with a child, inciting children to engage in sexual activity, blackmail, intimidation and encouraging a child to have sex with an animal. Just this week, the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) issued its report. It highlighted that analysts are finding:

*"fifteen times more child sexual abuse content online than they were ten years ago."*

Some of the areas that I know that we are working on and that we need to continue to work on and build on are around holding perpetrators to account and trying to work with them at the earliest opportunities to prevent the escalation of their behaviours. In the case of that young man in Newry and the other case of a young fellow in England, they were young adults. I do not think that people wake up on their 18th birthday and begin offending. These issues surface in their early adolescent years.

Early education is a must. We need a greater focus on online offending. There needs to be focus on misogyny. A violence against women and girls strategy is being developed. It is brilliant that we have domestic homicide reviews in Northern Ireland. They will be reported on in the new year. Again, in the future, we need to look at hidden homicides. There are a number of people whose deaths are recorded as suicide, and our understanding of non-fatal strangulation is growing. We need to rule on the rough sex defence. We need to look at suicides, particularly where there is a sudden death amid a long history of domestic violence. That warrants a full investigation. The structures for addressing domestic and sexual violence across Northern Ireland need to be looked at. We also need to look at the recent increase of spiking and the use of drugs and injections, which are leading to sexual assaults. The Gillen review considered the exclusion of the public from all serious sex offence

hearings and defendants' identities being protected pre charge. Underlying all that is proper funding in order to allow the various organisations and agencies to develop their work and tackle these issues.

I am happy to take questions on any of the points that I have raised today or any issues in the submission.

**The Chairperson (Mr Storey):** Sheila, thank you very much for your presentation and submission. Your submission refers to the absence of child abduction warning notices as being a gap in the legislation. Have you any examples of 16- or 17-year-old children, not subject to a care order, who would have been protected were it not for this gap in the legislation that you have shared with us? What difference would it have made?

**Ms Simons:** We have seen examples of that. Since April 2016, the police have been sharing their data with us about young people who were reported missing three or more times. That is shared in the trusts, and we work our way through all those young people. We discovered that 50% of young people have been reported missing from the community. When we say "missing", we have to be careful in the use of the word. "Reported missing" and "being missing" may be two different things. Sometimes, it might be that the young person has not come home; they are expected home at 10.00 pm and they come home at 11.00 pm. The word "missing" is used widely and broadly. When young people go missing from care, we in the trusts have power, until the age of 18, to seek a warning notice and to serve that on the person whom the young person is frequenting. However, if it is a child in the community between the ages of 16 and 18, those powers do not extend to them. That is a clear gap in the legislation and it should be closed.

**The Chairperson (Mr Storey):** Have you had any discussions with the Department about that?

**Ms Simons:** It probably came up. I know that you have asked about 'Not a world away', and the issue came up in the subsequent Marshall report. The gap is there; we must make a formal request to have it closed. I have raised the issue in recent meetings with the Department of Justice.

**The Chairperson (Mr Storey):** So that I am clear about it, is the child abduction warning notice referred to in the Marshall report?

**Ms Simons:** Yes, it is.

**The Chairperson (Mr Storey):** It was identified. That is very useful. Have members any questions? Rachel? Other members, please indicate so that I can see that you want to ask a question.

**Miss Woods:** Thank you, Sheila, for your presentation and written submission. I was going to ask about the child abduction warning notice as well, but the Chair has covered that. On the issue of abuse of trust of adults at risk of harm, you said that the law is "weak and warrants urgent attention". Will you give us more information about that? Do you recommend that the Committee looks at anything specific?

**Ms Simons:** I suppose that it comes back again to there being a lot of inappropriate behaviour that is accepted as "only a bit of craic" or "only a wee bit of fun". I note that upskirting and downblousing are examples of that. However, we need to give a strong message that they are not appropriate or acceptable behaviours. Then we need to reinforce that through legislation.

My colleagues brought to my attention the issue of adult safeguarding. I work with children. With the legislation on domestic violence, we seem to have more powers in managing those situations for children than for adults. However, if a victim has no children, they can be more difficult to protect because of the issues of consent and deemed consent, and we do not take full consideration of coercive control and the impact that that can have on someone. They are not giving informed consent.

