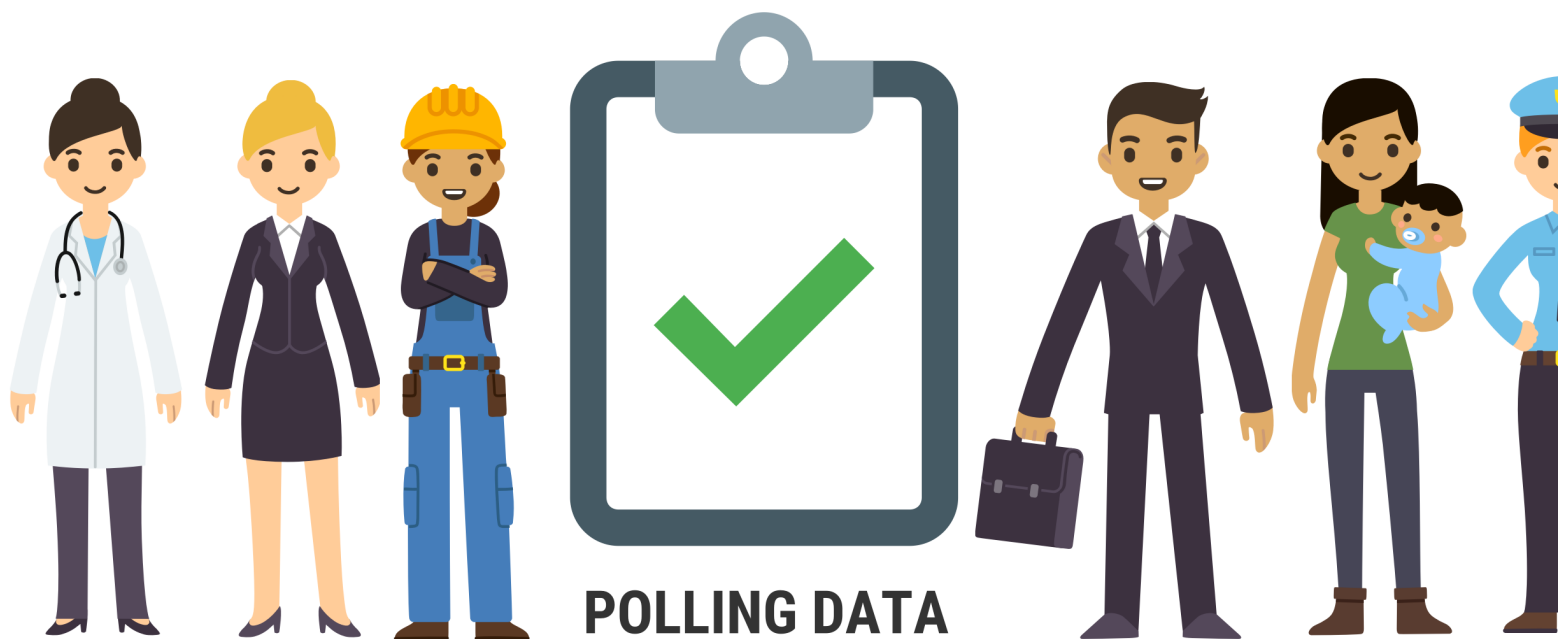


# Attitudes to **HUMAN RIGHTS** in Northern Ireland



# Attitudes to Human Rights in Northern Ireland: Polling Data



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# Background

Over the years the Human Rights Consortium has utilised public opinion polling as one of many tools to gauge prevailing views on a range of human rights issues. Our previous polling had traditionally focussed on the levels of support for a distinct Northern Ireland Bill of Rights and the specific rights to be contained within that legislation.

Polling on that subject from 2011 shows that 83% of the population felt a Bill of Rights was important for Northern Ireland, that supporters across all the main political parties held similar views at around 80%+ and when asked whether certain social and economic rights to housing, education and standards of living should be included those figures soared to between 88% - 99%.

Despite this widespread support there remains some resistance to this type of Bill of Rights within elements of main stream political unionism and the current UK Government. In turn this has led to a lack of progress on delivering a Bill of Rights.

In addition, one element of our underlying political and media environment in Northern Ireland has been the framing of some human rights issues through the prism of nationalism and unionism. Or more clearly as an issue of nationalism versus unionism.

Finally, in recent years a dominant feature of British political and media attention has been the debate about the future of the Human Rights Act. Negative media interpretation about the role of the HRA has in turn negatively influenced the public perception of this legislation in Britain. While this debate had not received similar political or media attention in Northern Ireland we were interested in what impact that wider UK debate has had on local opinion and how this legislation is viewed locally.

Given this context and the potential for such commentary, analysis and political views to influence wider public opinion the Consortium wished to establish a baseline analysis of wider attitudes to human rights more generally in Northern Ireland. Specifically we were interested in whether some of the political and media narratives that often surround discussion of human rights in Northern Ireland would be reflected in wider public perceptions of human rights.

To achieve this a number of survey questions were included on the Millward Brown Omnibus Survey in August 2016 and a range of those questions are presented here in this report.

The sample consisted of 1016 respondents (weighted to 1000) aged 16 and over and was carried out via face-to-face interviews. A quota sampling methodology was used following the initial random selection of 60 sampling points to ensure that the sample was representative of the population of Northern Ireland.

All research was conducted in compliance with the international standard ISO 20252:2012 and fully in accordance with the Market Research Society ethical code of conduct.



# Executive Summary



## Rights unite rather than divide

The Human Rights Consortium commissioned in depth research on attitudes to rights in Northern Ireland to explore how people here feel about human rights and to contribute a considered analysis to wider human rights debate locally and in the rest of the UK.

This is especially timely in the context of current risks to the human rights framework posed by Brexit and the threatened repeal of the Human Rights Act and/or withdrawal of the UK from the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR). This research is also useful in light of the local resurgence of political interest in the outstanding commitment from the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement for a Bill of Rights in Northern Ireland.

In the context of the ongoing talks to re-establish the Executive, where discussion of various human rights issues have been a central theme, this research provides an important perspective on how positively people across Northern Ireland feel about human rights. Moreover, the research shows again that while the UK government keeps repeating that there needs to be political consensus on human rights before a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland is progressed, the reality on the ground is that the general population value human rights as an important safeguard.

## KEY CONCLUSIONS

- In contrast to perceptions about rights in other parts of the UK our polling results clearly evidence an extremely high level of support (**84%**) for human rights among the population of Northern Ireland. (**See Fig1**)
- Rather than being an issue that divides the Northern Ireland population along traditional community lines, human rights are clearly a unifying issue in Northern Ireland with high levels of support across both Protestant (**82%**) and Catholic (**87%**) communities. (**see Fig1a**)
- Those polled clearly feel that having laws to protect human rights in Northern Ireland is a good idea (**87%**) but also that these laws should uphold International human rights standards (**82%**). (**see Fig6 and Fig4**)

- The public of Northern Ireland make no distinction between who human rights should or should not apply to. Instead there is overwhelming support (**90%**) for the universality and equal application of human rights. (**See Fig2**)
- There is also strong agreement that human rights are important in creating a fairer society (**87%**). When asked whether human rights help protect the most vulnerable in our society, the result is still high at (**77%**) but that level of agreement is slightly lower than for other questions. Suggesting that while people agreed with this, they may feel less clear about whether this actually happens in reality. Suggesting further work needed to make this particular principle a reality. (**See Fig3 and Fig5**)
- Contrary to negative media and political commentary in other parts of the UK the Human Rights Act enjoys massive public support here with (**84%**) of the population believing it is good for Northern Ireland. (**See Fig7**)

These results set a very clear and positive context for discussion of the protection and advancement of rights in Northern Ireland. Clearly the concept of rights being a zero sum competition that pits one community against the other is a myth that is exploded by these results. Whether as part of renewed political discussions about a Bill of Rights, Brexit or the Human Rights Act it is clear that public opinion is overwhelmingly in favour of a system of governance that embraces human rights at its core as a mechanism for protecting everyone and creating a fair and just society.

We believe the results indicate that the centrality of human rights within our peace agreement and all the work over the last 19 years to develop and realise those rights have had a very positive impact on public opinion about human rights. The results also clearly articulate and evidence what the Consortium has known for years from similar polling and work across communities, that **Human Rights unite Northern Ireland rather than divide it**. Across religions, gender, age and other backgrounds the clear message is that people see human rights as something that adds strength and value to their lives.

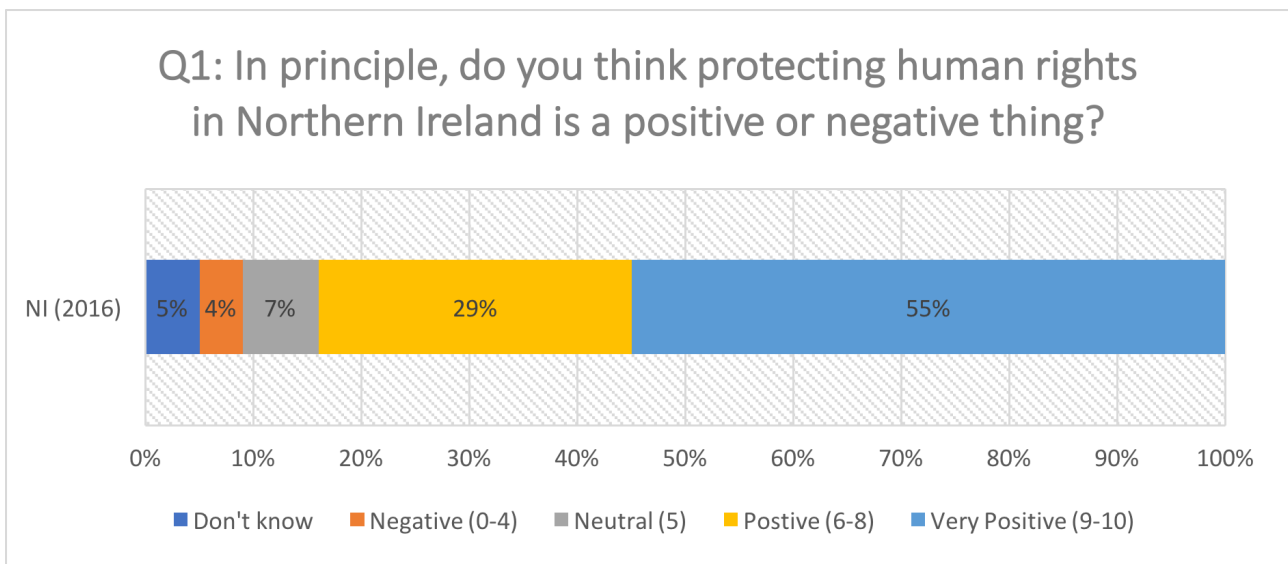


# Polling Results

## Question 1

The first question of the research asked participants ‘In principle, do you think protecting human rights in Northern Ireland is a positive or negative thing?’. All respondents gave a value between 0 (very negative) to 10 (very positive). The response was overwhelmingly positive, with **84%** of respondents indicating that they felt protecting human rights in Northern Ireland was a positive thing.

Fig1



## Question 2

For the second question respondents were asked to give a numerical value to their level of agreement from 0 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree) with a series of statements about human rights. The results are very encouraging and show a high level of agreement from respondents, particularly when rights are identified as universal values that apply to everyone, no matter what their background and help make Northern Ireland a fairer place.

