



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for the Economy

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Domestic Abuse (Safe Leave) Bill: Men's  
Advisory Project Northern Ireland; Women's  
Aid Federation Northern Ireland

15 December 2021

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Dr Caoimhe Archibald (Chairperson)  
Mr Keith Buchanan  
Mr Stewart Dickson  
Mr Stephen Dunne  
Mr Mike Nesbitt  
Mr John O'Dowd  
Ms Claire Sugden  
Mr Peter Weir

**Witnesses:**

Ms Rhonda Lusty	Men's Advisory Project Northern Ireland
Ms Sonya McMullan	Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland

**The Chairperson (Dr Archibald):** I welcome Sonya McMullan, the regional services manager at Women's Aid, and Rhonda Lusty, the coordinator of the Men's Advisory Project (MAP). I will hand over to you to make an opening statement, and we can then open up the meeting to members for questions.

**Ms Sonya McMullan (Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland):** Good morning, everyone. Thank you, Chair and Committee members, for the opportunity to present to you today on the Domestic Abuse (Safe Leave) Bill. I will be speaking on behalf of the eight Women's Aid groups across Northern Ireland. We hope to portray the voices of those women, children and young people.

The Bill is vital legislation that, if passed, will help give extra protection to all victims and survivors of domestic abuse by allowing individuals to have the time needed to help support them at a point of crisis. We hope that it will also inform workplaces and give them an opportunity to engage in the development of workplace domestic abuse policies, to be better informed about the impacts and to be able to look out for the signs and symptoms of domestic abuse. The legislation would offer protection and the time and space that people need for reflection when experiencing any form of trauma, but especially when they are experiencing domestic abuse.

Our response is informed by supporting women, children and young people over 40 years in Northern Ireland. Many of them would have really benefited from this legislation, as it would have allowed them to continue in the workplace and to have greater financial freedom and the choice to make decisions, which disposable income from the workplace often brings.

In the past year, Women's Aid has supported 6,000 families. I am interested in the conversation that you are having around the incidence and prevalence of domestic abuse in Northern Ireland and the crimes associated with it. Our police statistics are at their highest since the data set began in 2004-05. About 50% of the women who come to Women's Aid never report to the police, so it is very difficult to have an accurate figure of the number of families affected by domestic abuse in Northern Ireland.

I picked up from your previous conversation that you were asking about other regions. In England and Wales, there are 14 domestic abuse incidents per 1,000 people in the population. In Scotland, there are 11 incidents per 1,000. According to the police bulletin for the last financial year in Northern Ireland, there are 16 incidents per 1,000. That equates to a fifth of all crime recorded in Northern Ireland. We know that the data is collected in different ways, but that is just for your information.

The stark statistic for us during the past year, especially from 23 March 2020 to 23 March 2021, is that eight women have been murdered. This is the reality of domestic abuse in Northern Ireland: that, without investment in services, early intervention and prevention, domestic abuse kills.

We have the highest rate of femicide in Europe for someone being murdered by a family member of a partner where there is a domestic motivation. The Committee has already discussed the number of domestic abuse incidents, with the police attending a domestic abuse incident every 17 minutes in Northern Ireland. It is definitely a problem that is not going away.

Domestic abuse affects people's lives in so many different ways. It affects families and really limits people's opportunities, including their employment opportunities. Domestic abuse comes in many forms. The Committee has discussed the new coercive control legislation for coercive and controlling behaviour, which goes live in February 2022. The Economy Committee probably does not look at the minutiae of all the legislation that goes through the Assembly all the time, but similar legislation went live in England and Wales in 2015 and in the South in 2019. We are really falling behind and have a lot of catching up to do. We, of course, welcome that legislation, and we were involved in the process of making it. Coercive control is a form of abuse that is not recognised all the time. We do not always see the impact of that behaviour on women in the workplace.

For some people, work is a safe place. It provides a sanctuary, in the same as schools, which we have heard a lot about, especially during COVID, do. Other people, however, need to take time off to cope with the mental stress and anxiety that domestic abuse causes and contributes to, as well as the physical abuse, which can impact on some people's ability to function and simply carry out their day-to-day roles and tasks.

There are many factors to consider with this piece of work, including loss of productivity in the workplace when an individual experiences domestic abuse. We would direct the Committee to a piece of research that we have just submitted in a briefing paper to you this morning. Sorry that it was a bit late. It references 'The economic and social costs of crime'. That paper outlines the impact of domestic abuse in the workplace, but it also highlights the fact that such crimes disproportionately affect women and girls, who are often in part-time, lower-paid employment.

