

UNDER PRESSURE

NON-FATAL STRANGULATION ● *KNOW THE SIGNS*

THE EXECUTIVE OFFICE POLICY BRIEF: NON-FATAL STRANGULATION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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NON-FATAL STRANGULATION • KNOW THE SIGNS

This policy brief speaks directly to The Executive Office's (TEO) Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Women and Girls (EVAWG). Non-fatal strangulation is not limited to manual hands-on neck, but includes any pressure applied onto another person that limits the function of their respiratory or circulatory system from delivering oxygen to the brain. Strangulation and asphyxia are the second highest cause of femicide in the UK, accounting for 27% of all femicides between 2014-2025.¹

Those working within the Department of Justice and the Department of Health are currently under-resourced to deal with NFS, as injury can be invisible and training and guidance remains inconsistent and unclear. The Executive now stands in a position where it can directly address NFS in a cross-departmental manner and build upon best practice. Due to the fatality risk and direct link to homicide, it is essential this issue is urgently addressed.

This policy brief sets out four key ways that TEO can carry out their commitment, and uphold their responsibility, to address VAWG. These changes would facilitate cross-departmental engagement, generate a direct focus with specific actions, more secure and effectively applied funding, and a heightened awareness of the issue.

THESE RECOMMENDATIONS ARE:

- **STATED ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF THE PREVALENCE, AND DANGER, OF NFS IN THE NEXT EVAWG AND DOMESTIC ABUSE STRATEGY;**
- **A DESIGNATED INDIVIDUAL (SUCH AS ENGLAND AND WALES'S DOMESTIC ABUSE COMMISSIONER) TO TACKLE DOMESTIC AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE;**
- **SPECIALIST TRAINING, GUIDANCE AND STANDARDS WITHIN PSNI, CPS AND HEALTHCARE SYSTEM ON NFS WITH STATUTORY DATA MONITORING ON NFS AS A SPECIFIC CATEGORY ACROSS SECTORS;**
- **THE FUNDING AND EXECUTION OF AN NI WIDE CAMPAIGN EMPHASISING THE DANGERS OF NFS.**

Non-Fatal Strangulation can be defined as pressure applied onto another person that limits the function of their respiratory or circulatory system from delivering oxygen to the brain. This is not limited to manual hands-on neck, but includes strangulation through a chokehold or ligature, asphyxiation through gagging or drowning, among several other recognised methods. Over a third of 16–34 year olds report having been strangled/choked at least one during sex², and although some argue that this can be done consensually, the potential for dyspraxia, amnesia and unconsciousness in as little as four seconds means that the body's ability to withdraw consent is compromised.³ Furthermore, it takes less pressure than opening a can of drink to inflict serious injuries.⁴

IMPACT ON HEALTH

NFS can have significant medical consequences, both mentally and physically. Many survivors reported neurological issues such as changes to vision and voice, sensory loss and motor difficulties,⁵ with reports of stroke delayed by almost two weeks after the assault.⁶ Psychological impacts include PTSD, depression, anxiety, dissociation and suicidality, with study participants reporting increased feelings of shame and worthlessness, interpersonal difficulties and personality changes.⁷ A lack of standardised screening questions and specific training means that medical staff are currently unequipped to recognise many of the physical indicators of NFS, made especially difficult as only around 39% present symptoms on the day of the injury.⁸ Furthermore, the burden on the healthcare system, police time and the long term mental and physical impacts means that NFS generates a significant economic cost.

LINK TO VAWG AND HOMICIDE

Addressing NFS is essential in tackling Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG). Strangulation and asphyxia are the second highest cause of femicide in the UK, accounting for 27% of all femicides between 2014-2025⁹ and recent data shows that 20% of deaths from suicide following domestic abuse had been subjected to NFS prior to their death.¹⁰ NFS is often considered as the last warning shot before homicide, with the risk of subsequently being murdered by the perpetrator increasing by 750%.¹¹ Although NFS also impacts men and those in LGBTQIA+ relationships, it disproportionately consists of men committing the offence against women.¹² It is important to also note that certain groups such as migrants and disabled women may be particularly vulnerable, facing additional challenges in receiving support.

LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL GAPS

Although the legal changes to NFS in the 2022 Justice Act were a welcomed adjustment, it is still not enough. Within the criminal justice system, targeted training and guidance on NFS remains limited, and sentencing guidelines are unclear and inconsistently applied. Additionally, the ban of strangulation in porn is a narrow intervention that does not address the wider systematic issue, particularly as we have witnessed similar laws in the past with little enforcement. Activists highlight that accountability and implementation need to be reinforced to match these legal changes.

