

18th Annual Martin Tansey Memorial Lecture - the Jury Room, Criminal Courts of Justice (CCJ), Parkgate Street, Dublin 8, D08 K6YH.

Strategy to Tackle Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence in Ireland - Dr. Stephanie O'Keeffe

Introduction

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you to everyone attending, for your interest in the area of Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence. Thank you also to the Association for Criminal Justice Research and Development (ACJRD) for the invitation to deliver the 18th Annual Martin Tansey Memorial Lecture and for the association's interest in this area of criminal justice policy and practice. One of the things I have learned about Martin Tansey was his commitment to public service, his commitment to evidence-based practice and his commitment to living a professional life full of support for his colleagues, accompanied with a vision for change. I've said this many times, but it truly is a privilege to be a public servant, having the opportunity to do meaningful, transformative work and improve the lives of citizens through evidence-based strategy and policy development. My whole career has been in public service and since taking up the role of CEO of Cuan in February 2024, as a civil servant, working in a new statutory agency under the aegis of the Department of Justice.

The lecture today is about implementation of national strategy to tackle domestic, sexual and gender-based violence (DSGBV) in Ireland. I am going to give you my personal and professional reflections on that, as somebody who has experience in the development and implementation of whole-of-government, whole-of-society strategies to improve specific outcomes in a population. While many years ago, I undertook a PhD in organisational decision making in the area of rape and criminal investigations and worked in the area of sexual health improvement for 10 years, I am not an expert in DSGBV specifically. This lecture draws on my experience of strategy development, strategy implementation, monitoring and transformation, in and across large complex organisations and Government Departments. I also draw on what I have learned from the many experts in the area of DSGBV since commencing this role.

To date there has been three national strategies to tackle DSGBV, and to give you a spoiler alert at the very beginning; we wouldn't have a third national strategy if we had solved the problem identified in the first. I'm going to speak a little about this.

Today's lecture will set out the background of Cuan and explain its statutory functions. From there, I'll talk about the three national strategies published to date; what they have in common and where there are points of differentiation. Next, I will talk about the prevalence of sexual violence over two decades, drawing on the findings from the Sexual Assault in Ireland Survey (SAVI), published in 2002 and the more recent, 2022 Sexual Violence Survey (SVS) conducted by the Central Statistics Office (CSO)ⁱ. These two

surveys allow us to think about the challenges of successfully addressing the widespread issues of gender based violence in Ireland and internationally. From here I'll talk about new threats that have emerged in the area of DSGBV. I am going to set out opportunities and what I see as critical success factors that give us hope that it is possible to create conditions that prevent and protect women, children and other victims from sexual and domestic violence and will enable us to demonstrate that we can move the dial and make progress in this complex area. Finally, I will set out practical things everyone can do to play a part in ending this pandemic that kills women, damages children, destroys lives, wrecks havoc in families and communities and poses a threat to psychosocial, social and economic development in Irish society.

The Establishment of Cuan

Cuan was established following the enactment of the Domestic Sexual and Gender Based Agency Act 2023ⁱⁱ and it is a statutory agency under the aegis of the Department of Justice. Cuan is an Irish word meaning haven or harbour or place of shelter. Cuan has a Board and a staff compliment of 35 staff. Cuan's purpose is to drive Ireland's response to the prevention of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence and the protection of all victims and survivorsⁱⁱⁱ.

Cuan's founding legislation sets out a range of statutory functions. Some of these functions were formerly delivered by Tusla, the Child and Family Agency and the Department of Justice. Cuan as a new entity is working hard to establish and grow strong relationships and partnerships with both of these important partners in its work. Cuan's functions include delivering excellent services to victims of DSGBV, including delivering on the number of safe and accessible accommodation spaces available for those fleeing abuse, as well as ensuring that helpline and other supports are available to anyone requiring them. The majority of Cuan's c.€66m budget is toward funding these services across the country.

Cuan also has functions that require it to develop service standards and monitoring systems to ensure adherence to best practice.

Cuan has functions relating to research and data to inform DSGBV policy development, strategy, monitoring and evaluation.