Fig2

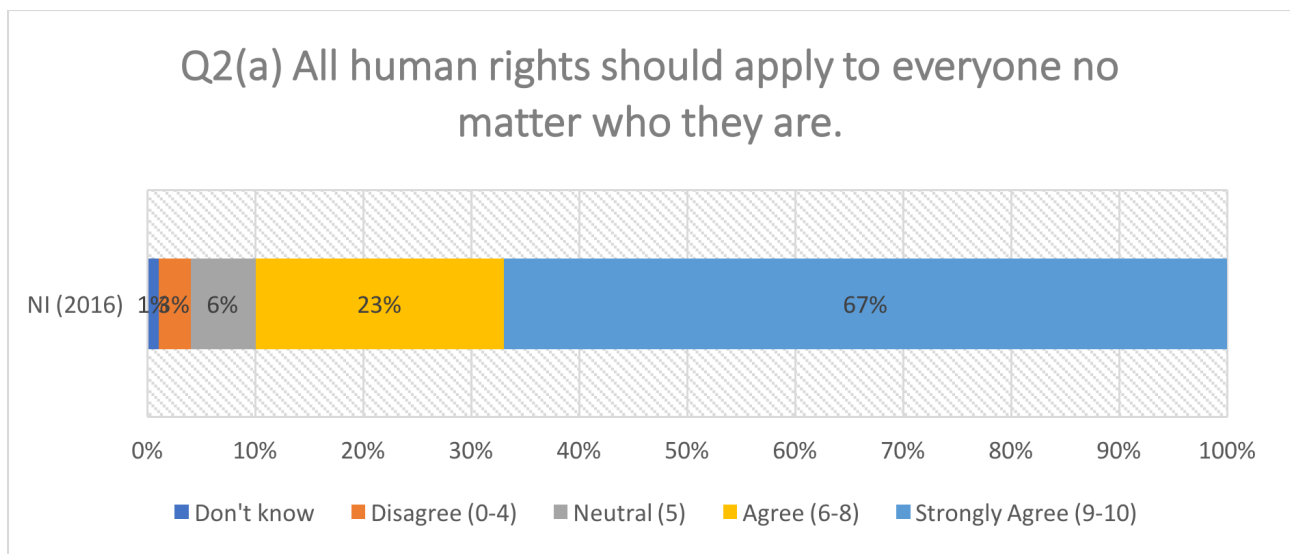
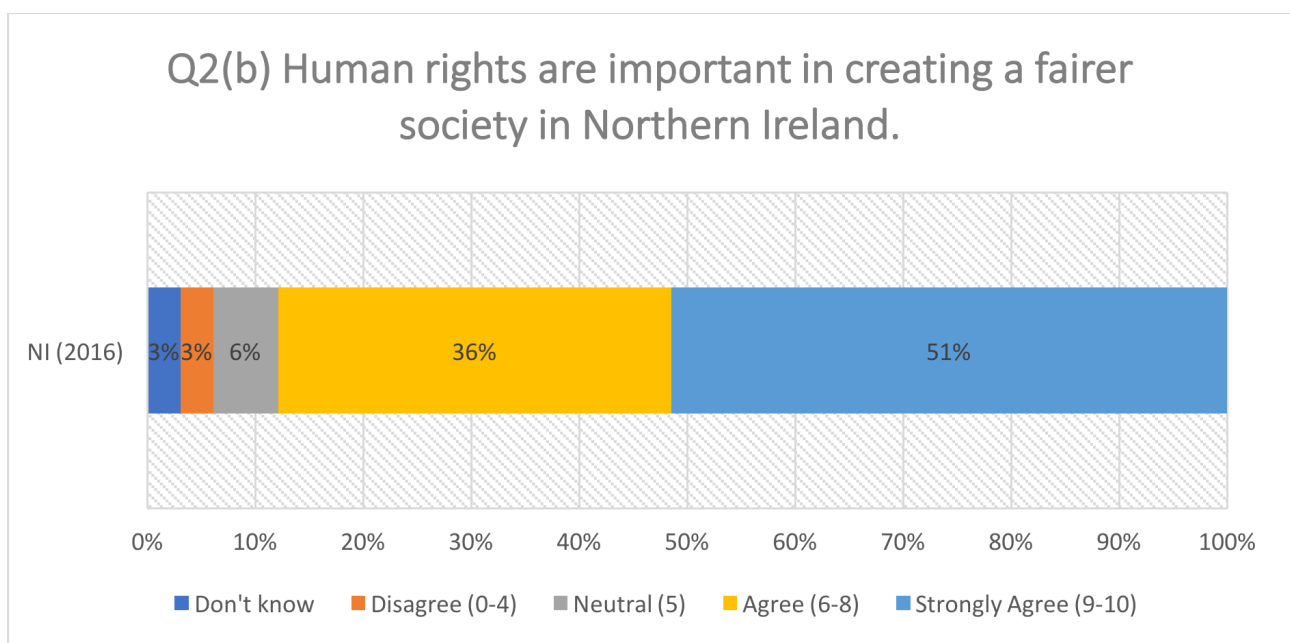
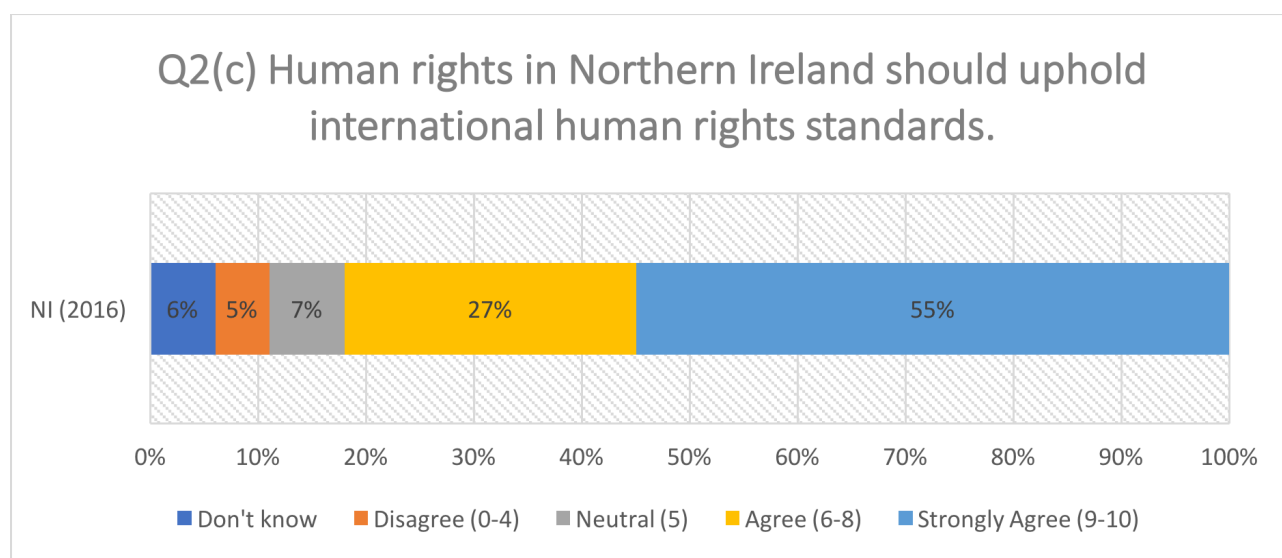


Fig3



There was also a high level of support with **82%** of respondents agreeing that human rights in Northern Ireland should be reflective of international human rights. This demonstrates that participants recognise the openness to global standards and supervision within Northern Ireland, rather than taking an insular approach to the enjoyment of rights.

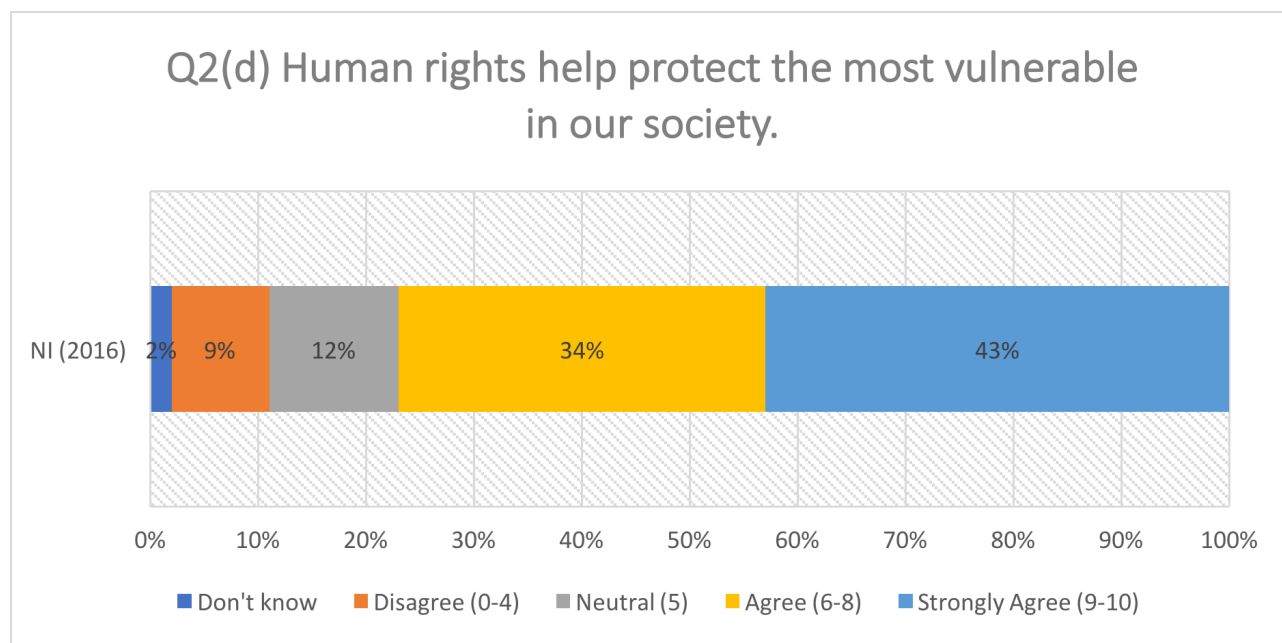
Fig4



Even statements with high levels of support also demonstrate some variability in response from participants which demonstrate that there is still some work to do to help people see how human rights are relevant to their lives and how they can be used to help drive up standards for people most at risk. For example, the statement that ‘human rights help to protect the most vulnerable in our society’ (Fig5 below) attracted a lower level of support (**77%** of respondents agreed with the statement), than more abstract aspiration statements ‘All human rights should apply to everyone no matter who they are’ (which had the agreement of **90%** of respondents) (Fig2 above).

This indicates a 13 percentage point difference in the level of agreement between these two statements. This difference makes it clear that further work needs to be focused on ensuring that current human rights protections help vulnerable people and the requirement for new protections like the bill of rights to be framed around people most at risk.

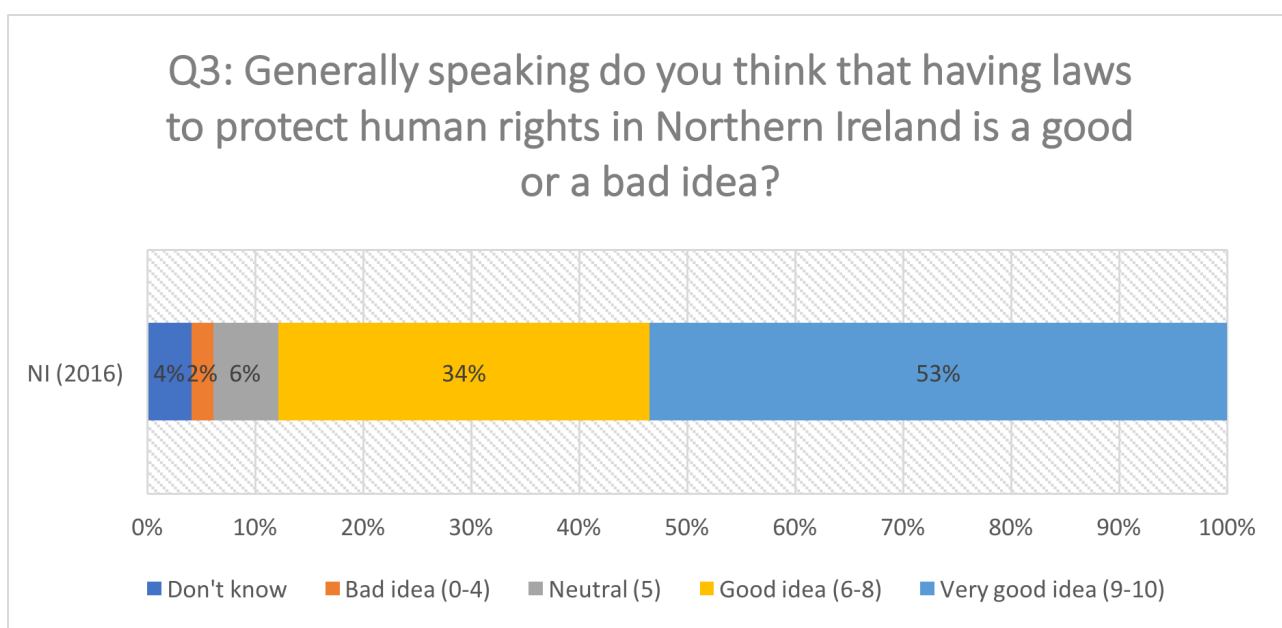
Fig5



### Question 3

Asked respondents whether having laws to protect human rights was a good or bad idea on a scale of 0 (very bad idea) to 10 (very good idea). The response was again overwhelmingly positive with **87%** of respondents indicating that they felt human rights laws were a good idea. Which again further evidences a very strong platform of support for measures to enhance human rights laws such as a strong and inclusive bill of rights, which reflects international human rights standards.