When considering the Bill, it is also important to recognise the gendered nature of domestic abuse. Rhonda is here from MAP, and she will talk about men as victims and survivors, but police statistics show that 69% of all victims of domestic abuse crimes are against females and 31% are against males. Of all the offenders who were dealt with by the PSNI in 2021 in connection with domestic abuse crimes, 86% were male and 13% were female. The Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) carried out recent research into domestic abuse and the workplace. That is a really good piece of work that took place in Northern Ireland. The survey was completed by 1,734 people. Some 82% of the respondents were women, and a third of them had experienced domestic abuse. Those are quite staggering statistics.

Day in, day out, we in Women's Aid speak to women who are trying to maintain their employment. Lots of women in our refuges are still trying to work and keep everything together. They need financial security for themselves and their family, and work is really important. Again, however, productivity can be reduced during periods of long-term stress and anxiety, including while living in a home where they are experiencing abuse. It is very difficult to concentrate when they are experiencing any form of stress or have been affected by trauma.

The wider effects of domestic abuse are not discussed enough in public awareness campaigns, nor is the ability to thrive and strive in any form of life. Employment prospects can really be hindered by taking time off at short notice, by turning up late for work or by taking lots of calls from a partner. The

Committee also talked about stalking, and there is a huge correlation among stalking, domestic abuse and coercive control. Some people are unable to get to their place of work because of physical injury or because they are being restrained. There is also the childcare issue, where people are refusing to help them with childcare, for example. They can therefore have unexpected absences, and that can lead to disciplinary action if an employer is unaware of the situation.

It is extremely difficult to disclose domestic abuse. Domestic abuse is shrouded in guilt, secrecy and shame, and many people find it difficult to disclose that it is happening to them, even to a family member or friend. So I am sure that the Committee realises how impactful and difficult it must be for someone to disclose it to an employer. It takes a very good employer, with a really good skill set of empathy and understanding, to be able to deal with that disclosure appropriately. That is why we are really pushing on workplace policies, and we welcome their introduction by organisations such as Danske Bank, which has already implemented paid leave in Northern Ireland through a workplace policy on domestic abuse.

It is a common for the perpetrator to want the victim or survivor to rely on them for money. Not having your own financial security and disposable income reduces your independence and space for action. Financial abuse is a huge issue on its own in domestic abuse, especially when it comes to court proceedings. For example, we did a very short piece of desktop research on that and found that a huge number of people are in a lot of debt from court fees alone. Financial limitations can create more isolation and dependency, allowing the perpetrator to gain more control.

We welcome the opportunity to address a Committee that we would not normally engage with. As you can imagine, given the amount of legislation that is going through the Assembly, we have been in front of the Justice Committee quite a lot over the last number of years. However, domestic abuse is a problem that crosses all Departments and does not just fall within the remits of Health and Justice, which drafted and look after the domestic and sexual abuse strategy. We call on all Departments to take ownership of all the key issues because, without their support, no reforms to take account of domestic abuse will work. It is paramount that the Departments responsible for housing, health, education, the economy and all the other Departments participate in making this work progress so that it transforms the lives of those who experience domestic abuse.

In relation to costing, for the Committee's reference, we should look at the most recent strategy, 'Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse in Northern Ireland'. That strategy ran from 2013 to 2020 and is now under review. In 2016, the total cost of domestic and sexual violence in Northern Ireland was estimated to be £931 million. Women's Aid service provision accounted for less than 1% of that.

We welcome all the developments that are taking place within the legislative framework. One example is the Justice (Sexual Offences and Trafficking Victims) Bill, which deals with upskirting, downblousing, the rough-sex defence, including non-fatal strangulation, image-based violence, abuse of trust and other recommendations in the Gillen report, including those on serious sexual offences. The Protection from Stalking Bill, which, as you have already stated, is very much needed, is also going through the legislative process. That includes provision for stalking protection orders and notices. We need domestic abuse protection orders and notices as well because we focus on removing a family from a home but do not have the power, through emergency barring orders, to remove the perpetrator from the home. Of course, there is also the violence against women and girls strategy. The Executive Office has undertaken that, which we welcome.

Living in Northern Ireland should not mean being disadvantaged by a postcode lottery, but it does. If I lived in London and experienced a domestic abuse incident, many more robust legal remedies would be open to me. Also, if the police came to me this evening following a domestic abuse incident in my home, consider what would happen. I have three kids, one of whom is still under 18, so there would be an automatic referral to social services. The police might get involved. I might have to go to the Housing Executive to look at housing. I might want to get some orders out, which means that I will have to go to the solicitor and then to court. The education and welfare officer might be involved, due to my children not attending school etc. Those are all the appointments that a woman might have to undertake in that short time. When you disclose this abuse, it opens a huge piece of work, so you can imagine the impact that that has in the workplace. Time off will be needed just so that the person is able to attend those appointments, never mind the time and space that they will need to be able to process and reflect on what is going on.

