

Tackling Violence Against Women
and Girls in Northern Ireland:

A STUDENT MOVEMENT RESPONSE



Contents

Foreword	1
Introduction	2
Development of the Charter	2
Signing Up	2
Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Charter Visibility	3
Definitions Used in this Charter	3
Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Charter	4
Aim	4
Principle One Taking a Public Stance	5
Principle Two Active Policy Daily Operations	6
Principle Three Democracy Sport STEM	7
Principle Four Bystander Training	8
Principle Five Campaigning for Change	9
Conclusion	10



Foreword

The Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Charter was established in response to the increase in violence against women and girls across Northern Ireland. It is the first collective Students' Union document on this matter in Northern Ireland, and strives to address issues around misogyny, sexual harassment, and violence against women and girls in all its forms.

As a Students' Union representative, I have had countless conversations with women students who feel unsafe. Students contacted me after the murder of Mary Ward as they lived on her street, and were terrified to go home. Students spoke to me at our Magee campus about their fears going out in the city centre after a rise in incidents of drink spiking in Derry/Londonderry. When "suspicious items" were found in the Coleraine area students told me they were scared to walk home after class. There is a pattern, and it is across Northern Ireland: women students do not feel safe here.

Violence against women and girls impacts more than just the individual receiving the abuse, but the wider community also. As such it is our collective responsibility to address this serious problem.

That is why I reached out to NUS-USI to do something meaningful about it, and through consultation and consensus with Students' Unions across further and higher education we have created this charter. This is more than signing a document and having a photo opportunity, this is commitment to action. The student movement has always been at the forefront of societal change, leading the charge and tackling the issues of the day. This is our fight. By signing this charter, your Students' Union is committed to doing the work to end violence against women and girls.



Emily Maisie Roberts

Ulster University Students' Union
Vice President Education
2024/25

Introduction

The Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Charter is an active commitment by those involved with a Student Union in Northern Ireland, to: (1) take steps to address the ongoing violence against women and girls in NI; (2) reduce any barriers to women and girls in a range of career fields; and (3) enhance the voices of women and girls. The Charter will use education as a tool to promote these objectives.

The Northern Ireland Executive published and funded the Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy in 2024, and this charter has been created in part to enable Students' Unions to hold The Executive accountable on this matter.

Development of the Charter

This charter was developed with consultation from all further education and higher education Students' Unions across Northern Ireland. This ensured fair representation for all Further and Higher Education students and apprentices. Furthermore, this breadth of representation highlights the different experiences of violence against women and girls across Northern Ireland both geographically, and by study level.

Ulster University Students' Union has held a series of meetings with student representatives, including networks, societies, and with academic reps to develop this charter. Discussions covered the principles, aims, actions, and language throughout the charter.

Signing Up

The Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Charter is a tool for all Students' Unions and/or their membership. By signing the Students' Union is visibly opposing violence against women and girls, but more so committing to playing their part in ending violence against women and girls in Northern Ireland and holding themselves accountable to doing so.

By becoming a signatory to this charter, your Students' Union supports the principles presented. We recognise that ending violence against women and girls in Northern Ireland will take time, active engagement, progressive change, and dedication across a range of stakeholders.

Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Charter Visibility

An annual report on the charter signatories, their successes, and any challenges faced will be published annually by NUS-USI and via each Students' Union's website.

Definitions Used in this Charter

For the purposes of this charter and the wider work of tackling violence against women and girls, we recognise it is important to define what we mean by this term.

We are focused on the nature of the violence and abuse committed against women and girls because they are a woman or girl or are perceived to be a woman or a girl, by the person perpetuating the harm against them. When we say 'violence', this can mean but is not limited to the following types of abuse:

- Psychological
- Physical
- Sexual
- Financial
- Emotional
- Online/digital harassment

The term "women and girls" is defined by the motivation behind the violence, and not by the identity or gender presentation of the victim/survivor. The key here is that the perpetrator has committed this violence because they believe the victim/survivor to be a woman or a girl. The motivation is violent misogyny, and by using this term we are recognising what the core issue is.

Victims/survivors of this violence can include people from a wide variety of gender identities and presentations. If you have experienced this kind of violence this does not define your gender identity, nor do we seek to define your experience.