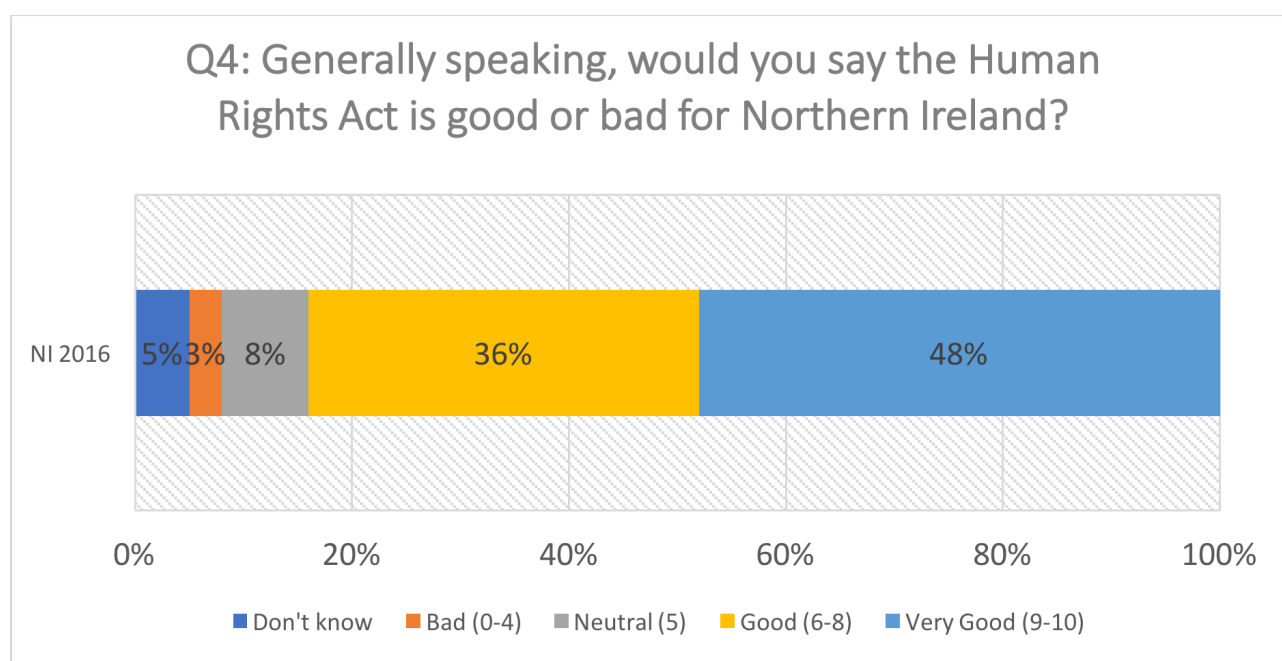
Fig6



## Question 4

The final question focused on the attitude of people in Northern Ireland to the Human Rights Act, in light of the current government's commitment to scrap the legislation. We found that unlike suggestions to the contrary in other parts of the UK, the Human Rights Act enjoys a high degree of support in Northern Ireland. When asked whether the Human Rights Act was good or bad for Northern Ireland, the respondents were highly supportive, giving it a 84% approval rating.

