

**Social
Democrats**

Survivors at the Centre

Ending Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

For the Future
It Starts Here

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Key Points

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Properly resource and implement the *Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence*.
- Make sustainable multi-annual funding for DSGBV services the norm.
- Pursue policy in DSGBV recognising the experiences and needs of different groups including disabled people, members of the LGBTQI+ community, Travellers and other ethnic minorities, and migrants and refugees.
- Ensure policy on DSGBV has a strong focus on children.
- Establish a Commissioner on DSGBV with appropriate resources and powers to monitor the National Strategy's implementation.
- Ensure training on domestic abuse and coercive control is available for legal professionals in the family law and criminal justice systems.
- Commit sufficient capital funding to double available refuge units over the lifetime of the next government, as well as significantly more Safe Homes.
- Ensure refuges are funded to specifically support and accommodate children traumatised by domestic violence and abuse.
- Create a medical card-type scheme for refuges to ensure that survivors staying in refuge accommodation can avail of medical treatment.
- Includes survivors of domestic violence in the next Housing Strategy as a priority cohort for social and affordable housing.
- Continue updating the SPHE/RSE curricula to ensure adequate guidance on issues like sexism and gender equality, and other areas.
- Work to combat online gender-based violence, including intimate image abuse, and to address the harms of online pornography.
- Resource and implement the Family Law Reform Strategy and the Family Justice Strategy.
- Initiate new legislative powers to enable An Garda Síochána to remove abusers from the home.
- Amend legislation so a parent convicted of the murder or manslaughter of the other parent does not retain guardianship of a surviving child or children.
- Ensure that a person cannot financially profit from murder or manslaughter.

Introduction

The United Nations describes violence against women as the most prevalent human rights violation in the world.

Domestic, Sexual, and Gender-Based Violence (DSGBV) is a serious problem in Ireland. One in four women in this country are affected by domestic violence in their lifetime, while half of all women report experiencing sexual violence at some point.

Most violence against women is perpetrated by current or former partners. An Garda Síochána received over 54,000 domestic abuse calls in 2023 and the number of calls for help are rising.

Increased public awareness in recent years and the publication of the latest *National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence* in 2022 are to be welcomed. However, the pace of change is still too slow. For many, “Zero Tolerance” remains a distant dream.

Services in the sector are overstretched and underfunded, so cannot meet the ever-increasing demand. Too often the legal system seems to work against domestic violence and abuse survivors, and the lengthy delays created by the family and criminal law infrastructure have unsafe and traumatising results. Too often we are failing to deliver justice for survivors through our court system.

Meanwhile, the housing crisis and lack of appropriate specialist accommodation provision for abuse survivors severely limits options. Ireland still has less than one third of the required refuge beds mandated under the Istanbul Convention.

At the same time, gender-based violence facilitated by technology is on the rise, as are the harms of online pornography, with little meaningful accountability for the online platforms facilitating this.

So much more needs to be invested in prevention, protection, legislative reform, and policy co-ordination to truly transform Ireland into a country where there is zero tolerance of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence.

The Social Democrats are committed to accelerated investment in this area and fully resourcing and implementing the National Strategy. We will also support the delivery of Ireland’s commitments under the Istanbul Convention.

We must maintain momentum towards creating an equal and safe Ireland with zero tolerance of domestic abuse and all forms of violence against women.

Strategic Priorities

National Strategies on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (DSGBV) must be victim/survivor-centred.

The *Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence* was co-designed with the DSGBV sector with this in mind, and the Strategy has their continued support. We believe it is essential that the Strategy be resourced and implemented in full. In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Properly resource and implement the *Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence*.
- Ensure that the development of a Fourth National Strategy is resourced.
- Pursue policy in the area of DSGBV that recognises the experiences and needs of different groups including disabled people, members of the LGBTQI+ community, Travellers and other ethnic minorities, and migrants and refugees.
- Allocate funding and resources to implementing the Third National Strategy across all four pillars; namely protection, prosecution, policy-co-ordination and prevention.
- Properly resource an investigation into the drivers of behaviours supportive attitudes in Ireland, and ensure that primary prevention of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence is resourced to address societal attitudes to achieve Zero Tolerance of DSGBV.
- Integrate workshops on attitudes towards, and the drivers of, domestic, sexual and gender-based abuse across academic programmes at third level
- Ensure policy on DSGBV has a strong focus on children, in line with the National Strategy and with our obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- Establish a Commissioner on DSGBV with appropriate resources and powers to monitor the National Strategy's implementation.
- Resource and implement the Family Law Reform Strategy and the Family Justice Strategy.
- Develop an Action Plan to implement recommendations of the *Study on Familicide and Domestic and Family Violence Death Reviews*.