**Miss Woods:** Thank you. I want to ask you about the public awareness campaign that you mentioned. That is really important when creating any new offence but specifically the ones on voyeurism, such as upskirting and downblousing. There is sometimes an idea that it just a bit of craic or just for a bit of a rake and a laugh. That, for me, is a gap. Why do you think that it is important to have a public awareness campaign? Are you looking at that based on your experience of your work in the partnership? How might that impact the people whom you come across?

**Ms Simons:** Well, 16 Days of Action is coming up very shortly, and we have planned a number of seminars. I think that the witness in the next Committee session is going to do one of those seminars for us. What is happening online is quite shocking, and I have seen that for a while. Children as young as four or five are walking around with iPads or having access to an Xbox, and people do not fully understand what they can access or that they can be targeted. They are being abused in their own bedroom. People have a perception that, because it is happening online, it is not really having an impact on you because you are not physically being touched as such, but there are ramifications to that. You just have to think back to Ronan Hughes, whom I mention in my submission. The impact of that is absolutely devastating, and we have seen it with young people putting up more and more images even though they do not fully comprehend the ramifications. New apps are being devised all the time, and they attract young people. They are requesting them to take images of themselves, and they feel that they are doing that almost in a safe environment in their own room without realising the potentially serious consequences.

**Miss Woods:** This is my final question. After this session, we will have a briefing from Professor Clare McGlynn. She raised a number of issues in her submission, and one that I want to ask you about is adopting a possible offence of cyber-flashing. That would tie in with what you said about images and young people taking images of themselves. Have you seen an increase in the circulation of images? Do you have any opinions on whether or not the Committee should look at an amendment to the Bill to criminalise cyber-flashing?

**Ms Simons:** Yes, there absolutely has been an increase, and it is becoming normalised behaviour. That is the only concern. There is a whole raft of measures that you can take. We need to put in place legislation with clear messaging, and we need to educate young people, through the education process, about the dangers of that.

**Miss Woods:** Thank you, Sheila. I could not agree more.

**Ms Dolan:** Thank you, Sheila, for your presentation and your submission. You mentioned upskirting and downblousing in your briefing. This could be a question for the Department rather than for you. Why is punishment not on par with that in the UK? Do you know? Have you asked the Department about that?

**Ms Simons:** No, I am not sure. I do not have the answer to that. We are looking to have it on a par with England. That is what we recommend.

**Ms Dolan:** My other question is about *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality]* threat of publication of image-based sexual abuse. Is that the case in any other jurisdiction that you know of?

**Ms Simons:** I could not hear you, Jemma. You were breaking up a wee bit there. Sorry.

**Ms Dolan:** I will turn my camera off and maybe that will improve things. Sorry. It was about the threat of the publication of image-based sexual abuse. Does that exist in any other jurisdiction?

**Ms Simons:** I know that that is being looked at in England and Wales, and we are definitely very keen on it because people have lost their lives because of such threats. We see that. People live with an absolute fear that images will appear again five or 10 years down the line. You just have to look at the case of Ronan, which had fatal consequences. People are so frightened to tell anyone because of the shame, the guilt and the control that someone is placing on them, and they usually bring you deeper and deeper into it through that blackmail. You feel like you have nowhere to turn. We definitely need legislation to stop that.

**Ms Dolan:** I know where you are coming from. That is why I am interested in whether it exists anywhere else. Thank you for that, Sheila.

**The Chairperson (Mr Storey):** Sheila, thank you for your submission and for taking the time to be with us today. I also thank you for the work that you and the sexual violence partnership do. It is much appreciated. These are challenging issues for us all, but particularly so for members of the partnership as people who see almost daily the consequences, challenges and difficulties of those issues.

As Rachel said, we are about to have a presentation from Professor Clare McGlynn. We would be happy to share her paper with you; I am sure that you will find it of interest. We will ensure that that is forwarded to you.

**Ms Simons:** Thank you very much. It is appreciated.

I will make one final point. Marcella Leonard referred to child abduction warning notices when she reviewed CSE in her report for the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland. She mentioned the need for the gap to be bridged in terms of not having coverage for 16- to 18-year-old children who live in the community.

**The Chairperson (Mr Storey):** Thank you very much, Sheila.