Any new legislation also needs sustainable funding to enable its life-saving specialist services. That is another key issue that Women's Aid wants to raise. We need to ensure that every victim and survivor

gets the support that they need when they need it. We cannot afford to move further behind in Northern Ireland.

Thank you for the opportunity to present to you. I am happy to take questions. I will hand over now to Rhonda.

**Ms Rhonda Lusty (Men's Advisory Project Northern Ireland):** Am I OK to speak, or do you want to ask questions first?

**The Chairperson (Dr Archibald):** Go you ahead, and then we will bring in members for questions.

**Ms Lusty:** Sorry, Sonya; I thought that you were just going to say "Hi".

I thank the Committee for asking the Men's Advisory Project to give evidence today. My name is Rhonda Lusty and I work for the Men's Advisory Project. We are a charity that has been working across Northern Ireland for 22 years, supporting men who have endured domestic abuse. It is right to say that we are not often in front of the Committee. In fact, this is the first time, so perhaps it would be useful to give you some context on the number of men who face domestic abuse and some of the ways in which it happens.

As Sonya told you, domestic abuse is a huge crime. We had just over 20,000 such crimes last year, 31% of which happened to men. In 2020, three men lost their lives to domestic abuse, and, in 2021, two men lost their lives to domestic abuse. When we speak about domestic abuse, we rarely do so about the men who have lost their lives, and we rarely think about the men who face domestic abuse every day.

Domestic abuse is a crime that is still seen as being something that does not happen to men. When we are examining policies, laws and responses on domestic abuse, the voices and experiences of men are very often not gathered. For example, the ICTU research is an excellent piece of work, but you have to wonder how men were encouraged to respond and if they even thought that what was happening to them was domestic abuse. That is a real problem and is one of the reasons why the Domestic Abuse (Safe Leave) Bill will be a huge support. I say that because we hear from men who say that their only safe haven is work. We also hear from men who say, interestingly, that what is happening to them has never been noticed in work. So, whilst work may be their safe haven and the only place where they have space and room to breathe, it is also a place where no one has noticed what is happening to them or that there is a clear pattern of abuse.

The Bill is not just something that could support people to safety and enable them to lead their lives free from domestic abuse. It is also a way in which we can build a community response to domestic abuse if we start to say that the shame is on the abuser and the questions no longer become something about which a person who faces abuse is ashamed or has any worry or concern around. So, it is more than just a Bill about safe leave; it really and truly has to be a way for us to bring the issue into the light and make it about health and safety for those in the workplace.

We know that domestic abuse is dangerous throughout the period of the abuse, but it is also dangerous post-separation. Post-separation can be the time when people who have faced domestic abuse most need the support of something like the Domestic Abuse (Safe Leave) Bill. As Sonya pointed out, someone who has faced domestic abuse might need to access many different things, but one of the first things that you need is space. If you think about it, you have been often violently attacked by someone that you love. Very often, there are children in the house, so you need space and time to, first of all, think about what you need and, after that, to organise all the different appointments to find out, for example, how to get housing or legal or police care, or to give a police witness statement, which is not simple.

Reference was made earlier to when something is a domestic abuse incident and when it is a domestic abuse crime. It does not really matter. We hear that in Northern Ireland our statistics are huge, but we know them to be the tip of the iceberg. We regularly see men who have faced domestic abuse for many years but never been near the police. Sonya would also see that with women at Women's Aid. So, we thank Rachel Woods for bringing the Bill forward.

We want to talk about one of the men whom we have supported to try to give you a flavour of what it might be like to be in that situation. We spoke to some men prior to coming here to give evidence, one of whom was happy for his story to be shared. The typical thing about his case was that he had

experienced extensive abuse and physical abuse. In almost every domestic abusive relationship, there is control because, without it, the abusive patterns cannot begin. There is control in isolation. If you remove someone's work from them, you might be removing their very last life raft. That is why it is vital that safe leave is provided for those in employment and that domestic abuse is seen as a health and safety issue.

The man whom we supported faced violent abuse, which often was much worse at the weekend. Sometimes he could not go to work after the abuse because he was either marked or really physically harmed. He was well known to the police and had been through the multi-agency risk assessment conference (MARAC) process for those who are at the highest risk. However, his work did not ever consider that he might be a victim of domestic abuse; they thought that he was someone who simply did not turn up to work on some Mondays or some Mondays and Tuesdays. Eventually, it came to the point where, not only was he being violently abused to the extent that we were very concerned that he might lose his life, he was also close to losing his job as he was on his final warning.