Cuan is required to lead on awareness-raising campaigns designed to reduce the incidence of DSGBV in Irish society as well as ensuring that all victims know how to access the supports they require.

Cuan is responsible for coordinating all Government actions set out in the Third National Strategy and reporting on their delivery to the Minister for Justice. Political oversight of the strategy is provided by the Cabinet Committee on Social Affairs and Equality. Oversight is also provided by a High-Level Oversight Board, chaired by the Secretaries General of the Department of Justice and the Department of An Taoiseach.

There are two functions in the DSGBV Agency Act 2023 that I want to draw your attention to that are particularly important for us to deliver. The first is that we are required to pay due regard to the diverse circumstances within the population, which means we really need to take an intersectional lens when thinking about who we are providing services to and how we scope our prevention work. We know sex, gender, class, race, ability all interconnect in different ways to shape individual experiences, vulnerabilities and responses to DSGBV. The second is that we coordinate, oversee and provide advice and support to public service bodies in the implementation of their actions. Whole-of-government and whole-of-society strategies are by their definition complex and involve a large number of essential and necessary partners to deliver impacts. Developing Cuan in a way that targets support to delivery partners with mission-critical responsibilities will be a key competency to develop over time. We understand that delivering on these two statutory functions, in particular, will be key to our success and their execution requires skill and strategy in giving effect to the work.

To reflect the functions of Cuan, set out in the Act, we have established teams to lead on the education and awareness raising elements of our work; we have a service delivery and development team; a strategic engagement team leading our strategy coordination and reporting functions with c30 implementation partners. A research and data team lead on building a knowledge generating programme of work to inform strategy implementation and evaluation. A corporate team leads on all finance, HR, org development and governance work. The corporate team, work hand in glove with the services team, putting in place a robust data collection system with funded services. We need to create capability to report and communicate the volume of services being delivered from state investment in this critical area. We need to be able to describe the cost for services and the demand for services across the country and work through a plan to develop these services over time. There are two important elements here – one practical, the other strategic. From a practical perspective, Cuan is investing considerable time in designing and developing a new system and processes/procedures to collect data from services and build reporting capability. This requires funded services to also invest time and expertise working with us. Secondly, we know that a very substantial proportion of people who experience DSGBV do not tell anyone, do not report and do not access services. This is changing and our work will quicken the pace of this change. As a result we expect to see more disclosure, reporting and service requests for support month on month, year on year. This is an inevitable and necessary consequence of progress and success – reducing shame and stigma; enabling environments that

support victims and survivors, calling out criminal behaviours and highlighting the people behind the statistics. We need to have evidence and data-led service development plans to underpin this likely trajectory in service demand to meet strategic objectives in Government strategy to ‘protect’ victims and survivors.

Cuan’s approach to delivering its statutory functions is set out in our first Corporate Plan 2025-2027. This plan, developed with our Board and approved by the Minister for Justice, outlines our vision, values and objectives for combatting DSGBV in the years ahead. It is guided by the legislation and based on feedback from frontline service providers, civil society and Cuan’s implementation partners. It can be read at www.gov.ie/cuan. Our Corporate Plan is not only ambitious—it is an essential blueprint for the transformation needed to eliminate domestic, sexual and gender-based violence from our society. Guided by this plan, our priority is to establish the structures and systems that will allow Cuan to fulfil our core statutory functions and working with and through others, our focus is to driving real, lasting societal change.

Evolution of Government Strategy to combat DSGBV

Over the last 15 years, Ireland has had three strategies to combat domestic, sexual and gender based violence (see [DSGBV Strategies](#)). The first strategy was from 2010 to 2014^{iv}. Some of you may remember that there was an executive unit established in the Department of Justice called COSC, and they engaged in very significant levels of consultation, to develop the first strategy in 2010. It’s important to reflect that a key focus of Government during these years was on national recovery following an unprecedented national economic emergency. There were minimal references to DSGBV in the 2011 Programme for Government, ‘Government for National Recovery’ and it did not reference the strategy published in 2010.