Fig7





# BREAKDOWN BY RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION

Fig1a

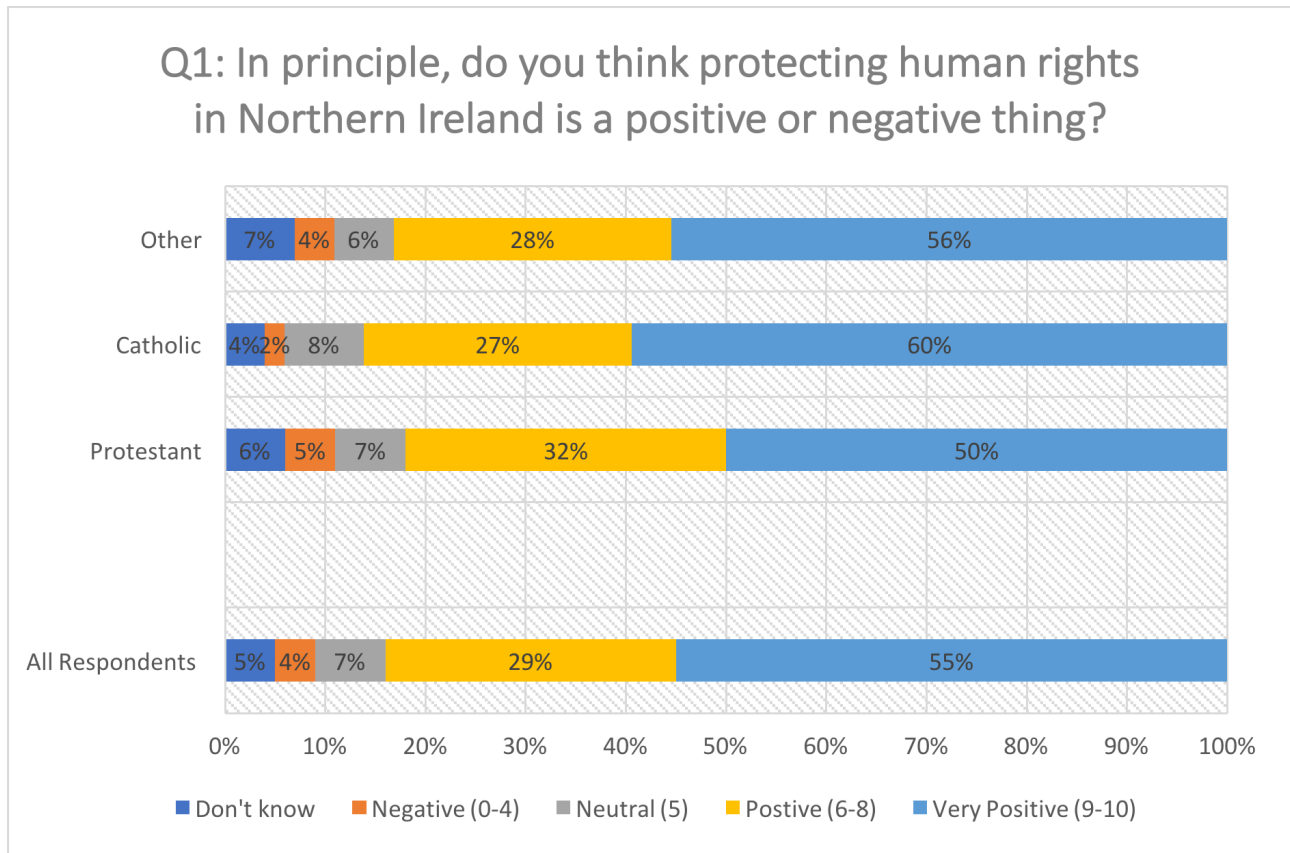


Fig2a

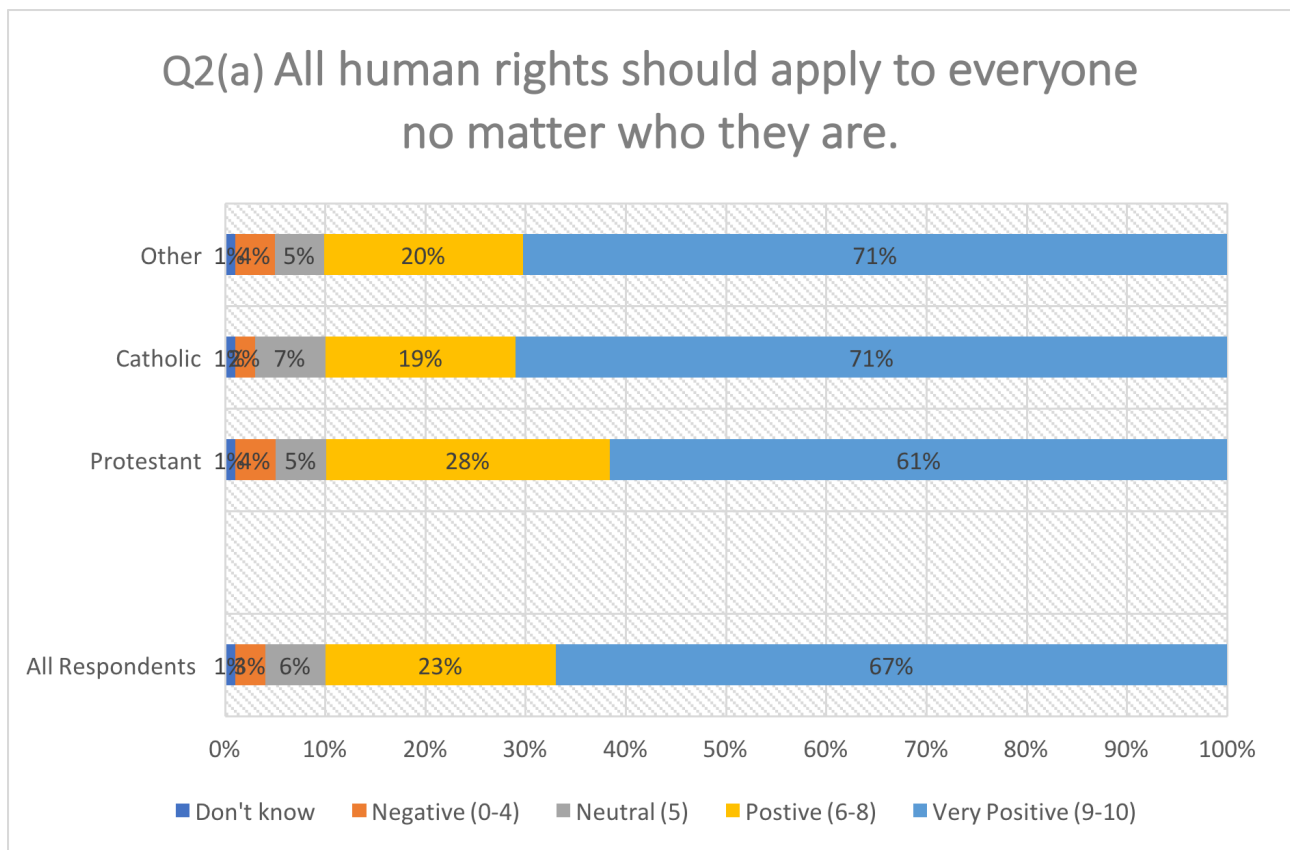




Fig3a

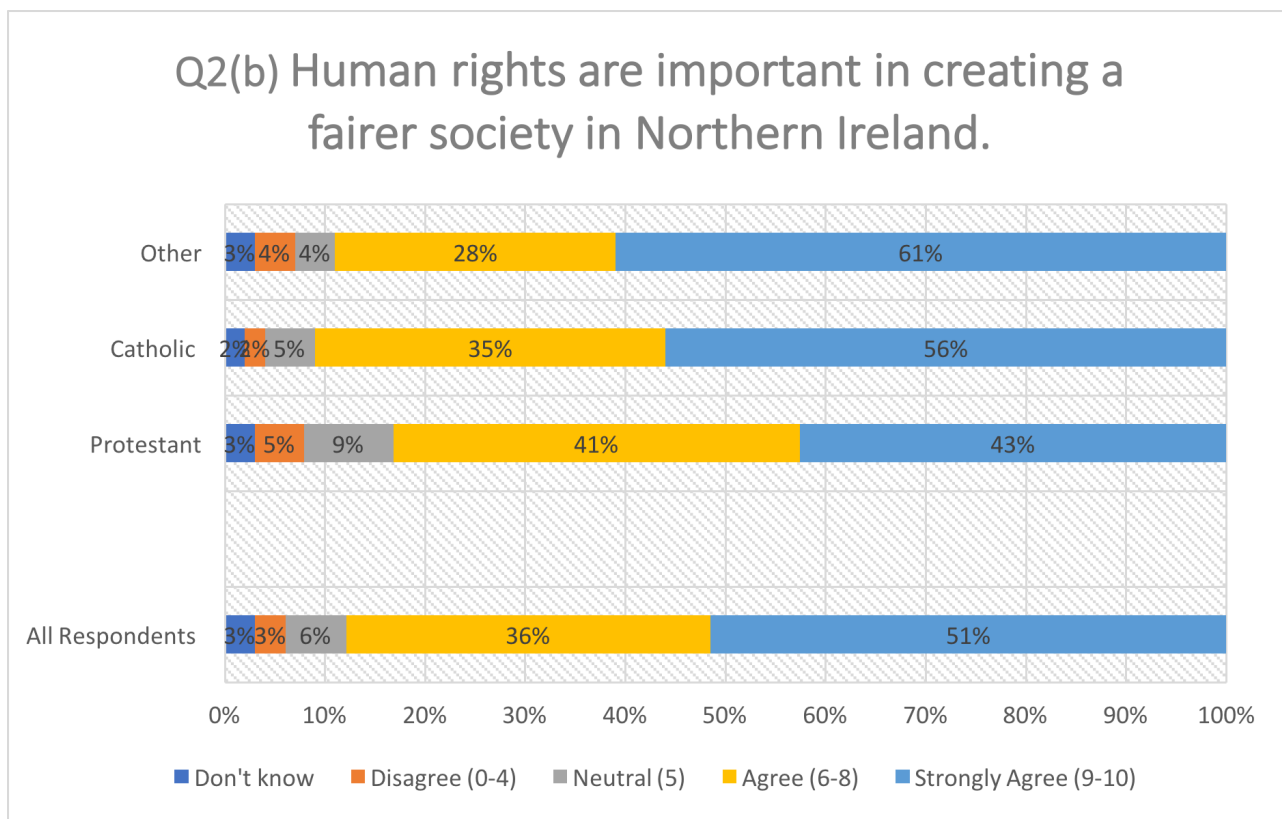


Fig4a

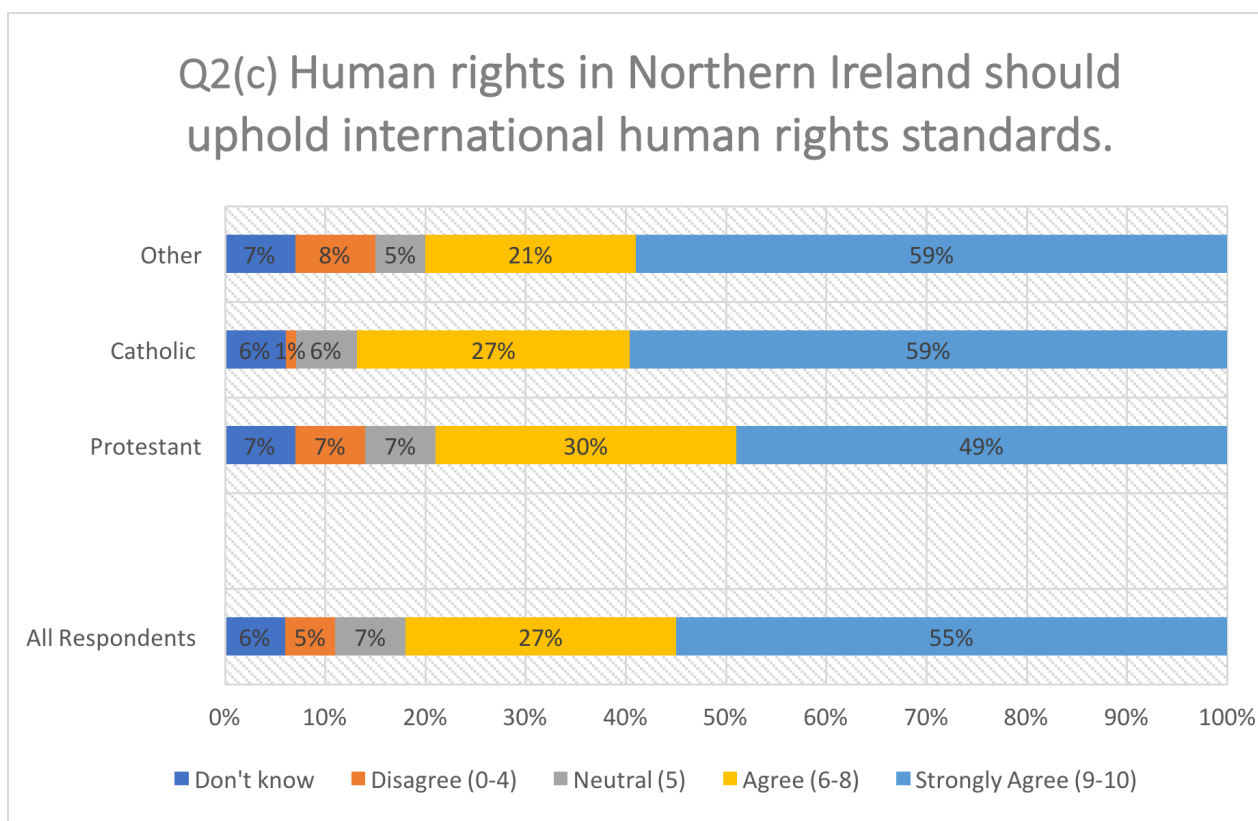


Fig5a

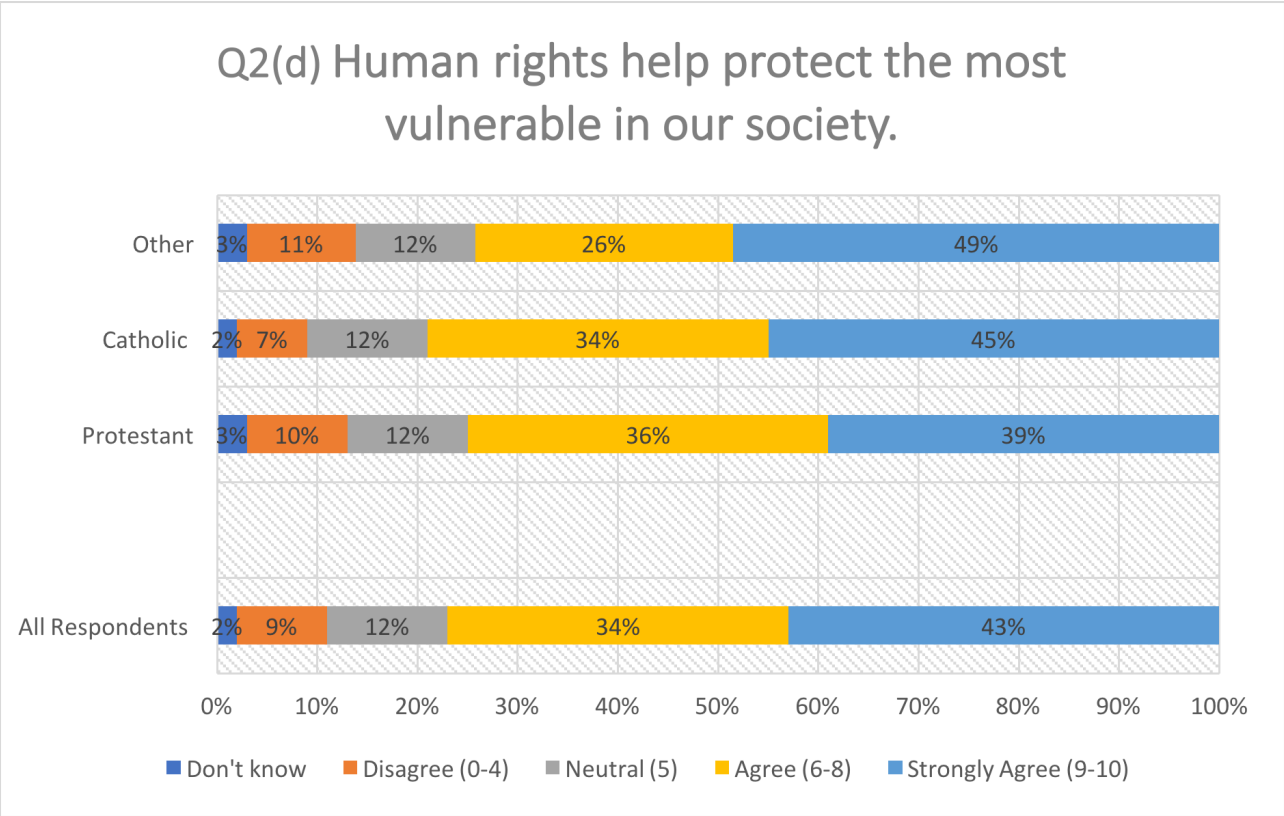


Fig6a

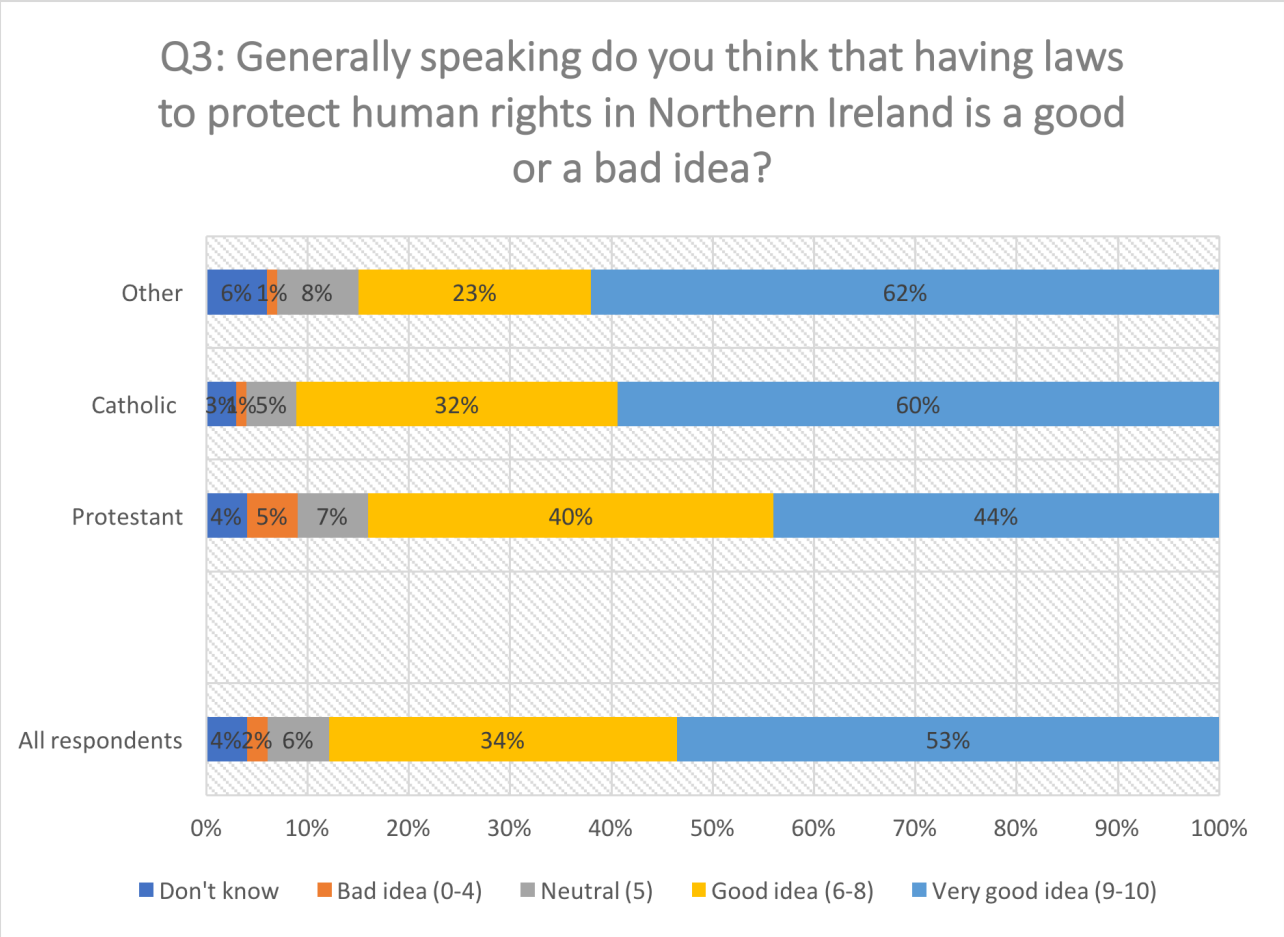
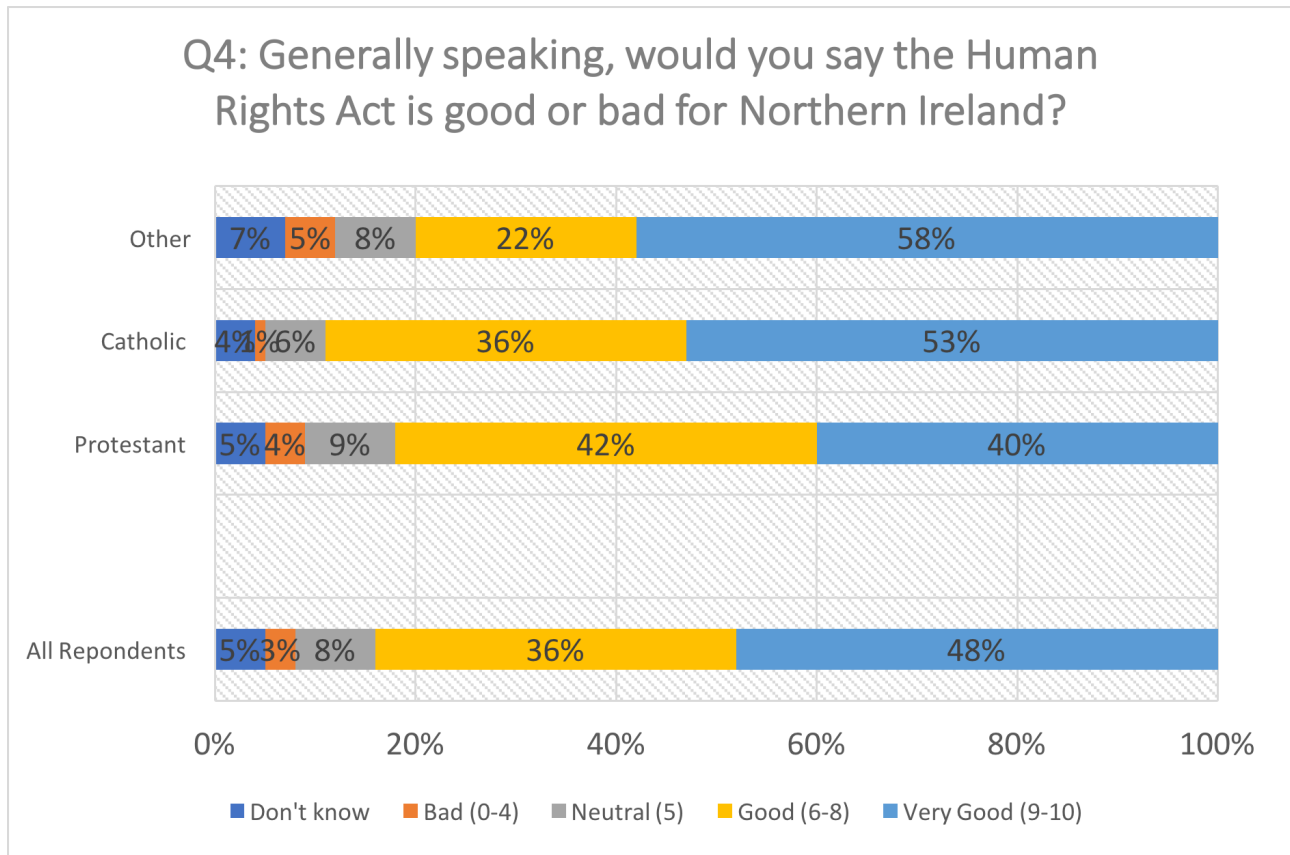