In his work, jokes were made about him being unreliable and about his sport, and there were assumptions made. We have to move away from assumptions, we have to follow somewhere like Danske Bank and we have to be brave enough to ask questions. There is no shame on those who are being abused. The shame is on the abusers. We ask you to widen your lens so that you see that, although it is happening to women and girls, which is terrible, domestic abuse is also impacting on men and their families, as we can show you with police statistics and, unfortunately, statistics on the number of deaths.

Thank you so much for giving us this space and time to speak with you. We implore you to see that safe leave will benefit businesses and society. Better than that, it is something that we, on this part of this island, can lead the rest of these islands on. We should be bringing in safe leave to support the men, women and children who face abuse. The cost that you think providing safe leave might place on small to medium-sized employers does not weigh the same as the cost of the lives that that measure would save or the cost of the anxiety that it would prevent. Nor would it outweigh the hope that, through the provision, we would be giving those who face abuse.

Thank you for much for listening to me today, and thank you, Sonya, for your perfect and beautiful beginning.

**The Chairperson (Dr Archibald):** Thank you both very much for your briefings, which were really helpful. You clearly set out the range of issues that victims of domestic abuse face, including the need to access support for housing, the police and legal support and how needing to deal with all those things can impact on someone's work life. The Committee is very aware that domestic abuse can happen to anyone, regardless of sex, class, background or anything else. It is very important that we hear from the full range of voices, and we wanted to ensure that the witnesses who were briefing us reflected that.

I do not have a great deal of questions because you have set out all the issues very well. I ask you both whether there is anything missing from the Bill or any things that needs to be set out more clearly in it? We received your written briefing, Sonya, and I can see some of the things that you have highlighted, such as flexibility in how leave is taken etc. We will take those points into account, but would you both respond to that question?

**Ms Lusty:** One of the things that I heard during the previous evidence session was a little bit concerning, namely the idea that you might have to have faced a crime before being able to avail yourself of the leave. One of the things that is excellent about the Bill is that the support starts from the first day of employment. That support needs to be there so that a person can stay safe and so that we might be able to save their life or the lives of their children. The impact is not just on men and women who are victims; it is on whomever else is in the house, be they vulnerable others or children. We really like that aspect of the Bill and welcome it.

The other thing that we are very fearful of is consideration of triggering the Bill's provisions only being made if a crime has been committed. Domestic abuse incidents are often experienced time and time again. As we have spoken about, there is often a great difficulty in getting men to understand that what is happening to them is domestic abuse. We have a lot of work to do in society to bring men forward and allow them to understand and be encouraged that what is happening to them is domestic abuse and that they too can have the support of human resources or other areas of support in their organisation.

It is often hard for men to report domestic abuse. In addition, it is hard for them to put their hands up to say that what is happening to them is domestic abuse. If we put barriers in front of the support, we will prevent those who need it from getting it. It should be open to all and welcoming to all. That might cause you fear, but the provisions in the Bill have to be about those who need the support. When we are creating law, we worry about bad actors, but, instead, we should be thinking about positive action. Safe leave really is positive action, and it is something that could be life-changing and life-saving.

**Ms McMullan:** I totally agree with you, Rhonda. One of the things that we are concerned about is providing proof of domestic abuse. Many victims will not have told anyone: they will not have gone to a doctor, and they will not have got a police report. How do they prove it? You would be taking someone on their word. Disclosing domestic abuse is very difficult. People go to their GPs or they go to an A&E department and are asked about domestic abuse but do not tell. Sometimes, they have to be asked directly, "Are you safe at home? Is there anything going on that you want to talk to me about?", and that kind of thing.

There is a whole piece of work to be done on workplace policy and on providing training and awareness for all employers. That is very difficult for very small organisations. However, we had a phone call recently from an employer who ran a rural petrol station. One of his employees was experiencing domestic abuse and the employer did not know where to start, but he lifted the phone and asked what he needed to do. Sometimes that is all that you need to do: it is about that trauma-informed approach and being present and available for the individual at the time.

There will be a public awareness campaign on the new legislation in the new year, but it is about employers and the general public being informed about the high level of domestic abuse that we have. Our high levels of domestic abuse mean that we know that it touches all of us. Each and every one of us will know someone — a friend, a family member or a colleague — who has been affected at some point by domestic abuse. That is the reality in Northern Ireland. If we are going to tackle the issue at all, we need to look at the wider picture, and relaying that information to employers is really important.

The area of proof is a difficult one, and I do not know how people would go about that. I totally agree with Rhonda about the provision beginning on day one of employment. I also agree with her about post-separation: domestic abuse does not end at the point of separation. People can be in protracted legal proceedings for five and 10 years after separation, during which abuse is still going on. That is an important consideration on the time frames.