Legal Reform

The legal process in Ireland for victims of domestic and sexual violence has been described as retraumatising and not fit for purpose.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Ensure training on domestic abuse and coercive control is available for legal professionals in the family law and criminal justice systems.
- Invest in our courts system to reduce delays in bringing cases to trial.
- Ensure domestic violence survivors do not have to pay for court ordered assessments and that these assessments are conducted by suitably qualified professionals.
- Establish mechanisms to prevent the current siloing of criminal justice, private family law and public law child care processes in relation to domestic and sexual violence.
- Initiate new legislative powers to enable An Garda Síochána to remove abusers from the home, thereby reducing the need for victims to flee the family home.
- Resource and implement the Family Law Reform Strategy and the Family Justice Strategy.
- Develop an Action Plan to implement recommendations of the Study on Familicide and Domestic and Family Violence Death Reviews, including:
 - Amending current legislation to ensure that a parent convicted of the murder or manslaughter of the other parent does not retain guardianship of a surviving child or children.
 - Enacting legislation, as per the Law Reform Commission's recommendations, to ensure that a person who commits murder or manslaughter should not benefit or profit financially from that act.
- Change legislation so that victims'/survivors' counselling/therapy notes are not routinely used as evidence in sexual offence trials.
- Work to encourage the referral, by An Garda Síochána, of all victims/survivors of sexual violence who report a crime to a Rape Crisis Centre for specialised support.

Supporting the DSGBV Sector

For too long, support services for victims/survivors of domestic and sexual violence have been chronically underfunded.

During the recession, funding for most domestic and sexual violence services was cut by up to 20 per cent, with restoration only happening in recent years.

There is still a shortage of funds for basic services; on any given day of the week there are refuge services across the country putting call outs on social media for donations of food and clothes. It is time to properly fund and expand these vital support services.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Make sustainable multi-annual funding for domestic and sexual abuse services the norm.
- Resource the provision of essentials (like food and clothes) at refuges, as well as therapeutic counselling to aid recovery.
- Create a scheme for refuges to ensure that victims/survivors staying in refuge accommodation can avail of medical treatment on the same basis as qualifying individuals availing of a medical card.
- Provide DSGBV services with core funding to deliver specialist support to children.
- Resource specialist DSGBV services to engage with education and awareness raising in their communities.
- Provide the additional resources necessary for DSGBV services to reach and support vulnerable groups, including those in homelessness, those with alcohol or drug abuse issues, members of the LGBTQI+ community, Travellers, migrants and refugees, and those with a disability.
- Support survivors of domestic violence to leave abusive relationships by piloting an emergency cash payment, similar to the UK Flee Funds.
- Support programmes which seek to educate on issues of DSGBV.

Refuge Spaces and Housing

Survivors of domestic violence and abuse face huge issues in securing accommodation; both emergency and long term.

Ireland still has less than one third of the required refuge beds needed to meet our obligations under the Istanbul convention. There is a clear need to increase the number of refuges and refuge spots in Ireland to fulfil our commitments.

This must include the dedication of capital funding to build and acquire the spaces, and current funding with which to run the settings.

When refuges are full, as is often the case, it prevents women and children from leaving dangerous and abusive homes. While the government has committed to double refuge accommodation over the lifetime of the National Strategy on DSGBV, the speedy delivery must remain a priority.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Streamline the planning process for new refuges to ensure a quicker turnaround.
- Commit sufficient capital funding to double available refuge units over the lifetime of the next government, as well as significantly more Safe Homes.
- Ensure refuges are funded to specifically support and accommodate children traumatised by domestic violence and abuse.
- Make sure refuges are accessible to disabled people.
- Include survivors of domestic violence in the next Housing Strategy as a priority cohort for social and affordable housing.
- Publish revised guidance for Local Authorities on the housing needs of survivors of domestic violence without delay.
- Implement recommendations from the Social Housing, Domestic Violence and Public Sector Duty report by Mercy Law Centre to strengthen the rights of tenants affected by domestic violence and improve the response from County Councils.