COSC also led the development of the second strategy from 2016 to 2021. There were a lot of changes during that time period, including for example the establishment of Tusla, the Child and Family Agency in 2015. This would have involved change for DSGBV services, moving from the health service to Tusla. The Department of Justice was undergoing extensive organisational change, most notably in response to the recommendations of the independent Effectiveness and Renewal Group (ERG), established by Government in 2018. Finally, the global pandemic in 2020 required fundamental re-think of all elements of national strategy roll-out and brought with it a set of terrible global and national challenges. The Programme for Partnership Government published in 2016 referenced the Istanbul Convention and the second national strategy to combat DSGBV in addition to specific actions relating to protecting children from sexual exploitation. The 2021 Programme for Government (Our Shared Future) had a section specific to DSGBV. Government committed to building on the ratification of the Istanbul Convention and working with NGOs and services to develop the third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence, placing a priority on

prevention and reduction. Government also committed to an audit, of how responsibility for domestic sexual and gender-based violence is segmented across different government agencies, and develop proposals to improve coordination and strategy implementation.

The third national strategy was developed and published by the Department of Justice in 2022, following significant engagement with the sector, led by the Minister of Justice, Helen McEntee.

All three strategies were led by Minister's for Justice. The first strategy was published by Minister Dermot Aherne, the second by Minister Frances Fitzgerald, and most recently, Minister Helen McEntee, who prioritised this portfolio and led significant legislative reforms over the period. Political leadership and political sponsorship for whole-of-government strategies is an essential condition for success. It is widely acknowledged that Minister Helen McEntee, was pioneering in championing the need for change, acknowledging DSGBV as an 'epidemic' and identifying actions for a more effective response in Ireland.

The current minister for Justice, Jim O'Callaghan, has also placed DSGBV as one of his top three priorities, thereby consolidating and further strengthening Ireland's political response in leading on these profoundly complex matters. The Programme for Government 2025, 'Securing Ireland's Future', has very strong commitments to addressing DSGBV. It states 'tackling the epidemic of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence will remain a major priority for the Government. We will invest in new refuge spaces, update the school curriculum, roll-out training and make the criminal justice system more victim centred, in particular our Courts system'.

Strategy content: compare and contrast

All three strategies say they take a 'whole of government approach'. It is clear there was a very significant level of stakeholder engagement in the first, second and third strategy. The idea of having a victim centred focus resonates across the three strategies, as is the emphasis on prevention. Interventions with perpetrators, particularly the language of accountability for perpetrators is strong in the first and second strategy, it also features in the third strategy. There is a commitment in all three strategies to data collection and research. Emphasis on legislative reform strengthens over time across the three strategies.

The first strategy focused on victim safety and perpetrator accountability and public awareness and talked about the first ever coordinated response. The second strategy builds on that and talks about strengthening structures, and it also talks about reducing societal tolerance, building the victim services, and clear perpetrator accountability. The second strategy references that it's getting ready for Ireland to be able to sign the Istanbul Convention. Following ratification of the convention, the third strategy is focused on the

Istanbul pillars of prevention, protection, prosecution and policy. There is more coherence in the third strategy, which encompasses the priorities set out in the first two strategies, but situates them in the context of the four Istanbul pillars.

A different approach to implementation planning can be seen across the three strategies. There are broad goals and actions in the first strategy; the second states the action plan is a living document and therefore flexible. The third national strategy has two very detailed implementation plans and a third and final implementation plan is in development by Cuan (2025-2026 Zero Tolerance Implementation Plan), working with all implementation partners. Monitoring and oversight seems to be limited in the first strategy it gets stronger in the second, but it is still very agency dependent. Oversight is much stronger in the third national strategy. The third national strategy commits to having cabinet oversight, cabinet committee oversight and oversight from a High-Level Oversight Board which is chaired by the Secretary General in the Department of the Taoiseach and the Secretary General in the Department of Justice.