**The Chairperson (Dr Archibald):** Thank you both; that is very helpful. The proof issue has been raised with us, and there has been some discussion on it. We will have to consider that in more detail.

During a previous evidence session, there was a discussion on whether a crime would have to be committed. To clarify, that discussion related to data. As I understand it, it is set out in the Bill that a domestic abuse incident is the threshold. So, it is not the case that somebody would have to go through legal or criminal proceedings before they could avail themselves of the leave. It was a question about the data, but maybe those who raised the question will address that as well.

**Mr Weir:** To reiterate the Chair's point, quite often with legislation we will probe the information and data and stress test them. That does not necessarily mean that we are hostile to particular provisions. Wearing my other hat, as a member of the Committee for Justice, the many submissions that you have made and the many evidence sessions that you taken part in have all been valuable. Thank you for your contribution today.

I want to probe two issues. The point about potential barriers if an evidential or proof basis is required to act as a trigger point has been well made. We always try to strike a balance with legislation, particularly when it is of this nature, between being prescriptive from the start and, effectively, letting it act as a paving mechanism that can then be sketched in at a later stage with regulations. There are merits in both approaches.

If the draft legislation was passed and there was no proof element, some form of notification process would be required. Clearly, some form of record would have to be kept on where the safe leave is triggered so that people can obtain their entitlements. How do you see a notification process working?

Related to that is an issue that Mr Dickson has pushed, and there is great sensitivity around it. You had indicated that, at times, people are reluctant to come forward and to let things become public knowledge. What are your thoughts on sensitivity around the leave being triggered and how we can

ensure confidentiality when it happens? Northern Ireland is a small place, so if somebody is suddenly not at work, even if things are kept fairly confidential, rumours will start. So, the first issue is notification and confidentiality, and I might have one other issue to raise with you.

**Ms Lusty:** Thank you for your questions, Mr Weir. The question about notification is a really interesting one. First, we have to say that we believe people who say that they have faced abuse. If someone says, "I need time off for a funeral", no one says, "Could you bring in a death certificate?". Instead, we say, "Gosh, that is awful. Of course". Someone could say that they needed time off but they would not necessarily have to use the words "domestic abuse". They could say, "difficulties at home" or whatever form of words that the relevant department in their work uses.

Again, we have to move away from the idea that there is shame around something that someone else has chosen to do to you. No one chooses domestic abuse. No one. They enter into a relationship with an abuser, and the abuser abuses them. They enter into that relationship with an open heart and with all the hopes that all the rest of us have. So, the idea that there should be shame or gossip around that is something that we, as a society, need to move away from. If someone told me that you were facing domestic abuse, it would not be a gossip item for me; it would be an item for huge compassion. We must move towards the point where, instead of being treated as scurrilous, domestic abuse is treated as life-ending and life-limiting and something for which the shame is on the abuser. If we were to openly shame abusers more and start to recognise domestic abuse in that way, we could start to tackle the problem. We need support from you and all Departments to see it in that way. We should not be prescriptive about barriers based on proof. It is something that all employers should be doing, whether, as Sonya says, it is that brave person phoning from a small garage to try to support someone or about a larger workforce. You should not get less protection if you work for a small employer. Every employer should offer it freely and step forward to do so. Obviously I am going to say that, but I truly believe it. Sonya?

**Ms McMullan:** Yes, I could not agree with Rhonda more. We realise, however, that these are some of the challenges that we will face in implementing such a piece of legislation. With regard to notification, of course, in bigger companies, there may be domestic abuse champions and that kind of thing, or welfare officers to whom people can disclose in confidence. With this piece, there is a huge issue around confidentiality and the sharing of information. It would have to be done in such a way that people felt confident, because many people's information, after they have disclosed it, is used further. That puts them back so much on their pathway to support and in their recovery. We have to be very mindful of that.

As Rhonda said, over the past few weeks, there has been so much commentary publicly about the importance of believing survivors. The sooner you are believed, the sooner you start to heal; we hear that so much. The first response is so important. If someone discloses to an employer, therefore, it has to be done in the right way. Employers have to know the pathways to support and what is available for them. They will not have to go into a counselling session but just need to know the phone number, where to go and what they can do to support their employees.

Confidentiality is key for absolutely everyone. For bigger human resource departments, such as in local government, it may be easier; they may be able to have those kinds of champions. We have worked with a few corporates recently who have allocated champions, and disclosures have happened successfully because they have had the training and awareness sessions with us before. That works really well, and they are putting in place what they can do.

Early intervention is key to all of this: any domestic abuse work, strategy or forward planning and working. To be able to give people time off at an earlier point will save the employer money in the long run. It is like our Government investing now: if you all invest much more now in all those services, you will save money in the criminal justice and health budgets further down the line.