Fig7a



## BREAKDOWN BY GENDER

Fig1b

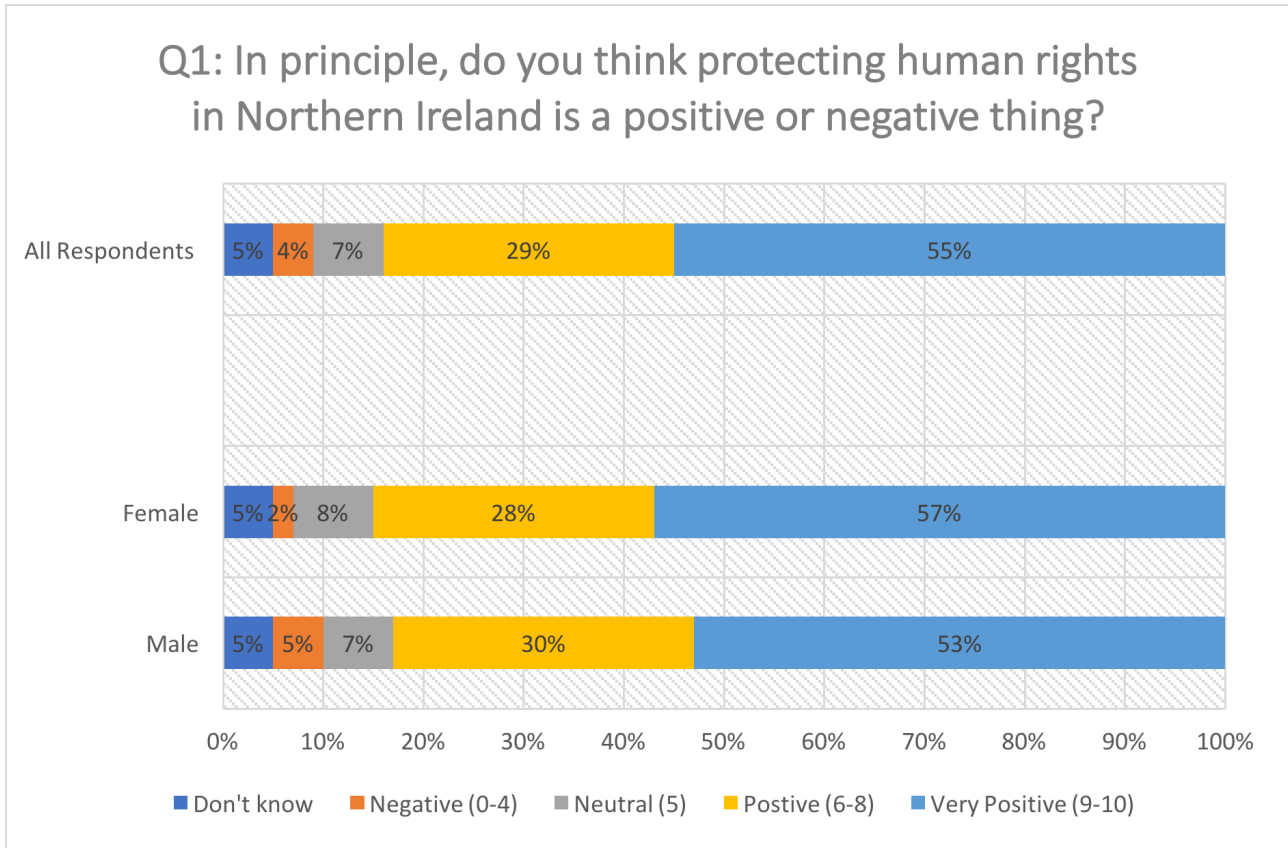


Fig2b

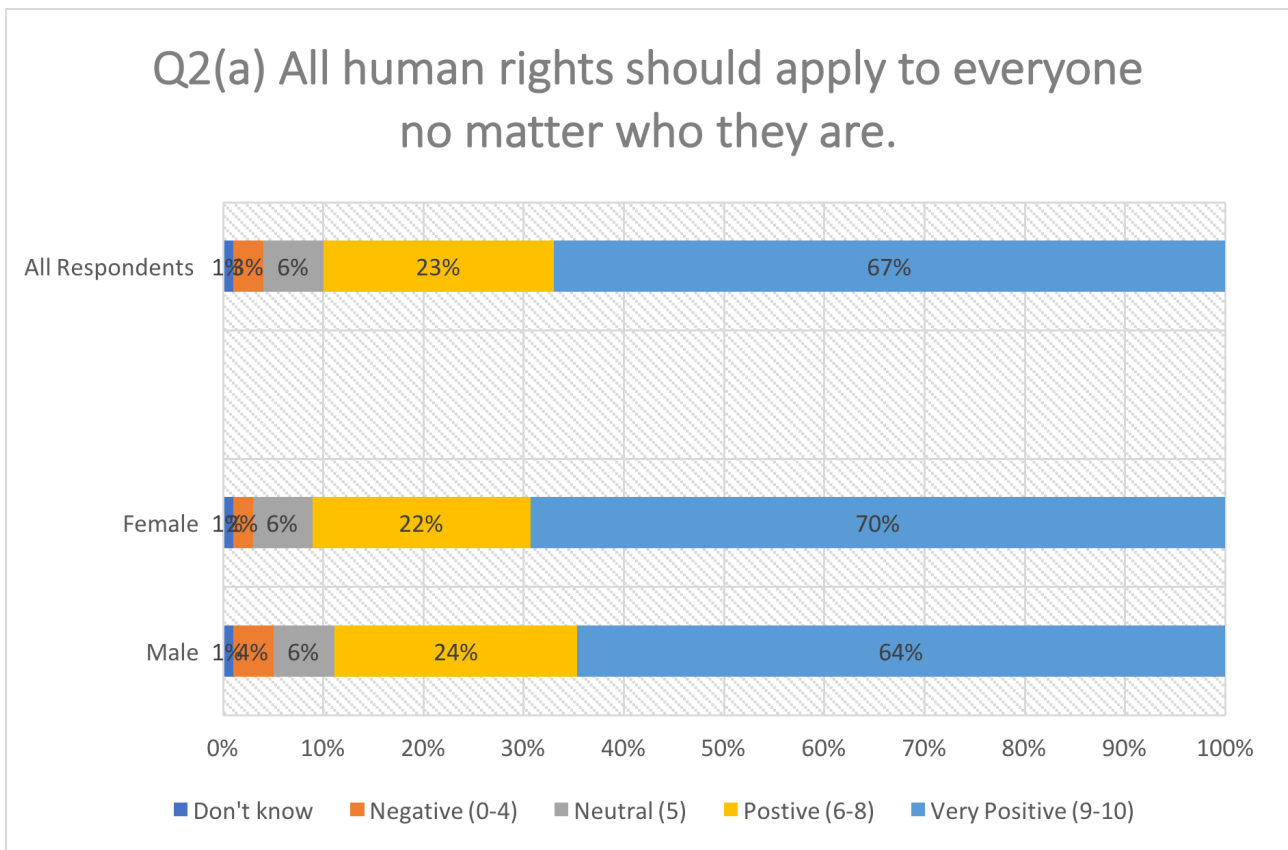


Fig3b

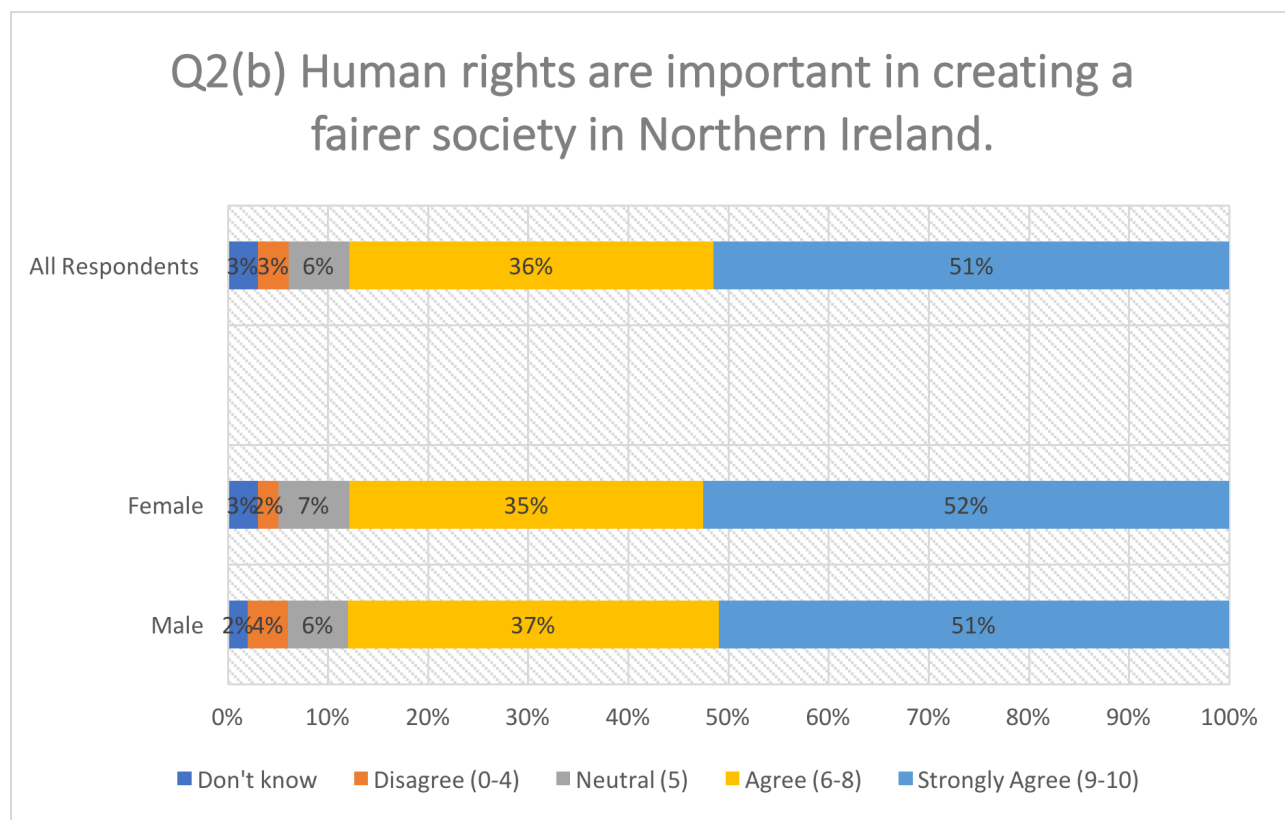


Fig4b