We believe it is important to name this as violence against women and girls because we must acknowledge the root cause, misogyny. We need to look at this issue and its definition in the context of Northern Ireland having the highest femicide rate across the UK and Ireland, and this place being one of the most dangerous places in Europe to be a woman or a girl.

We refuse to allow society to shy away from the fact that we clearly have a problem with violence against women and girls and that action to change this is required.

Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Charter

An annual report on the charter signatories, their successes, and any challenges faced will be published annually by NUS-USI and via each Students' Union's website.

To achieve this, we will:

- Stand up and speak out on incidences of violence against women and girls.
- Develop policies and practices that highlight and address the ongoing issues of gender-based violence, discrimination, and inequality, ensuring such policies have achievable actions on how to combat these issues on their campuses.
- Take steps to actively involve women and girls in all aspects of union life, from securing leadership roles to holding council seats to becoming academic reps and being involved in societies/networks, sport and STEM work.
- Work to establish active bystander training schemes/programmes for all universities and colleges in Northern Ireland.
- Through education, campaigns, and other work we will strive to reduce stereotypes, stigma and barriers for women and girls across Northern Ireland.

Aim

Higher Education and Further Education Institutions of Northern Ireland will be a safe space for women and girls, free from misogyny, violence, and barriers. Women and girls will be empowered to succeed, thrive, and progress.

Principle One

Students' Unions will stand up and speak out on incidences of violence against women and girls. We will take responsibility for calling it out both as individual representatives and as organisations.

Taking a Public Stance

It is paramount that when an incident occurs, the Students' Union publicly responds with empathy, expressing solidarity with the victim(s) and their families. It is crucial that the Students' Union takes a firm stance against all forms of violence against women and girls, making it clear that such violence is unacceptable in any form.

Violence Against Women and Girls is a symptom of a larger systemic issue, fuelled from stigma and stereotypes. Therefore, it is essential that the Students' Union lobbies and campaigns for long-term solutions to not only address the root causes but to prevent further incidents of violence, harassment, or abuse. This can be achieved through education, awareness, and regular communication with local organisations and our members. We will encourage our members to speak out and report incidents when they see them, on or off campus.

- We will work with our institutions to ensure our reporting procedures are robust, with care pathways and support built in.
- We will work collaboratively to support students when these incidents occur, and to address any fears/concerns expressed by students in the aftermath.
- We will ensure that when we call these incidents out, that we address the societal context and consistently call for solutions to tackle the root causes of violence against women and girls.

Principle Two

Students' Unions will develop policies and practices that highlight and address the ongoing issues of Violence Against Women and Girls, discrimination, and inequality, ensuring such policies have achievable actions on how to combat these issues on their campuses.

Active Policy

The Students' Union will develop and implement policy that clearly outlines specific aims and objectives to empower women, tackle violence against women and girls, and promote an inclusive environment. It is crucial that these policies reflect an active commitment to creating a safe, supportive, and equitable space for all individuals.

Daily Operations

Each Students' Union in Northern Ireland must ensure that day-to-day operations and practices actively promote an inclusive environment. This requires not only commitment to internal organisational policies, but also dedication to eliminating barriers and challenging harmful societal norms associated with gender discrimination. Students' Unions must stand firmly against such discrimination and work continuously to create an environment that reflects equity, respect, and empowerment for everyone

- We will ensure Union policy is robust and fit for purpose, and will not be afraid to act on our commitments to tackling violence against women and girls.
- We will ensure Students' Union staff and elected officers receive equity at work training, to embed this principle in our working culture.

Principle Three

Students' Unions will take steps to actively involve women and girls in all aspects of Union life, from securing leadership roles, to holding council seats, to becoming academic reps, and being involved in societies/networks. Students' Unions will champion women student engagement in areas where they have been traditionally underrepresented, i.e. Sport and STEM.

Ensuring that women and girls have equal representation and opportunities within Students' Unions helps to challenge gender-based discrimination. It encourages an environment where all students, regardless of gender, can equally participate in decision-making processes.

Democracy

Through initiatives like She Should Run, profiling women leaders, and active promotion and support of women's networks/societies, Students' Unions can and should empower the next generation of women leaders.

Sport

Women's involvement in sport can be increased by highlighting women and non-binary athletes and coaches through different media, highlighting both their individual achievements and the benefits of getting involved. Seeing other women involved in sport can inspire the wider community of women and non-binary students to get involved.