**Mr Weir:** In case there is any doubt on the two points, I am not suggesting that there is or should be any form of shame in that. I am saying, perhaps echoing your points on confidentiality, that we need to have protective mechanisms, because there will always be some people who want to be open and publicly expressive about things, but others will want to be able to avail themselves of services while keeping everything as well protected and as quiet as possible. We need to respect both positions. As with a lot of things in any workplace, people should not be subject to levels of speculation or gossip, but, unfortunately, sometimes that will happen, so we need also to think how we can protect that relationship between employer and employee.

Similarly, the points about proof are made well, but in order to make sure that there are no barriers for people, we need practical mechanisms. If we are talking about statutory entitlement, there will have to be something, whatever the format, that is officially triggered on that basis. We need something for the victims of domestic abuse so that they have a very clear-cut pathway and it is not something that is relatively vague as to how things are being triggered.

I want to get your professional judgement on one final point. When statistics are rolled out about criminal incidents and what is reported, there is always a slightly double-edged sword when it comes to rises or falls in those figures because, where we see either an increase in numbers or a decrease in numbers, whether in domestic abuse or in any other crime, that can either reflect that there are greater incidence of a crime — or lesser incidence, depending on whether they are rising or falling — but sometimes, when there is an increase in numbers, that can reflect a greater confidence and willingness among people to come forward. On the flip side of the coin, if we see a reduction in figures, that sometimes does not necessarily mean that less of that crime is taking place. It may be that there is a breakdown in terms of people feeling, "What's the point of reporting this? I won't have anything done about it". So the statistics can be a little bit of a movable feast where there is an up and down side of things.

One of the issues in terms of the implications — again, I am seeking your professional judgement and experience. On the basis that the current provisions will become law, what are your views on the level of uptake that this will lead to from those who avail themselves of it? I appreciate that you are casting your mind slightly into a level of the unknown, but I would be interested to get your views on that. Obviously, there will be quite a lot of people who suffer from domestic abuse who will either not avail themselves of this or perhaps will feel that they do not wish to take the particular route of taking time off. What are your thoughts on where you see, from a practical point of view, the levels of uptake being if this legislation or legislation of a very similar nature goes through?

**Ms McMullan:** I think that the key to this will be the awareness of it. How do we get the information out that this is available, if this is passed into legislation? How does everybody in the public in Northern Ireland know that there is a safe leave Bill and that this is available to them? For example, when the legal aid waiver came in for protection orders, so many people just did not know that it existed and could not avail themselves of it. Like anything, it is about awareness. How do we promote this? Do you promote this? What way will it be rolled out within the workplace for those people? Will it be through the unions and that kind of awareness raising? I wonder about that, because there will be a lot of people who will not know anything about it and will not be aware of it. Like so many other things, pieces of legislation go through, and people just do not know. They are not in the sector so they do not know, and, sometimes, they do not know until they need it. A lot of people will not be aware that it is in existence, and that is a big problem for us in relation to so many things.

**Ms Lusty:** That was excellent, as always, Sonya. I want to come back to one of the things that you said, Peter. When we speak about this, I understand, of course, your point about confidentiality. I deal every day with men who have experienced abuse, and one of the things that prevents those men most from coming forward to seek help is shame. Shame is the greatest barrier, and I know that the gendered experience of men who have experienced abuse might be slightly different than that of women who have experienced abuse. The excellent work of Women's Aid over 40 years may have brought the experiences of women and children to the fore in a way that the experiences of men and their children have not been brought to the fore, so we are battling each day with men so that they can sit with the shame that they feel because someone has abused them. I think that your point was a really good one and was really well made. I am not disputing that, but I think what I am saying is that we have to make an effort to move through and past that. As Sonya said, if we are going to use this Bill, we have to say why we are using it, we have to celebrate it and we have to talk about how we as a country are stepping away from being a country that tolerates abuse.

We agree that, when we see statistics go up, we probably feel that that is because more people are aware that support is out there for them and that there might be a greater awareness of how well the police are doing and how much confidence there is in the police. However, again, these statistics are a tiny, tiny percentage of what is really going on. When you think about how horrifying it is, you see that it is truly horrifying. When we talk about proof and *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality]* the workplace, there is an additional difficulty, which is that not everyone is out in the workplace about all of their status. This is something that we wanted to speak about. Not everyone is open about their sexuality or even their relationship status in a workplace. They may never have spoken about what goes on at home. We speak about barriers; there are intersecting barriers. The barriers might be that the person is very rural and very isolated, and it might be intersected by their being gay, bi, trans or lesbian. It may be that they are older or younger. We have to look at the intersecting things that

prevent people from getting the help and support that they need. That does not mean that we should not do it or that we should not step forward positively to do it.