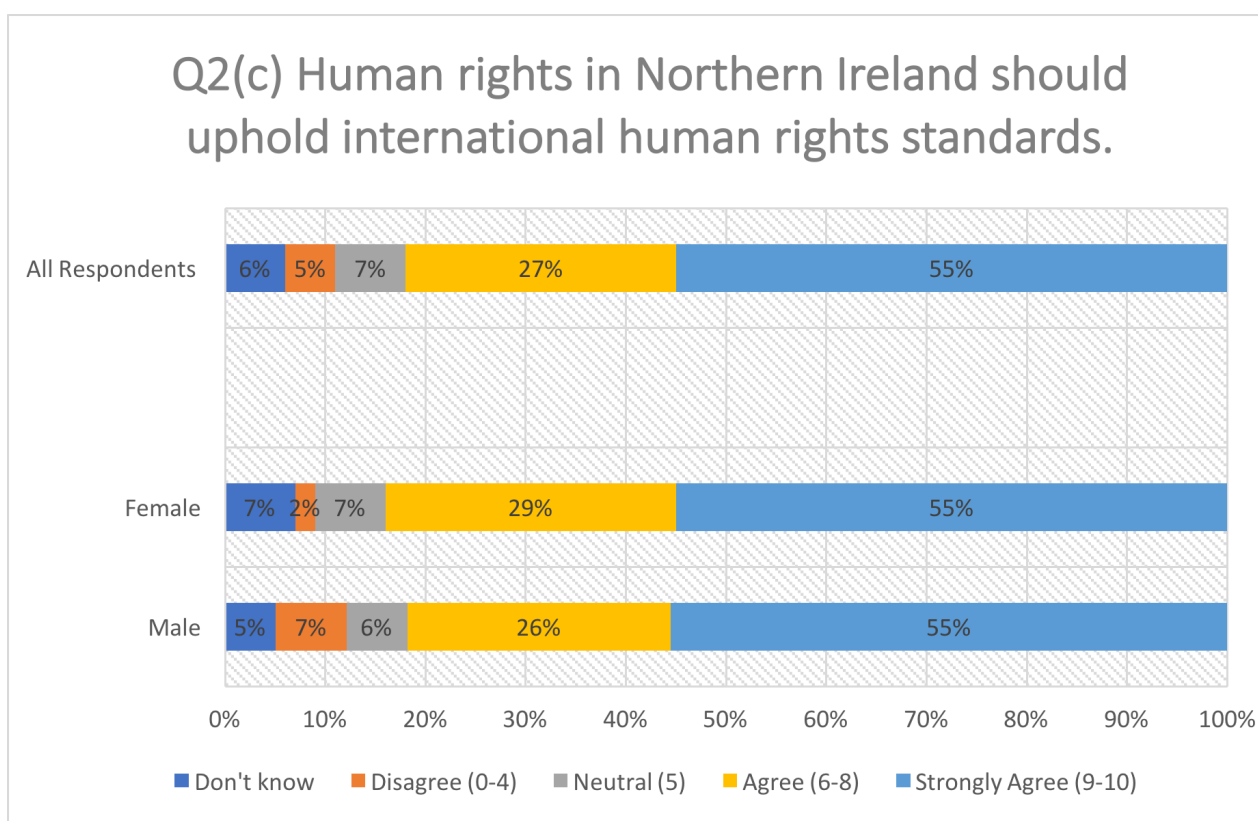


Fig5b

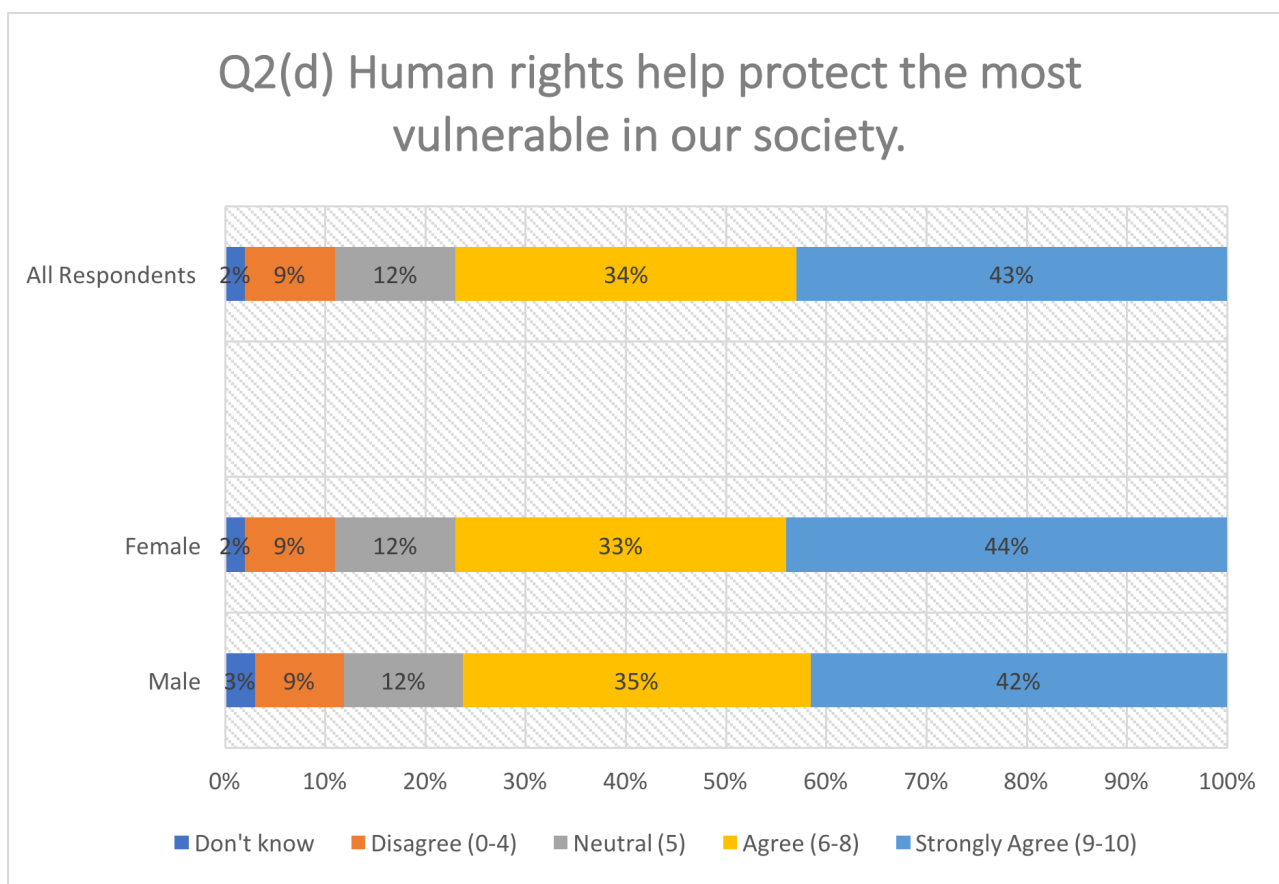


Fig6b

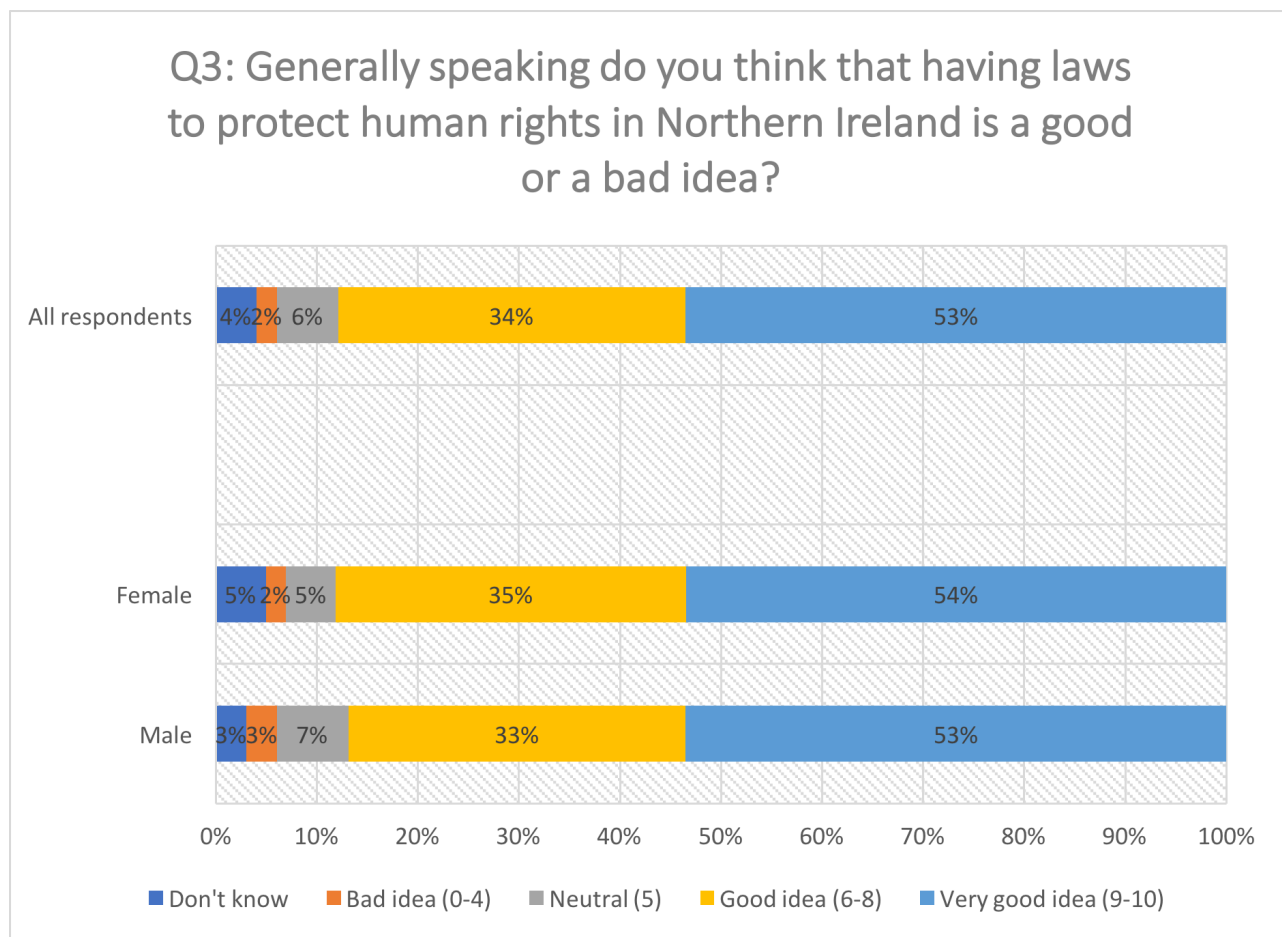
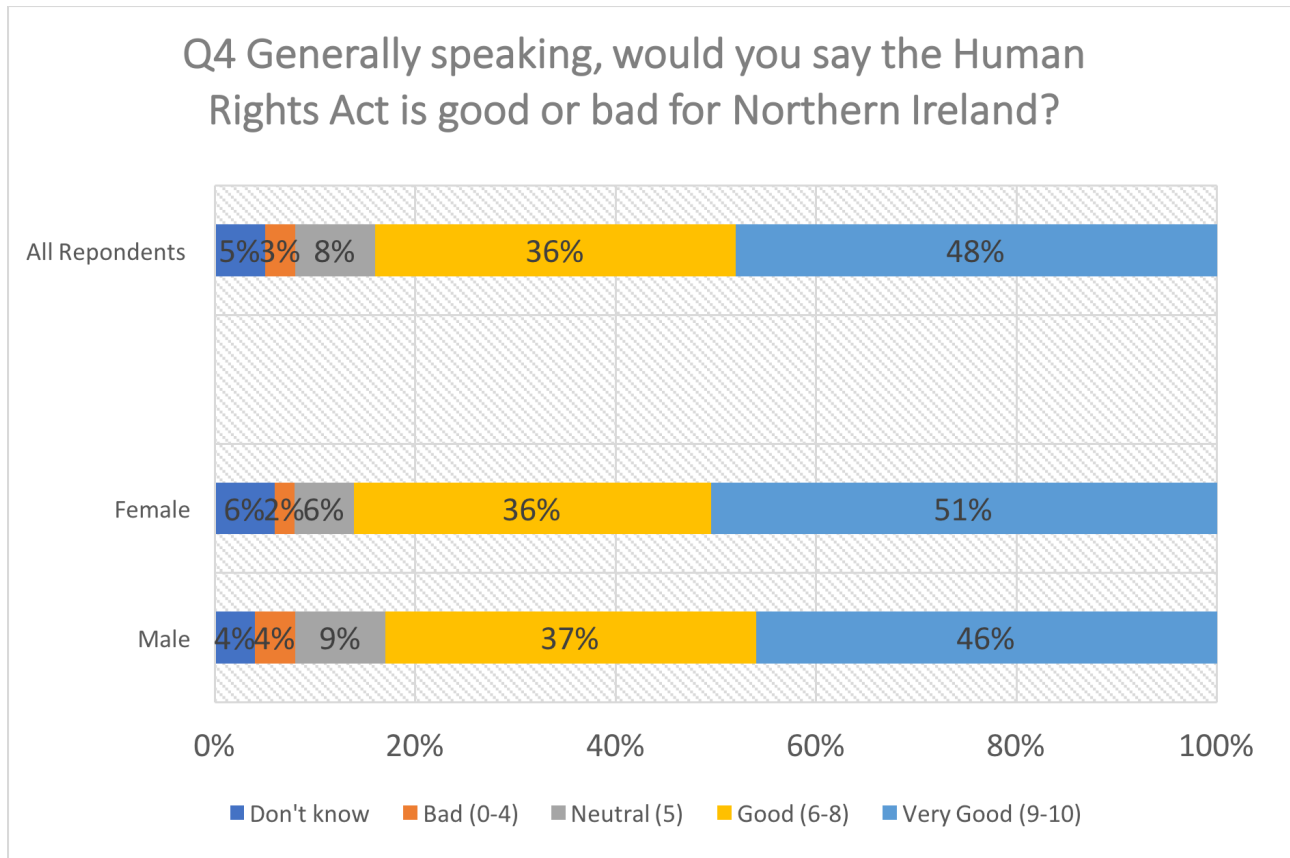