The area of inclusivity and intersectionality deepens into the third strategy. It is reinforced in the DSGBV Agency Act 2023. Funding has increased over time. There is no reference to additional money in the first strategy to support implementation. The second strategy references a small number of resources. When the strategy was launched, it was clarified there was an initial €90,000 identified for a communications campaign. There was increased investment in services during covid, as a result of heightened risk of domestic abuse. Funding has significantly increased for the third national strategy, with increased funding for DSGBV services and funding to increase emergency accommodation capacity for those fleeing domestic abuse.

To raise public awareness at the very beginning of the first strategy, the approach was to give small sums of money to lots of organisations to run campaigns; the second strategy then centralised this budget, and they launched the first of the National campaigns. This has been strengthened again in the third national strategy, with a robust approach to national campaign development, audience segmentation and evaluation.

None of the strategies have performance indicators or defined outcome measures. There is a theory of change in the back of the third national strategy, but it is not specific enough to be useful as a monitoring or evaluation tool. None of the strategies specify the main mechanisms by which strategy will be delivered at local level. Infrastructure for implementation from national to local and from local to national is not clearly specified.

As mentioned earlier, the first strategy was developed by an executive agency in the Department of Justice, as was the second strategy. The third strategy was developed by the Department of Justice and the strategy committed to establish a dedicated statutory agency to coordinate and report on implementation. Feedback from the sector, was that there was too much fragmentation, too much siloed working and clear opportunities to

create a stronger synergy across the key implementation partners. This gave rise to the Department of Justice committing to a DSGBV Agency Act 2023 and the establishment of Cuan in February 2024.

Progress and achievements

From my reading of these strategies, I can really see a very strong evolution. I can see evidence of strengthened governance and increased resourcing. In 2021, an audit of DSGBV structures^v was commissioned by Department of Justice, in consultation with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and published in June 2021, to inform the third national strategy. In the review it talks about improvements in public awareness and attitudes. This finding is reinforced in other research. Just this morning the organisation, One in Four published a research study on the prevalence of child sexual violence and abuse, using the CSO 2022 survey as well as some additional research they did, and it is really clear that the public are much more aware than they were previously about DSGBV. For example, the fact that most abuse and most violence is perpetrated by people known to the victim. We can see that knowledge and awareness has changed over time.

There has been a huge improvement in development of coordinated, interagency structures working on defined programmes of work, to address known issues, e.g. ensuring the voice of the child can be heard in family courts or managing high risk sex offenders. There has also been huge improvements in terms of policing policy and policing practice in this area, certainly since I did my PhD in the area of sexual violence over two decades ago. There have been seismic changes organisationally and professionally in how An Garda Síochána are trained, with specialised units to lead on these kinds of crimes. In the area of domestic violence, operational policing response has also improved significantly particularly, DSGBV services report, since the pandemic. An Garda Síochána have prioritised this area of policing for improved response and partly as a result of this, they are now receiving more and more calls from victims/survivors seeking protection each year. When I visit services funded by Cuan, by and large service report they have an excellent working relationship with local Gardaí. The Gardaí themselves, have committed to further improving the frontline response, in response to reviews^{vi} and feedback from services and victims/survivors.

The absence of measurement or data to support strategy evaluation is a limiting factor. How do we know if all of the work is having the desired effects? Where are we making inroads in terms of prevention? How do we know if there is effective access to justice and improved experience through the courts system for victims of DSGBV? There is more work to be done on data and measurement, but also on the local structures for delivery. We can have a strategy at a national level, but we also need to have a robust infrastructure for implementation at regional and local level.

Prevalence of DSGBV in Ireland 2001 - 2022

There are twenty-one years between the SAVI survey (data collected in 2001) undertaken by Professor Hannah McGee and colleagues in the Royal College of Surgeons and commissioned by the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre and the CSO Sexual Violence survey (data was gathered as part of a commitment in the Third National Strategy in 2022). Both the SAVI and the CSO surveys are big population surveys on sexual violence; the CSO surveyed over 4000 people and the SAVI surveyed over 3000 people. Whilst there are important methodological caveats that caution against making comparisons across the two timepoints, the surveys seek to do the same thing (measure the prevalence of sexual violence) and they are supported by umpteen smaller surveys undertaken in the intervening years. All giving a general, composite picture of what we are dealing with.