Relationships & Sexuality Education (RSE)

The Social Democrats believe that the SPHE and RSE curricula should be standardised across all publicly funded schools.

In 2021, the Social Democrats brought forward a Bill seeking to reform the way RSE is taught. However it has been repeatedly delayed by Government. The Bill would amend the Education Act to, among other things, require schools to teach RSE solely in accordance with the prescribed curriculum which must be evidence-based, and in line with universal social goals.

The education system has a role to play at all school levels to reduce and prevent DSGBV in the future. Schools should implement a reformed SPHE and RSE curriculum to cover age-appropriate content on issues like sexism and gender equality, healthy and unhealthy relationships, consent, homophobia and transphobia, and the impact of pornography.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Continue updating the SPHE/RSE curricula to ensure adequate guidance on issues like sexism and gender equality, healthy and unhealthy relationships, consent, and homophobia and transphobia.
- Ensure that schools use SPHE/RSE to address the issue of pornography, and how it contributes to gender inequality and harmful sexual behaviours.
- Work to remove the ability for schools to opt out of content in this area.
- Ensure appropriate training for SPHE teachers.

Online

Online DSGBV is an increasing problem. Online abuse within and outside of relationships is of great concern, especially for younger generations. Research suggests that nearly half of young women who experience intimate relationship abuse in Ireland experience online abuse by their partner and/or ex-partner.

This can include having images or videos taken of them without their consent, and the sharing or threatened sharing of sexually explicit or intimate photos and/or videos without their consent.

While the non-consensual sharing of intimate images has been criminalised, criminal prosecutions take time and often do not progress. For most victims, having the harmful content removed from the internet before it goes viral is the primary concern.

In Government, the Social Democrats will continue the work being done to combat online DSGBV, including intimate image abuse, by preventing abuse, protecting, and providing resources for victims/survivors, addressing the harms of online pornography and holding online platforms and social media accountable.

Pornography can help shape unrealistic, unequal and disrespectful sexual expectations, particularly among boys and young men, and often normalises and promotes sexual violence. It also promotes misogynistic attitudes, yet it is widely available, including to children and young people, and helps shape their understanding of sex and relationships. We need to address the harms of online pornography and particularly the risk of consumption by children.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Work to combat online gender-based violence, including intimate image abuse, and to address the harms of online pornography.
- Provide resources for victims/survivors.
- Make technology platforms accountable for their content and business models, including for algorithms which push violent, extremist and pornographic material to young people.
- Work to develop a fast, free, and enforceable mechanism to remove intimate image abuse and content promoting DSGBV from online platforms and social media.

Understanding the problem

Despite a widespread understanding in society that domestic, sexual and gender-based violence is both commonplace and under-reported, reliable national data is limited.

The Social Democrats believe that understanding a problem is the first step in solving it. We need much better, more robust data published on a regular basis in order to understand the scale of the problem and to understanding what progress is being made in tackling it.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Ensure Cuan, the new Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Agency, is resourced to compile and publish accurate national data on DSGBV services, including on housing and support service needs and refuge requests.
- Ensure An Garda Síochána and the DPP publish more detailed information on domestic and sexual violence cases, and that county councils' data on social housing requests where domestic violence is a factor are published.
- Commission the Central Statistics Office to run a Domestic Violence prevalence survey, modelled on the recent Sexual Violence survey.
- Commission a biennial population-wide national beliefs and attitudes survey to measure attitudinal change over the lifetime of the current and future DSGBV strategies, and ensure the evidence gathered from such surveys is used to develop targeted interventions and campaigns around changing attitudes to DSGBV.
- Invest in efforts to increase the rate of reporting of sexual and domestic violence, so that the true rate of offence is better understood.

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