CURRENT NI APPROACH

The recent murders of Ellie Flanagan and Amy Doherty prove that VAWG remains an urgent issue. The General Assembly and Executive Ministers have promised to address VAWG in Northern Ireland, however, neither the Strategy to End Violence Against Women and Girls or the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy refer to NFS, even with its direct link to homicides. This policy's recommendations encompass the four themes of the Ending VAWG Strategy and are necessary to achieve all its six outcomes. Changes need made across the Executive's Departments, particularly legal, sentencing and policing shifts under the Department of Justice and updated approaches to reporting, treatment and pastoral care under the Department of Health.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **SPECIFIC REFERENCE TO NFS IN THE NEXT VAWG AND DOMESTIC ABUSE STRATEGY.**

This would create ring-fenced funding, facilitate cross-departmental engagement and Key Performance Indicators and ensure NFS's integration into safeguarding frameworks.

- **A DESIGNATED INDIVIDUAL TO OVERSEE DOMESTIC AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE, SIMILAR TO THE DOMESTIC ABUSE COMMISSIONER IN ENGLAND AND WALES. CURRENTLY NI ONLY HAS A VICTIMS OF CRIME COMMISSIONER, MEANING LIMITED FUNDING AND RESOURCES DIRECTED TOWARDS VAWG, AND PLACING ADDITIONAL PRESSURE ON THE CHARITY/ 3RD SECTOR, CAUSING IMMENSE STRAIN EACH TIME STORMONT COLLAPSES.**

This would ensure statutory reporting and institutional accountability, establish implementation oversight and assign responsibility on administering guidance.

- **SPECIALIST NFS TRAINING, GUIDANCE AND STANDARDS WITHIN PSNI, CPS AND HEALTHCARE SYSTEM (SEE DEPARTMENT-SPECIFIC POLICY BRIEFS FOR GUIDANCE), WITH STATUTORY DATA MONITORING ON NFS AS A SPECIFIC CATEGORY ACROSS SECTORS.**

This would ensure victims and survivors are receiving effective and empathetic treatment, and perpetrators are receiving proportionate punitive measures.

FUNDING AND EXECUTION OF AN NI WIDE CAMPAIGN EMPHASISING THE SERIOUSNESS OF NFS, HIGHLIGHTING THE WARNING SIGNS, MEDICAL RISKS AND THE ROUTES TO SUPPORT.

This is a key measure to reach those currently facing domestic abuse and as a preventative measure in addressing both potential perpetrators and victims.

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- ¹²IFAS (2024). Domestic Homicide Review Series Part Two: An analysis of Domestic Homicide Reviews with a history of non-fatal strangulation [online]. Available at: <https://ifas.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/DHR-Analysis-Non-Fatal-Strangulation-Report-February-2024.pdf>
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WHO ARE WE?

NON-FATAL STRANGULATION: KNOW THE SIGNS

The starting point of this project was a simple statistic. People who are subjected to non-fatal strangulation (NFS), are 750% more likely to subsequently be murdered by that same perpetrator^[1]. The lived reality of this statistic is that many organisations working to combat domestic abuse (DA) and/or intimate partner violence (IPV), consider NFS as the last 'warning shot' before fatalities occur^[2].

Whilst we are aware that statistics can often silence complexity, our research into NFS, particularly in Northern Ireland (NI), does not mirror this. For us, it rapidly became clear that NFS was more common than it was understood.

- ▶ NFS is in the conversations with peers and friends that equate this crime with a kink, namely choking, during sex.
- ▶ NFS is ubiquitous in pornography, where violence against women and girls is being normalised and men's control over women's bodies is rehearsed and performed.
- ▶ NFS is also a pattern occurring in the violent deaths of women in Northern Ireland. Non-fatal strangulation or death by strangulation was a feature in 52% of all femicides in Northern Ireland since 2020.^[3]

THUS, THIS PROJECT SEEKS TO:



RAISE AWARENESS OF NON-FATAL STRANGULATION



OFFER IMPARTIAL ADVICE AND AVENUES FOR SUPPORT



PRESENT RESEARCH-LED RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE TO TACKLE NFS

This project was undertaken by the following students undertaking the MA in Conflict Transformation and Social Justice at Queen's University Belfast:

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**CIVIC ENGAGEMENT
AND STRATEGIC
COMMUNICATIONS**

[1] Training Institute for Strangulation Prevention; Domestic Violence Services Network, Inc.

[2] Alliance for Hope International, <https://www.allianceforhope.org/training-institute-on-strangulation-prevention/online-courses>

[3] Where details of cause of death are known. The real figure could be much higher (Mc Morrow, forthcoming)