Regarding the more recent CSO sexual violence survey (data collected 2022), the findings were shocking. For the whole population, 40% of adults had experienced some form of sexual violence in their lifetime. That is 52% of women and 28% of men. A worrying finding in the 2022 data is that younger people reported higher levels of experience, compared to all other age groups (65% of female 18–24-year-olds Vs 52% for all). There are multiple potential explanations for this ranging from younger people being more likely to admit to experiencing SV to actual increases in experience in recent years. 20 years ago prevalence levels were similar with 42% of women and 28% of men reporting experience of some form of sexual violence in their lifetime.

If we look *only at experience of sexual intercourse during childhood*, including non-consensual vaginal, anal or oral sex, this was experienced by 7% of girls (those aged under 17), and 2% of boys. 20 years ago, it was 6% of girls and 3% of boys. For all forms of sexual abuse during childhood the figures are much larger e.g. CSO found that 29% of the adult population experienced some form of sexual violence as a child. Again, this was higher for 18–24-year-olds (40%). For adults the prevalence of *non-consensual sexual intercourse*, the most serious of sexual abuse crimes, the figure was 18% of women and 3% of men reported experiencing rape as an adult (those aged over 17). In SAVI in 2001 it was 6% and 1%. Direct comparisons come with very significant caveats, but we can see how endemic sexual violence is in Irish society over 20 years.

In terms of disclosure, the question about whether the person had ever told anybody about the unwanted sexual experience before the survey, in 2022 only about half of women and a quarter of men had told anybody, and in 2001 it was 58% of women and 40% of men. So effectively, in 2022 half of adult women and more than a quarter of adult men reported some lifetime exposure to violence but almost half of the women and three quarters of the men have not disclosed these experiences to anyone but the survey.

Domestic Violence Statistics

Cuan is progressing a survey on domestic violence with the Central Statistics Office (CSO), which will for the first time produce official statistics in Ireland on the prevalence of domestic abuse. We have just concluded a scoping study examining data, data definitions and inclusion requirements. Generally speaking, surveys undertaken over the years show that between 20% and 30% of people report having experienced domestic abuse from an intimate partner.

The very first Dublin Women's Aid Survey^{vii} reported 1 in 5 women experienced domestic violence, and a more recent European survey stated that it was 35% of women reported, either psychological, physical or sexual abuse from an intimate partner in Ireland.^{viii} Women's Aid receive c 28,000 contacts per annum and that is increasing year on year.^{ix} We estimate that in 2025, through the 78 services it funds, Cuan will be supporting in the region of 44,000 individuals, men, women and children (86% adults, 14% children).

The Garda Síochána had 61,000 domestic violence related contacts in 2024, that was a 9% increase on the same period in 2023.

This is what Prof. Hannah McGee, lead author of the SAVI survey wrote in a column in the Irish Times in 2023 when the CSO data was published:

"Sexual Violence is an iceberg, huge and hidden, and we need a serious National dialogue to figure out how to change it, because two decades later, much hard work, pain for many, a big financial investment by government and charities, do not seem to have brought about progress....we need a wider sense of societal outrage about behaviours that are so common, so unacceptable and still so hidden – even after all the brave people who have spoken publicly at personal cost about these issues in the past few decades."

Herein lies what I see as the 'wicked' problem of DSGBV – prevention. Wicked problems, defined in 1973 by design theorists Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber lack clarity in their articulation and they are subject to real-world constraints that prevent multiple and risk-free attempts at solving them. The problem of domestic sexual and gender-based violence has almost all of the characteristics of wicked problems, including for example the fact that wicked problems can always be described as the symptom of other problems. While the persistent levels of DSGBV in Irish society are sobering, shocking and perplexing to many, it does require us to re-double our efforts to effectively tackle the whole area of prevention and take a more strategic approach to formulating and defining the problem we are striving to solve, thereby supporting more effective solutions. Learning from progress in other public policy areas, also responding to wicked problems, is a good starting point.

New Challenges in DSGBV

I am going to discuss changes leading to new threats in the whole area of sexual and domestic violence. I'll touch briefly on technology, the impact of the manosphere and the threat of violent pornography.