Fig7b



## BREAKDOWN BY AGE

Fig1c

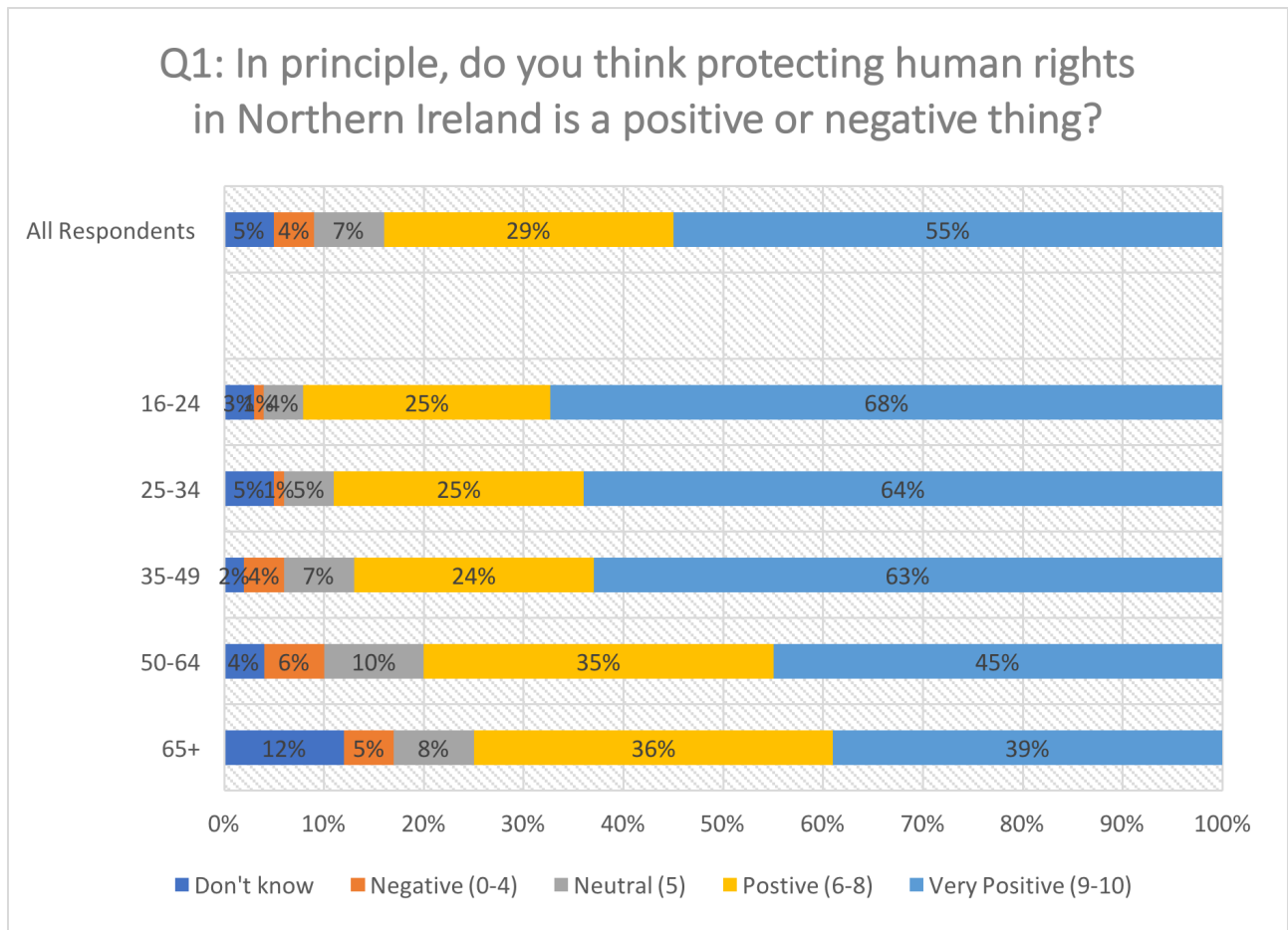




Fig2c

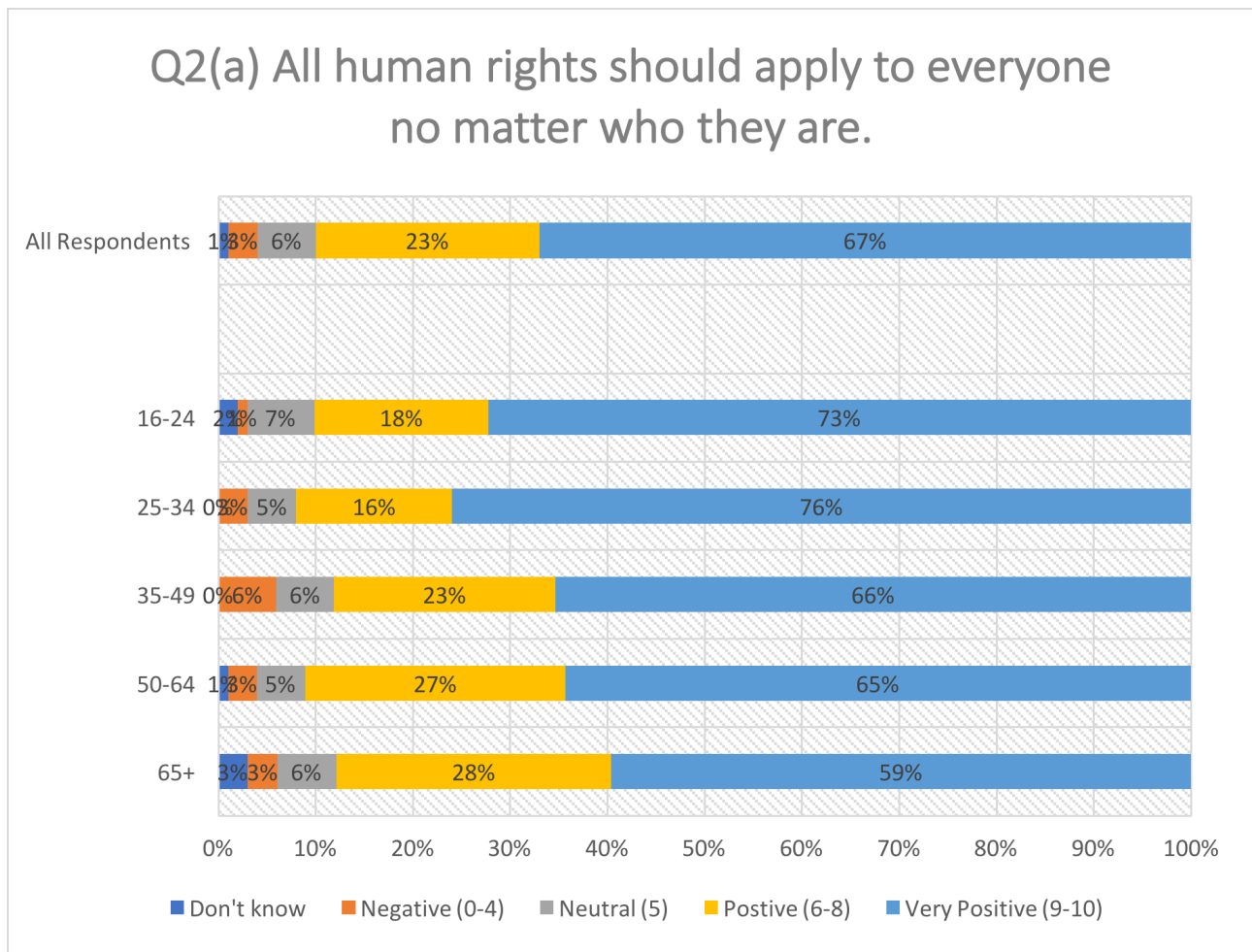


Fig 3c

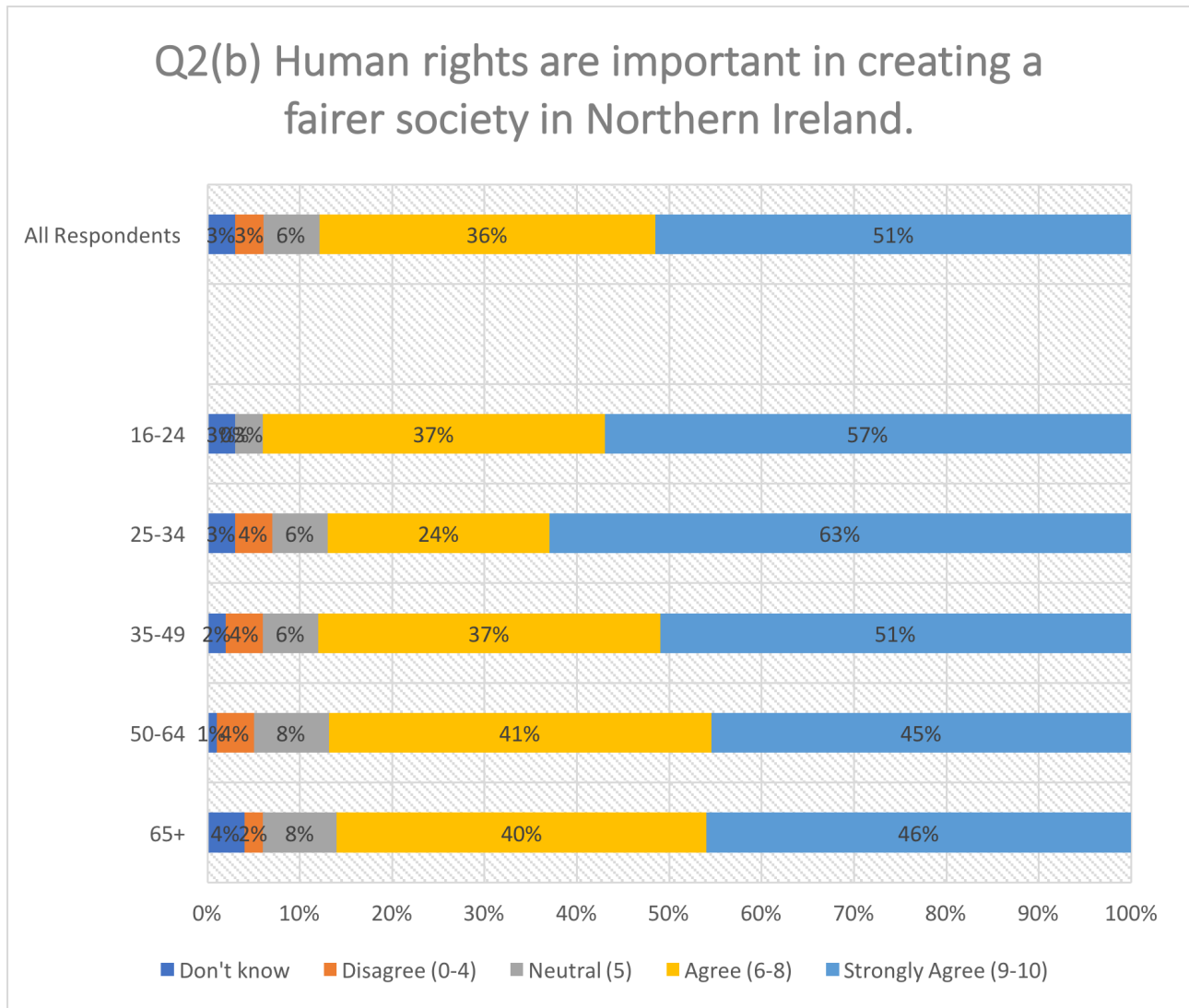


Fig4c

## Q2(c) Human rights in Northern Ireland should uphold international human rights standards.

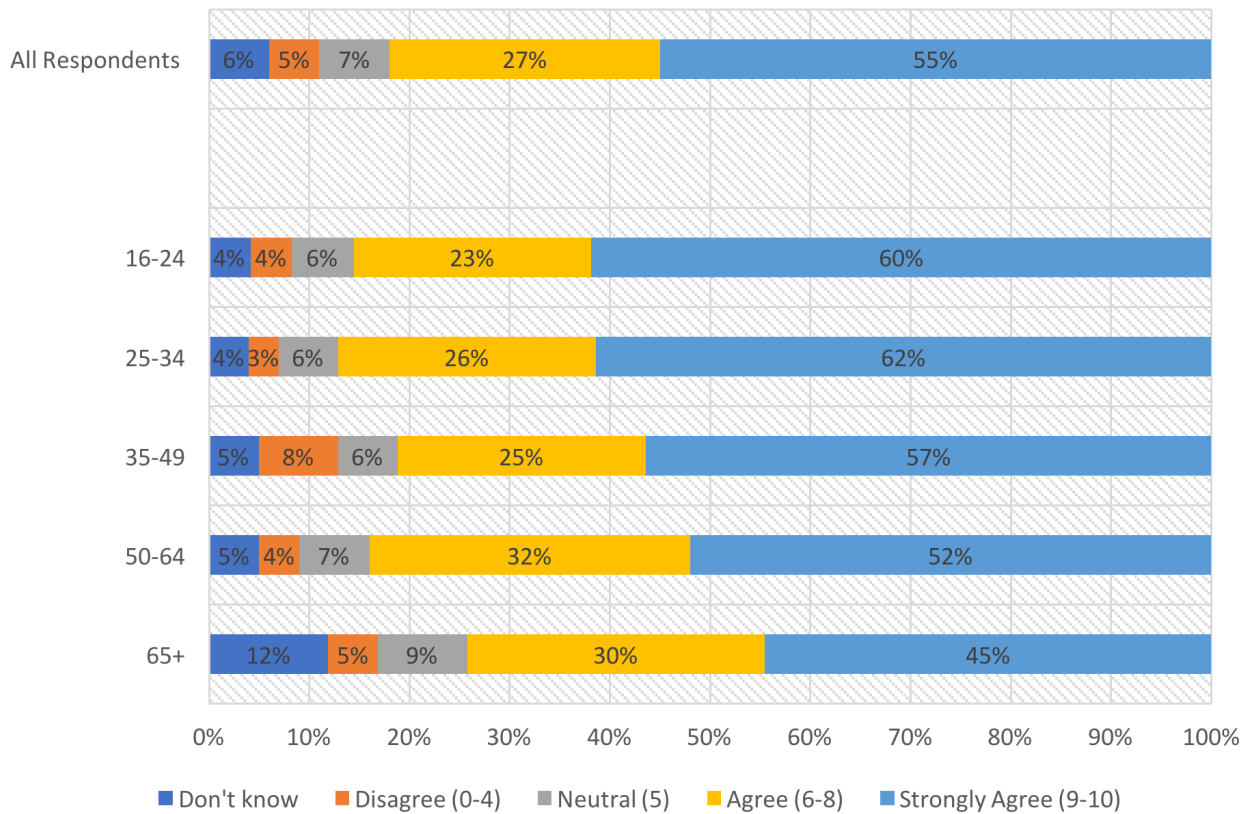


Fig5c