Breaking down stereotypes and barriers is a crucial aspect to getting more women involved in sport, particular in relation to physical appearance. Addressing these stereotypes through positive messaging and body-positive campaigns can encourage more women to participate.

STEM

Women have been historically under-represented in STEM. These systemic and cultural barriers still exist, however part of making positive change includes celebrating the contributions women have made to science, especially those women overlooked in their time.

Students' Unions will champion women studying fields in which they have been historically underrepresented, supporting academic reps in these courses to organise women-focused events and highlight issues women on these courses are facing.

- We will run campaigns, events, and schemes to encourage women to stand for election at all levels within the Students' Union.
- We will work with women on STEM courses and those involved in sport to address the specific barriers they each face, and platform both their struggles and successes.

Principle Four

Students' Unions will work to establish active bystander training schemes/programmes for all universities and colleges across Northern Ireland.

Bystander Training

Establishing active bystander training programs across universities and colleges in Northern Ireland is a vital step toward fostering safer, more inclusive campuses. In the event of the institution not providing any active bystander training, the Students' Union should lobby for the establishment of one, ensuring it is freely accessible to all staff and students within the institution. This training is essential in fostering a culture of awareness, respect, and responsibility, empowering individuals to intervene effectively in situations where they witness harmful behaviours.

The Students' Union should publicly promote and encourage its membership to participate and engage in the training, ensuring that society committee members, academic representatives and volunteers at the Union receive the training. This will create a campus culture of zero tolerance to violence against women and girls.

- We will ensure that our members have access to active bystander intervention training, provided either internally or externally.
- We will include active bystander intervention training as a part of the induction for new society committees, academic reps, sports team leadership, and volunteers.
- We will ensure that our elected officers and staff have received active bystander intervention training.

Principle Five

Through education, campaigns, and other work Students' Unions will strive to reduce stereotypes, stigma and barriers for women and girls in Northern Ireland.

Reducing stereotypes, decreasing stigma, and eliminating barriers for women and girls in Northern Ireland is essential for achieving gender equity and creating an inclusive society where everyone has the potential and opportunity to thrive.

Campaigning for Change

Wide-reaching public awareness campaigns can be used to challenge harmful stereotypes and raise awareness about the unique challenges faced by women and girls living in Northern Ireland. Campaigns could include:

Celebrating Women's Contributions:

Highlight the successes and contributions of women in various sectors, showcasing role models from Northern Ireland and beyond. We cannot be what we cannot see.

Men as Allies:

Run campaigns that engage men and boys as allies in challenging stereotypes and promoting gender equity. Men's participation is critical for shifting ingrained cultural beliefs about gender roles.

Community-Based Campaigns:

Partner with local community groups, e.g. schools, youth groups, women's sector organisations, etc. to collectively tackle violence against women and girls.

Women's Health and Well-Being:

Utilise SHAG (Sexual Health Advice and Guidance) Week to provide comprehensive and inclusive sexual health education. Covering consent, relationships, reproductive health, and body autonomy. These campaigns support the breakdown of stigma surrounding women's health, including menstruation, menopause and mental health. Going a step further, these campaigns can do myth busting around contraception and smear tests.

Legislation and Policy Advocacy:

Advocate for stronger laws and policies that address gender inequality in key areas such as the workplace, education, healthcare, and political representation. This includes pushing for equal pay, combating sexual harassment, and ensuring access to reproductive health services. In Northern Ireland, following the launch of the Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy by the Government and the PSNI, as Students' Unions we are responsible for holding them to account to ensure they are acting in line with these promises and meeting targets.

Conclusion

We recognise that there is a long way to go with this work, and that gender equity will not happen overnight. As a signatory to this charter, you are holding yourself and your Students' Union accountable. You are promising not words, but deeds.

- NUS-USI will collate and publish annually the work being done by signatory Students' Unions according to the actions laid out in the five principles.
- A working group will be established to discuss challenges and solutions signatory Unions may be facing, and to facilitate collaboration.
- Students' Unions will nominate one elected representative from within their respective leadership teams each academic year to report back to the working group.



With thanks to NUS-USI for their support in the creation and launch of this charter.

Written by Emily Roberts, UUSU Vice President Education 24/25

Edited by Rosie McKenna

Designed by Lauren Davidson