The first change is technology. The internet, smart phones, social media apps, developments in AI, mean one abusive act can become permanent, it can become scalable and it can become global. Anybody who wants to hurt another human being and commit a criminal offence, are able to find or create a community of like-minded people online. People with predatory behaviours have access to a much larger pool of potential victims online. Technology makes it easy to create and circulate abusive and criminal content.

Technology has shifted norms of interaction and communication, blurred realities between what is private and what is public, and very much de-personalises people, because people believe that is just a person they see online, it is not a real person to them. Technology also creates organised abuse and exploitation, whether that is trafficking, the buying and selling of children, or adults for sexual exploitation; technology is something that facilitates this and it is an area where the Gardaí have put a lot of investment into, working with international agencies to detect and prosecute crimes of this nature. With regard to trauma, there is some evidence to suggest that emotional, psychological and social damage can be longer lasting and even more severe when it is online.

Shifting attitudes and the manosphere

It is also important for us to understand and validate new emerging data suggesting that younger males are moving towards more traditional views and there is a hardening of attitudes towards women, towards gender equality and a belief in traditional rape myths (where there has been a lot of improvement in the population more generally). Recent omnibus data from the DRCC showed 92%, a majority of people, agree that even if you have given consent, you can change your mind at any time. However, a significant minority of younger men, 29% aged 18-24, believe that once you have consented you can't change your mind^x.

There was Eurobarometer data^{xi} released last year that refers to data from Ireland from 2021, that shows 27% of men in Ireland tend to agree or fully agree that women may over-exaggerate claims of abuse or rape. That is in comparison to 22% which is the EU average for men. In Ireland, 13% of women agreed with that sentiment. Dublin's Women's Aid also launched research earlier in 2025^{xii}; an omnibus survey which reported most Irish men, 61%, reject narrow, traditional views of masculinity moving beyond the need for stoicism and dominance, however traditional views persist especially in digital spaces. Notably, 39% of men in this survey agreed with more conventional notions of masculinity, such as

the necessity for strength, emotional restraint, and being the primary economic provider. This group tended to be younger with nearly 70% of men in their 20's being influenced by figures such as Andrew Tate and Donald Trump. Half of those with traditional views, so around 18%, disregard women's opinions and view sexism as exaggerated. These are smaller scale surveys and it will be important to develop a research programmes that supports robust measurement and reporting of potential trends and/or shifts in public attitudes.

Harms of Pornography

Pornography online now is very different from what it used to be years ago, when magazines were a dominant form of distribution. Many scholars and academics warn that online pornography is not equivalent to a 'top-shelf' magazine. The adult content which parents may have accessed in their youth could be considered 'quaint' in comparison to today's world of online pornography (Children's Commissioner UK, 2023^{xiii}). Depictions of degradation, sexual coercion, aggression and exploitation are commonplace, and disproportionately targeted against teenage girls. According to recent studies, most pornography has some level of violence, whether that is hairpulling, slapping, spitting, strangulation, forceful anal sex and penetration of the mouth with women until they gag. Teen porn is a very popular genre. Studies report, violence is typically used against teenage girls more so than adult women who feature in this content. The Sexual Exploitation and Research Centre (SERP)^{xiv} published a report reviewing research in this field. They point to a study that shows 9 in 10 scenes contain physical aggression where women are the targets of that aggression. 95% of the targets are shown to respond either neutrally or with pleasure towards that aggression, and there is a very strong consensus emerging at European levels of the dangers of pornography to children, men (especially young men) and women. Children's advocates, people who work with young people and others are *extremely concerned about free, easy access children have to this content; how children are targeted with this content through social media apps and the normalisation of sexual violence in online pornography, and the role that this plays in shaping children's understanding of sex and relationships*. Pornography is seen as a cause and accelerant in the perpetration of violence against women, girls and boys by (predominantly) men and boys, and particularly in rising levels of cases where sexual violence is perpetrated by children on other children. This is something that DSGBV services, child protection services, and gardai are seeing more of.

