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Victims in Northern Ireland Call for Right to Be Heard in Court

July 10, 2025

– Categories: Human Rights



Campaigners in Northern Ireland are urging urgent reform to allow victims of crime the right to read their personal impact statements in court, a right already standard in England, Wales, and the Republic of Ireland. Victims say they feel silenced by the current system and are calling for change that would give them a voice at a critical stage of the justice process.

At present, Northern Ireland and Scotland are the only parts of the UK and Ireland where crime victims do not have the automatic right to read out Victim Personal Statements (VPS – written accounts submitted by victims describing the emotional and practical impact of a crime) during sentencing. These statements can influence sentencing decisions but are typically submitted in writing only, without being read aloud in court.

The issue came into sharp focus following a rare case in Newry earlier this year, where a foster mother was allowed to read her VPS aloud in court after a child in her care was left severely disabled by an assault. It is believed to be the first time such a right has been granted in Northern Ireland, a development some campaigners hope will set a precedent.

Among those calling for change is Julieanne Boyle, a rape survivor who waited 30 years to see her father convicted. She was not permitted to address the court during sentencing, and says the exclusion left her feeling unheard. “With that victim impact statement, the most important thing for me was to be allowed to have my voice,” she said. “I wasn’t being listened to, and I wasn’t being heard. There’s no closure for me, I’m still in that courtroom, waiting.”

Boyle added that giving victims the chance to speak directly would provide empowerment and a degree of healing. “It would have meant everything for me to say to him: ‘You raped me. You were meant to protect me, and you didn’t.’ Let the victims read their statements, it’s going to be the most powerful thing.”

At present, the decision on whether a VPS may be read aloud remains entirely at the discretion of the presiding judge. A spokesperson for the Lady Chief Justice’s Office confirmed that current legislation in Northern

Ireland does not mandate how such statements are delivered, nor by whom.

The Department of Justice (DOJ) said Justice Minister Naomi Long is “supportive of measures which can help victims on their journey to recovery”, including the option for victims to read their VPS in court. The department has convened a working group to review potential changes, but any final framework would still require judicial discretion on a case-by-case basis.

Victims’ rights advocates argue this approach leaves too much uncertainty. “Victims feel they’re being silenced,” said Boyle, echoing a view shared by many who believe justice should include not only sentencing, but the dignity of being heard.