
ENDING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS



Politics in Action



Cross and Passion College and Ballycastle High School



Politics in Action runs a cross-community programme with schools across Northern Ireland that seeks to increase young people's knowledge about politics and their sense of efficacy in addressing issues that are important to them. The current programme is called 'Citizens Now' - and has involved 35 schools in the current academic year.

Young people link with other schools in their local area, and this is the first year we have worked with two Ballycastle schools - **Cross and Passion College** and **Ballycastle High School**. The students were in year 14 and were involved in a workshop that helped build relationships between them, identified issues about which they were concerned and then focused in on the issue that was most important to the students. There were 13 students involved in the project - 10 female and 3 male - though not all were able to make it to Stormont. These workshops were facilitated by our Executive Director, Paul Smyth, with support from their teachers Caroline McAfee (C&P) and Neil McMaster (BHS).

The students settled on the issue of Violence Against Women and Girls and the related issue of the rise in 'Toxic Masculinity'. The students felt very passionately about these issues, and worked closely together to develop this report and to present it to MLAs at the Northern Ireland Assembly. They met with **Timothy Gaston** MLA, **Sian Mulholland** MLA and **Philip McGuigan** MLA.

Their visit was facilitated by the Education Team at the Northern Ireland Assembly.



“...education fails women today and will fail them again in September unless we reform it”

-EMER

Jenna – We would like to start by thanking “Politics in Action” for allowing us to meet, with Cross and Passion College, and explore issues important to us as young people growing up in Northern Ireland. We would also like to thank our MLAs for taking the time to meet with us today and listen to our presentation on the work we have been doing over the past year.

When exploring themes which meant a lot to us this year, the two that really struck a chord with us as a group were:

“Our education and RSE systems do not work well enough in deterring and educating around these issues”

- LYDIA

1) Ending violence against women and girls in our communities, and

2) The rise of toxic masculinity and the importance of education to combat this trend.

Carragh – Unfortunately, the importance of both themes has been increasingly evident throughout this year. In the media, we often see the impact on women and girls in our society. This has been reinforced by recent evidence republished by the PSNI; that Northern Ireland is the most dangerous place to be a

woman in Europe, coupled with the recent horrifying statistic that thirty women have lost their lives locally to male violence since 2020.

Victim Focus found, in a sample of over 22,000 UK women, 99.7% had been repeatedly subjected to violence including assaults, harassment and rape. And, The ‘Every Voice Matters, Violence Against Women in

Northern Ireland’ report by Ulster University revealed this year that 98% of the 540 women who responded had experienced at least one form of violence or abuse during their lifetime, with half experiencing this before they were 11 years old.





Although we welcome the release of the ‘End Violence against Women’ strategy – today, we would not only like to outline these issues but look to the future and present how education reforms can play a part in combating violence against women and girls.

Lydia - Introducing Toxic Masculinity

We recognise that it is very difficult to combat violence against women and girls in an atmosphere blighted by legacy issues and a rise in toxic masculinity, especially the type that has arisen online. Toxic masculinity, as we know, is *“The internalized cultural pressure for men to act tough, powerful and avoid showing emotion.”* This is linked to an increasingly negative view of women.

We see anti-women sentiment increasingly online and in elements of society, unfortunately, impacting many across Northern Ireland. We see it within our own peers. In our own school we experience this in dismissive pupil attitudes towards female sports teams, compared to male teams. This is just a small indicator of a greater issue.

The much-reported incident in Laurel Hill Community College, which saw nineteen male students suspended for their treatment of female staff and pupils was another example of how this type of aggressive culture influences young men and impacts women and girls.

While we applauded the principal's decisive action in this case, it outlines a more worrying reality in schools across Northern Ireland. Our education and RSE systems do not work well enough in deterring and educating around these issues. We will talk later about how education can lead to improvements in these attitudes.

Kacee - Toxic masculinity in the media

As a group we considered how society can move to dealing with the **cause** rather than the symptom when violence and toxic masculinity begin to plague our society. This is not just a cultural problem; it's a pathway to the murder of innocent women. Femicide.