Use of online pornography in Ireland is pervasive and highly gendered. The ESRI^{xv} analysed results from the longitudinal survey on children, 'Growing up in Ireland'. The data was collected in 2018 when the young people were 20 years of age. They found 64% of young men and 13% of young women reported using pornography. Men from more advantaged backgrounds were more likely to use pornography than those from less

advantaged backgrounds (75 per cent vs. 50 per cent). Pornography use was lower among those with a religious affiliation and where there was greater parental monitoring in adolescence. There was no strong relationship between the provision of sex education at school and pornography use, although young people who were more reliant on the Internet or (in the case of men in particular) their friends rather than their parents for information about sex in adolescence were significantly more likely to use pornography at age 20.

Harmful sexual behaviours are increasingly being shaped by the content and cultures that children are exposed to online, including pornography, misogynistic trolling and the non-consensual sharing of intimate images (Online Safety Commission UK 2022).^{xvi}

An article by Faye Curran and Róisín Ingle in the Irish Times in March 2022^{xvii} gives an indication of the direct connection between online pornography and how it is shaping harmful sexual behaviours. I read this article when it appeared in the paper and I was shocked, as were friends and family I discussed it with. The article is titled: ‘There was a lot of choking, how the pandemic has changed sex for generation Z’. In the article Róisín interviewed young people on their sex lives after the pandemic.

A woman who was 20 said “Porn is definitely where men got ideas such as choking women during sex, I just don’t think they would have come up with that on their own. This is really strange to me. I like sex to be equal but a lot of sex I hear about from my friends is not equal.” A man, 23 shares “The way most of the gay men I know, younger ones anyway, understand their sexuality and learn about it from an early age is largely through porn. I also learnt a lot from feminist conversations on Tumblr. As I grew up my sexuality and preferences were massively influenced by porn, they still are today”.

A woman, who is 22 said “I think choking during sex has been normalised. Internet culture has glamorised choking for a while as a kind of trend, I have never really partaken but then again, who am I to judge.” Another man, 23 stated “One thing that is a big issue for me is pornography. Like a lot of my friends, I started watching it at maybe 13”.

It is clear from talking to colleagues in the prison and probation service and people working on providing programmes to men with a history of sexual violence that mainstream pornography plays a significant part in violent offending behaviour and directly impacts psycho-sexual development (desire, arousal, and orgasm, and how these interact with thoughts, feelings, and behaviours).

Cuan has planned a significant portfolio of work, working with a breadth of partners, to address the harms of pornography. The final two years of implementation of Zero Tolerance will see tangible improvements in prevention and response to address issues of major societal concern such as pornography and the rise in online harms.

This is a very significant area requiring urgent action to protect children, women, boys and men from all associated harms. Civil society organisations, children's rights advocates, mental health professionals, educators, statutory agencies and DSGBV services will a key role working together to address these harms.

Opportunities and solutions with promise

Notwithstanding the challenges and emergent threats in the whole area of DSGBV, there are many opportunities to accelerate progress in areas showing some improvement and new solutions for problems not yet solved. The establishment of Cuan by the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration as a mechanism to strengthen structures for implementation at national level is positive, as is strong and consistent political leadership and commitment from Government to make progress on the complex issues giving rise to DSGBV. Many years of work across government departments, statutory agencies, civil society organisations and DSGBV services have created the conditions in 2025 for best-in-class execution of Government strategy. The following list gives a sense of the breadth of actions committed to in the final implementation plan for Zero Tolerance, building on years of work to put in place the foundations to make this work possible.

A broad range of awareness and education initiatives are in place to interrogate the social and cultural norms that underpin and contribute to gender-based violence. Spanning schools, higher education, public transport, places of work, and notably online spaces, there are a broad range of initiatives to make our spaces safer reducing opportunities for sexual and gender-based violence.