**Mr Dunne:** Thank you, Sonya and Rhonda, for your presentation, which was very clear, and your engagement thus far. I join others in commending the work that you do, including in my constituency of North Down. I am aware of the activities of both of your organisations there. As you have said, the problem is becoming more widespread and has grown in recent years. In the specific context of the Bill, I am keen to get your opinion. We have seen a great increase in working from home since the pandemic started, coming up to two years ago. Do you think that that has increased demand for your services? For some, the workplace is actually a safer place than home. I am interested in your views on that working from home issue.

**Ms McMullan:** We have to be clear that the pandemic has not caused domestic abuse. It has always been there. Of course, while we have government messaging saying, "Stay at home; stay safe", we know that many families live with domestic abuse day and daily. We saw, as with safeguarding figures, a decrease in referrals when the first lockdown started, but, when there has been any lessening of restrictions, our referrals have gone up.

That is why, on 25 November last year, as part of the 16 Days of Action campaign, we started the "Unlock your lockdown" campaign. That was to let people know, "We are still open; we are still here. Please contact us". A lot of the work that we did was on safety planning for being at home. We looked at very simple safety planning around keywords for friends and families if they were not safe. We also saw a lot of financial abuse implications for families who went to grandparents for dinner and that kind of thing and just did not — those financial implications were really impacted upon as well.

It has been a difficult year for all families who are experiencing domestic abuse. We are happy that our services have gone back to face-to-face, and we hope that they stay that way, albeit there may be a few changes on the horizon. There was an awful lot of risk assessment. Risk assessment is fluid and changes all the time, so we were supporting families that were still living with domestic abuse and others that were out of the situation.

On the working at home message, it is certainly as you said and as we said in our submission. Home, school, college and all those places are often a safe haven for people. During the time of working from home, we were contacted by an awful lot of employers. The Financial Services Union, for example, which covers the whole island, contacted us because it had seen an increase in domestic abuse and wanted to know how to help its members. That was really successful. We did a group of webinars looking at the champions within different organisations. Danske Bank promoted that too. An awful lot of organisations have been contacting us, looking at their workplace policies and raising the profile of that work during the past year and a half or coming up to two years, which we welcome.

It is about the support services that cannot meet the need because of lack of funding and the waiting lists that are being extended across the whole country in relation to support services. If you are in need of support and you ring someone, you do not want to be put on a waiting list. It might put you further back. It has most definitely impacted on the lives and safety of many families in Northern Ireland. It is a perfect storm for perpetrators of domestic abuse. If we think of the language around isolation, many of the things that happened during the COVID restrictions are tactics that many perpetrators already use. Yes, it culminated in a perfect storm for them, but it raised very serious safety issues for many families. Most of our refuges were full. There are still very high levels of occupancy and a huge number of referrals coming through day and daily. I know that MAP is experiencing that as well.

**Mr Dunne:** OK. Thank you.

**Ms Lusty:** MAP became a crisis response during COVID. It meant that we were open 365 days a year and worked until 10.00 pm, but there was no additional funding for that. It meant that we had to change how we worked a lot. Sonya has spoken of all the organisations that spoke to Women's Aid to support its workplace policies. With the exception of a very few, such as Danske Bank, they did not ask the Men's Advisory Project about how to support male victims. Sonya and Women's Aid do a brilliant job because they always talk about all victims, and we cannot thank them enough for that. Again, we must look at why is it that, when we are looking for workplace policies, we are not considering what happens to men or those in same-sex relationships. We are truly thinking about what happens to women and girls. As we have said, domestic abuse is a crime that impacts everyone. Our numbers rose by 100% during parts of the pandemic, and it was absolutely overwhelming. However,

at the same time, we stepped into that because there was no other support. That safety planning, risk assessment and letting the world at large see what it was like for those who faced domestic abuse was very important to us.

We tried to communicate with MLAs to let you know what it was like for men who experienced domestic abuse. We had a lot of family members phoning us who were worried about brothers, nephews, grandsons and sons because they could not see them any more. They had been worried previously, but it was a low level of worry, and they could see the person often enough. Once they could no longer see the person or the isolation tactics had been further increased by COVID, there was a lot of distress placed on wider families, and we need to look at that.

The Bill talks about how we keep people having the safety raft of work. The tools of an abuser are financial isolation and control. Those impacting on you in such a way that you lose your job is often deliberately done by an abuser. That is why, when we think of these things and we think of how much more dangerous it is for people who are living at home and are away from their work, it is good that we are thinking about how those policies can be layered in and awareness brought to workplaces and to the country. Thank you for asking such an excellent question.