One of our key focuses was to explore the role of the media in creating a culture of a destructive impression of what it is to be man in modern society. We saw the rise of so-called influencers, such as Andrew Tate and learned the horrifying fact that



his content has been viewed over 10 billion times since 2022. And the 'red pill' male podcasters who focus on misogyny and hostile sexism, which often seems to lead to women being dehumanised and treated as objects.

Sadly, this can also lead to violence, and the objectification of women to be treated as a matter of opinion, rather than abusive behaviour.

In both of our schools we see individuals discussing these themes and content, which is a huge concern. Therefore, even in our own environments we can see that these harmful messages are

repeated by peers, and we fear what impact that this will have in the future.

“...we see anti-women sentiment increasingly online and in elements of society”

-LYDIA

We also fear the algorithms online, especially on social media platforms, which hook young people to see more extreme content around toxic masculinity and violence towards women to keep them viewing. Echo chambers online are a ticking time bomb, the more entrenched someone gets into their tailored algorithm, the more they begin to believe that their feeds are showing them a majority held opinion. This can push misinformation to younger people in the form of believed truth. It creates a dangerous ideology built on lies.

“...echo chambers online are a ticking timebomb”

-KACEE

Close to home, we saw the victimisation of Conor McGreggor. A court of law found the man guilty of rape, and yet these echo chambers spread misinformation and glorified the rapist.

Blame can be pushed onto victims of abuse, and when exploring evidence of this trend, it is contributing to the violence against women and girls in NI we see today.

Eimear - Tackling the cause?

We realised we needed to tackle the cause and not the symptoms of this problem. We thought of how violence against women and toxic masculinity can be effectively managed in our society.



The key answer for us seemed to lie in the education. We realise that the core structure of social media will promote these spaces, but it is up to our own education systems to protect our young people from being vulnerable to these negative inputs. We understand that the role of both parents and schools is vital for achieving the change we hope for.

We would love to see major reforms in education when it comes to violence against women and girls and the development of toxic culture around masculinity. When researching this theme there was evidence from the Youth Endowment Scheme, which stated; tackling these issues in educational settings will help reduce incidents of violence towards women.



A timetabled and consistent curriculum within RSE that teaches violence against women and girls through an emotional lens would help to instil the consequences of the behaviour into young boys. For example, like the way we teach drunk driving, an emotional, consequence-based style that tells the stories of those affected. Teaching people the quantity and scale of abuse that women face daily and how the consequences ripple through society

Emer - Just yesterday, our school had a violence against women workshop for sixth year students. While this is a step in the right direction, it is not good enough. This was the first time *in all our years in education* that this issue was explored. As we saw in Laurel Hill, and in many cases, this is simply too late.

“We would love to see major reforms in education when it comes to violence against women and girls”

-EIMEAR

We propose that violence against women education needs a larger focus within RSE. Schools should not have the ability to chop and change RSE lessons, to not teach vital information and protection to young people. The Ulster University Healthy Young Adult Relationships Research Project found that RSE education in NI is not currently fit for purpose, or inclusive, nor is it delivered early enough. The research looked at education of intimate partner violence and coercive control.

RSE laws have changed during our education, but they are nowhere near expansive or effective enough to deliver the change in society that

we wish to see. While changes to guidance are being implemented by September, the core issue still exists. The education fails women today and will fail women in September unless we can reform it.

To recap, we want more expansive education to be delivered on toxic masculinity and violence against women and girls, and we would suggest that it should be emotional, and consequence based. The reality is grim, and our education needs to reflect it.

Evidence based learning is not being utilised in classrooms, the youth endowment fund scheme clearly shows a correlation between education and a reduction in harmful behaviours when it comes to women's safety. Something needs to change, and the longer we wait, the more women suffer. It's that simple.

This report is the work of the students involved. The students also took part in a 'Local to Global' event hosted at Queen's University in March with over 200 other young people from across Northern Ireland. The event looked at a number of important global themes including violence against women and girls, the rise of the far right, the climate crisis and the ethics of Artificial Intelligence. This work has been funded by the Reconciliation Fund (DFAT) and the Ireland Funds with support from Radius Housing, Belfast City Council, the Education Authority (Shared Education) and the RAM Foundation.

For more information on the work of Politics in Action, please visit our website policinaction.org or follow our social media channels.