Specific actions set out in the final Implementation Plan for Zero Tolerance that are designed to address threats and maximise opportunities for impact include:

- Development of an evidence-based pornography literacy strategy spanning public awareness and education;
- Framework to address sexual violence and harassment in higher education;
- Provision of prevention, consent and healthy relationships education in schools and other settings;
- Work with sporting bodies to establish a zero tolerance culture;
- Public awareness campaigns to change attitudes and prevent and reduce the incidence of DSGBV;
- Information and education initiatives on online safety;
- Supervision, monitoring and enforcement of age assurance requirements and other relevant measures, including content rating for regulated online services;

- Increasing the availability of public transport to make travel safer and more accessible for women and other vulnerable users.

There are also a range of measures included to ensure that those who experience DSGBV can access information and support services, such as:

- Preparatory work on the National Services Development Plan to ensure availability of accessible quality specialist and community-based DSGBV services across the state;
- Phased roll-out of service enhancements and supports to sexual violence services;
- Clinical supports to victim-survivors of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM);
- Implementation and expansion of the Barnahus model - a coordinated inter-agency response to support child victim-survivors of sexual violence;
- Progress work on the voice of the child in private and family law;
- Child-friendly information to explain family justice processes to children;
- Preparatory work to introduce Operation Encompass into the Irish system.

In addition, there are comprehensive training actions across the four pillars of the plan to upskill frontline professionals across the health and social care sector, DSGBV services, the judiciary, courts and other justice agencies.

An important development led by the Department and Minister for Justice is the creation of Community Safety Partnerships at each local authority level (Policing, Security and Community Safety Act 2024). These community safety partnerships are essentially creating a structure at local authority level, whereby all your local stakeholders come together to develop a community safety action plan. The Partnerships will bring together residents, community representatives, business interests, councillors, local authorities and State services such as An Garda Síochána, Tusla and the HSE to devise and implement the Local Community Safety Plans. These partnerships recognise that policing alone will not solve the issue of people feeling unsafe in their communities or in their homes.

The Plans will detail how best the community wants to prevent crime and will reflect community priorities and local safety issues. The goal is to make communities safer for individuals, families, residents and businesses.

It is envisaged that every local authority area will have a Community Safety Partnership, with dedicated funding and staff, once the policy is rolled out nationally as part of reforms outlined by the Commission on the Future of Policing. It has been acknowledged that DSGBV needs to be a feature of community safety plans. I have great hope that these

structures will provide an essential pathway for implementation of local actions to prevent DSGBV, and other safety concerns and be a catalyst for change. Cuan is a part of the national steering group, supporting the roll out of these partnerships and Cuan will be supporting their development at local level in every way we can.

I'd like to end this lecture by highlighting a recent campaign developed by Cuan in partnership with services and victims/survivors. The Hardest stories campaign carries a message to victims-survivors that too many stories of DSGBV exist in our society and whenever they wish to share their story, they will be heard, and they will be supported.

In addition to that, this evergreen campaign is designed to mobilize the public into action by acknowledging that we all have an active role in creating zero tolerance of DSGBV in Irish society and work towards the cultural and societal changes needed for a society free from DSGBV. The audience is asked to visit the campaign website gov.ie/stories where they are provided with information on how they can become an agent of change. This campaign is developed to respond to the evidence covered in this lecture, showing the scale of non-disclosure of sexual and domestic violence in Ireland. Its time we hear the people behind the statistics and challenge cultural norms that create a sense of shame among victims and silence their voices. Here's how the campaign sets out how each of you can play a part. Look up gov.ie/stories to find practical information such as:

- How to look out for out red flags of DSGBV,
- How to support someone you are concerned about,
- What support there is for victims/survivors,
- How to turn your environment into a place of zero tolerance of DSGBV,
- How to reach out to those addressing DSGBV in all higher level institutes for education in Ireland,
- How to use your voice to bring about change and advocate for victims-survivors,
- The importance of having consent conversations in our own lives,
- How to promote positive masculinity,
- Dispelling rape myths, and
- How to think intersectionality in terms of DSGBV.

You can find out more about the work of Cuan, the services it funds, progress reports on strategy implementation and its many partners on www.gov.ie/cuan. Thank you all for listening and for your interest and support. Thank you to the A for your invitation to deliver the 18th Annual Martin Tansey lecture on this important topic.

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