**Mr Dunne:** Thank you.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I might have half a question; I might get to a question. I commend Sonya and Rhonda on one of the most powerful and informative presentations I have received at this Committee in the last two years. Rhonda made a very good point — as did Sonya — that there is no point in passing legislation unless people know about it and it is workable. Rhonda said that we should "celebrate" this legislation, and similar legislation, from the point of view of being a society that will no longer stand by and allow abuse to take place. We are going to support the victims of abuse. We as legislators can do that not through tea and sympathy but with legislation that works. I commend you on your presentation and your work.

As the presentation was going on, I was thinking about a case that I dealt with a number of years ago. The figures speak for themselves; the vast majority of victims of domestic abuse are women and girls, and the vast majority of perpetrators are men, but I am going to speak about that case, because it goes back to my potential question. I dealt with a big, physically strong man. He was the sort of guy who, if you ran into him on the football pitch, you would need to be stretchered off. That guy came to me one time and told me the story of the physical and psychological abuse that he was receiving at home. I was in shock. As legislators, we go through learning processes as well, and I learned a lot from that issue. I signposted him towards support and those sorts of things. I was thinking of that man. I think that, if he were to walk in to his employer, in a male-dominated work environment, and tell them that he was a victim of domestic abuse, his employer would be shocked. I do not know whether his employer would be able to support him, but it goes back to the point that you made earlier: we need to have information for employers, we need to support employers in this and we need to make people aware of the legislation and the rights that they have.

It is not so much a question, but I also wanted to make the point that the presentation is quite timely because we are approaching the Christmas period, which we are told is a very happy period, and, for very many people, it is a very happy and joyful time. For many people, it is also a very dangerous time. If a message comes out of this Committee today, it should be that there is support and another way out for those people. It is easy for me to say that, because it is not as easy when you are in the midst of it, but there is support and protection for them out there as well. It goes back to this point, which a number of members have raised, in fairness. When the legislation, hopefully, passes, how do we ensure that people are aware of it and able to use it?

**The Chairperson (Dr Archibald):** Thank you, John. I am not sure whether Sonya or Rhonda want to respond to that, but you made really important points. Sonya, do you want to come in?

**Ms McMullan:** I will come in about resourcing, because it is a huge issue. We have new domestic abuse legislation, and it was stated in the House that it was only going through because there was no money attached to it. That is no good. That is a piece of paper that is going to sit there. You need resourcing for those public awareness campaigns, for training and development, and for things to work properly in order to make changes to people's lives.

I know that we are in a very difficult time with budgets, and we look forward to seeing and commenting on the draft Budget, as we normally do. Very difficult times are ahead, but there are people — often

the most vulnerable in our society — who are experiencing domestic abuse. This legislation will be game-changing for so many people. For me, it does not matter if 10 or 1,000 people take it up. It is there, and it is about awareness. It is bigger than the cost that it will have for the employer. The awareness piece that can take place during this is more impactful.

**Ms Lusty:** Thank you so much for your comments, John. They were perfectly put. The idea that you can only support women and girls or men and boys is a bit of a mistake. That is so far from what we see in the sector. We see people who need help and support. Whilst I work for the Men's Advisory Project and Sonya works for Women's Aid, we work together all the time to try to ensure that the support network for those who face abuse is there and is strengthened day by day.

I would love our MLAs to speak more about domestic abuse — to speak about it all the time. That may sound like a boring drum to beat, but what if we spoke about it all the time in an inclusive and open way? When we look at Bills, we could think, "OK, we are going to bring through this Bill; how is it going to impact Women's Aid and MAP? What money needs to be attached to that? If men are seeking to flee to safety, where do they go? If women need to flee to safety, where do they go? Is there enough space and refuge? Have we increased funding for refuge in years?" Those are all things that are within your grasp as a Committee. When we come to you, we come to try to put meat on the bones of the Bill, but we also come to ask you to do a bit more. I know that we always try our best, and I know that, given COVID, it is difficult at the moment, but the suffering has continued and will continue. We keep trying to drag it out into public awareness, but unless we get support from all the House, that will not happen. That support, unfortunately, also has to include funding.

**The Chairperson (Dr Archibald):** Thank you. I do not have any other members wanting to come in with questions. Again, thank you for your evidence this morning. You have very clearly set out for the Committee why this legislation is needed. I want to reiterate to everyone, particularly during the festive season, when we know that there are increased incidences of domestic abuse, that support is available and that there are organisations out there that will help and will believe people when they come forward. You have really helped the Committee this morning, and I thank you again for coming along and sharing your evidence with us.

**Ms McMullan:** Thanks for the opportunity today. Thank you very much.

**Ms Lusty:** Thank you so much.