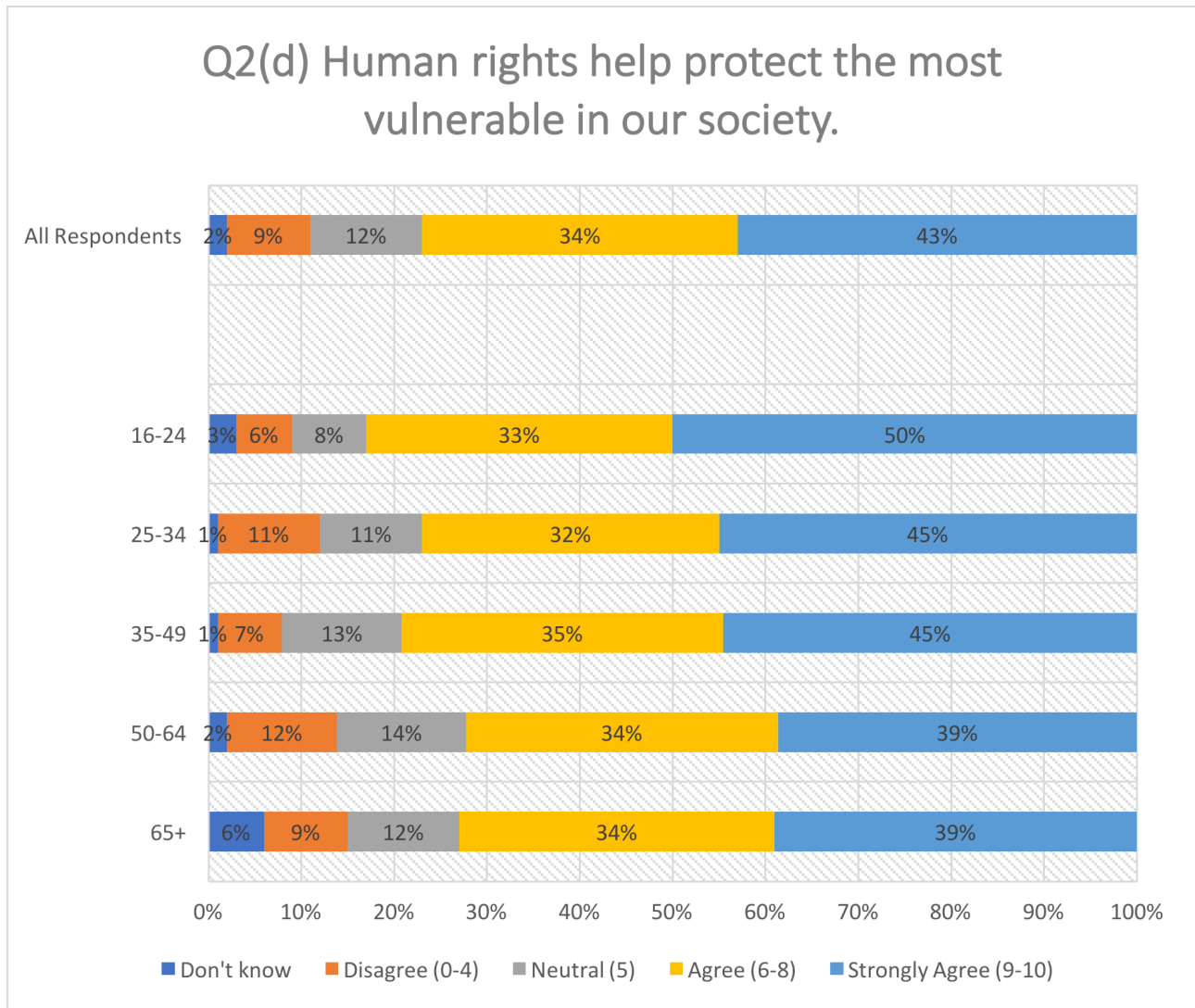


Fig6c

Q3: Generally speaking do you think that having laws to protect human rights in Northern Ireland is a good or a bad idea?

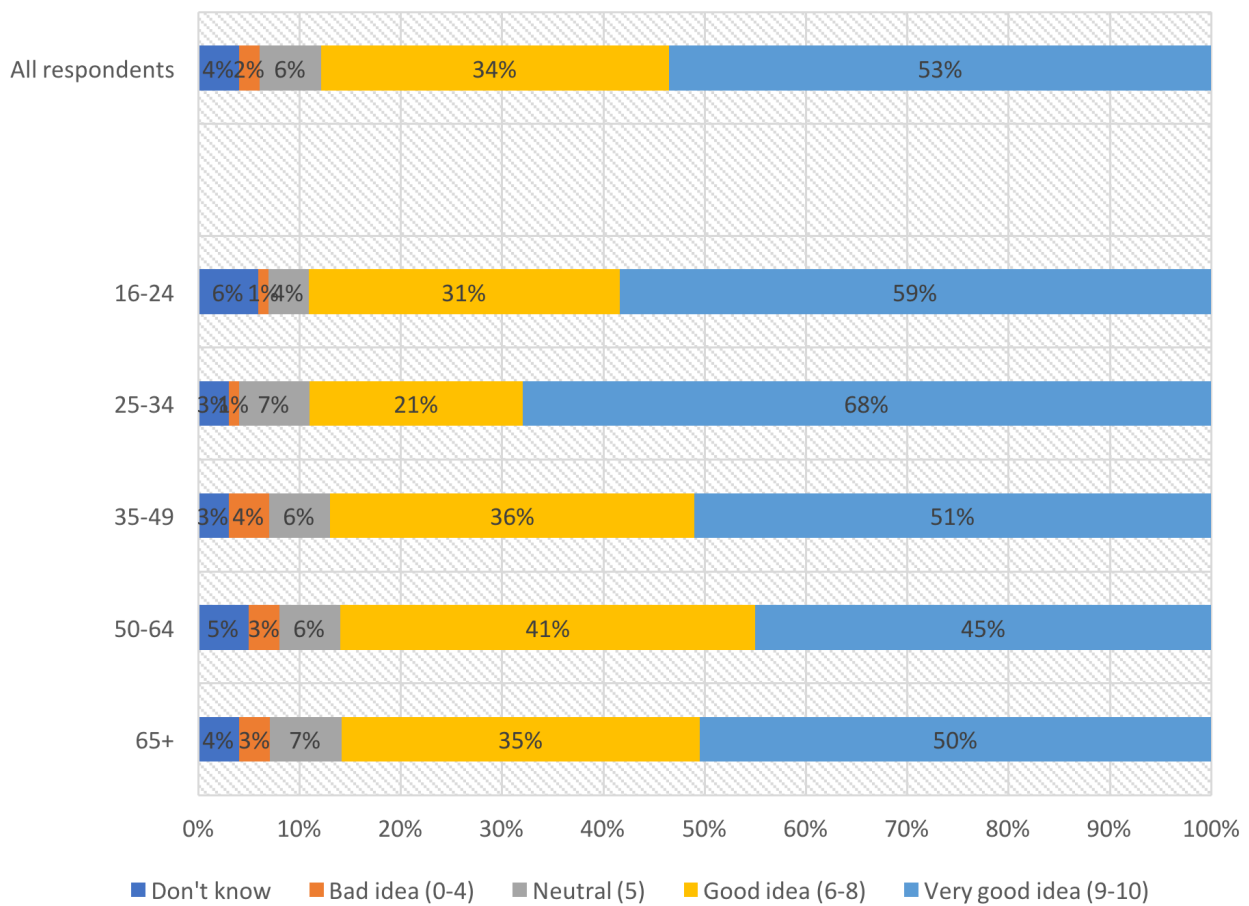
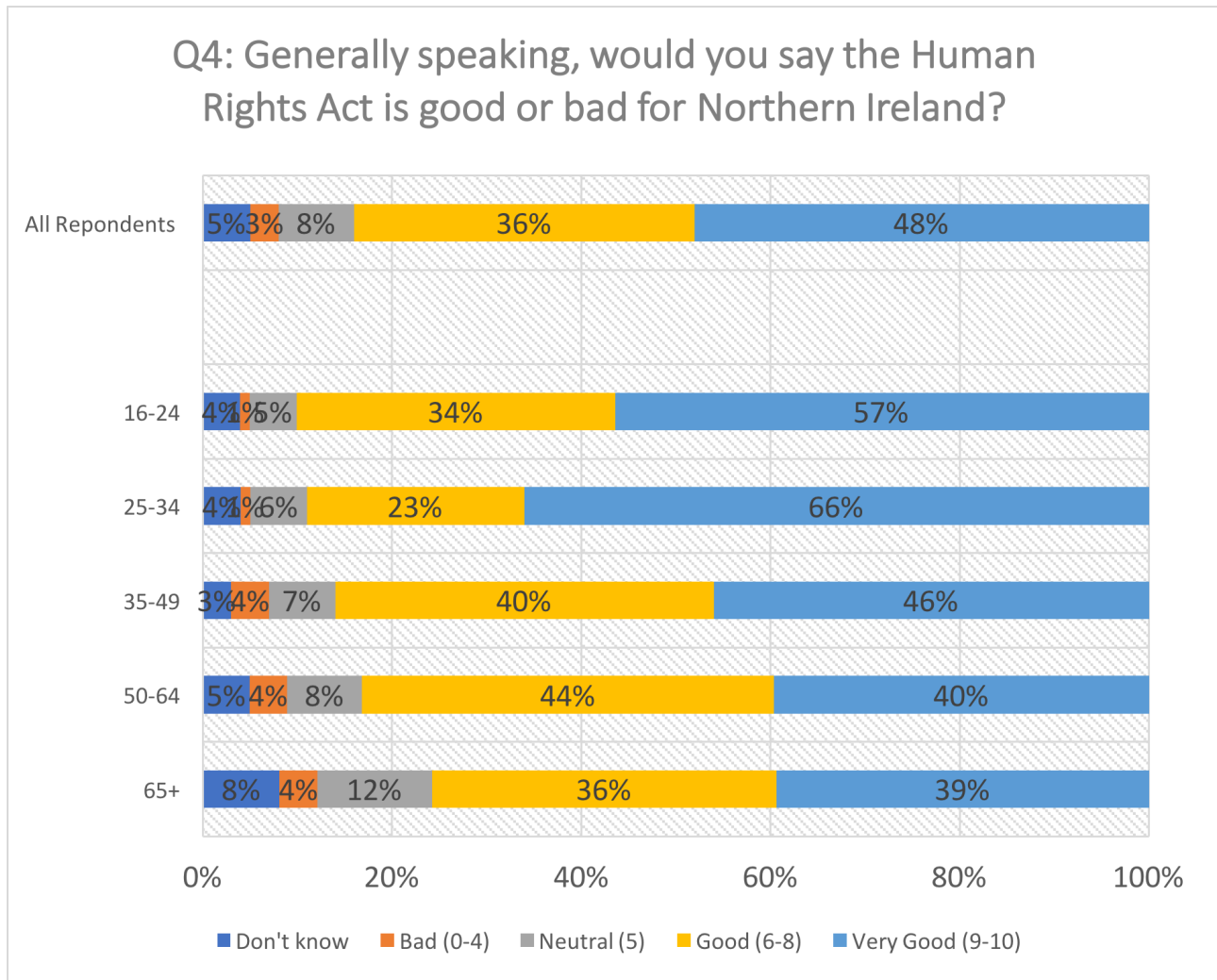


Fig7c



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# HUMAN RIGHTS CONSORTIUM

