

women's aid

Federation Northern Ireland

Women's Aid Northern Ireland

**Violence against
Women Consultation
with Victims, Survivors
& Service Users 2017/18**

Background

Women's Aid in Northern Ireland is the lead agency supporting women and children subjected to domestic and sexual abuse. We offer a range of direct services including the 24 Hour Domestic & Sexual Violence Helpline, emergency accommodation, community-based support, safety planning, and prevention services. We also offer a preventative education programme training teachers in schools across Northern Ireland to deliver effective, high quality education to children about healthy relationships. Alongside this, we campaign for change for women, challenging the inequalities, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours that perpetuate domestic, sexual and gender-based violence in Northern Ireland¹.

Over the last 40 years, we have worked with thousands of women and children to help them stay safe, build resilience and lead lives free from violence. Throughout all this time we have focused on what women need, listening to them and responding to their needs. This method of working, termed co-design or co-production² is essential to our approach and to our ethos. It is the foundation of all our services.

Women's Aid understands domestic abuse and violence as a grave violation of women's human rights and recognises violence against women as a gendered crime that is deeply rooted in societal inequality between women and men. Evidence demonstrates that domestic abuse and sexual violence happens disproportionately to women, preventing women from realising their potential and denying them their right to equality³. It is a cause and consequence of inequality, and women in Northern Ireland experience it regardless of their race, ethnic or religious group, sexuality, class, or disability.

Most often the women and children we work with have been subjected to multiple forms of violence and abuse, usually experienced as an ongoing pattern of abusive and controlling behaviour that can include: the use or threat of physical and sexual violence, intimidation, degradation, isolation and control, psychological and/or emotional abuse, financial abuse, harassment, stalking and online or digital abuse.

Women's Aid defines domestic violence in terms of this ongoing pattern of abusive, coercive and controlling behaviour. It involves a perpetrator who holds power in the relationship and their abuse of that power. It isn't always physical, and most often it involves emotional, psychological and/or financial abuse, as well as other controlling and manipulative behaviours. In many cases, physical and sexual violence, or threats of physical and sexual violence, are used alongside these other types of abuse to control someone. It is a confusing, frightening and isolating experience; victims are often cut off from their support networks, emotionally abused, and manipulated to the point where they are too afraid to leave. This pattern of abusive behaviour, also known as coercive control⁴, is deliberate and calculated, designed to isolate, manipulate and terrorise a victim into fearful compliance.

The nature of domestic abuse means women must be strong and resourceful, adopting all kinds of coping strategies to survive each day. Women's lives and those of their children are devastated by the violence and abuse; many women experience multiple physical, sexual and mental consequences that negatively affect their health and well-being. Women may also develop post-traumatic stress, suffering from a range of symptoms that include: agitation and anxiety, depression, panic attacks, trouble sleeping or relaxing, numbness, a sense of isolation, nightmares, mental health problems and substance misuse/addiction. Across our services, we are seeing increases in these complex needs with 46% of women using our services needing longer-term, multi-agency support because of domestic violence.

Many women in our services tell us that the coercive control element of their abuse is much harder to endure – and more difficult to recover from – than the physical violence. It is well-evidenced that the negative impact of psychological abuse and coercive control can be as devastating as the trauma of experiencing physical attacks.⁵

1 Details of all our education programmes and services can be found at www.womensaidni.org or you can contact your local group directly and programmes and informs our campaigns to raise awareness of domestic abuse and sexual violence.

2 Co-production means delivering public services in an equal and reciprocal relationship between professionals, people using services, their families and their neighbours

3 See UN Women at <http://endviolence.un.org/>; CEDAW Convention <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/> and the World Health Organisation http://www.who.int/topics/gender_based_violence/en/. Violence against women – particularly intimate partner violence and sexual violence – is a major public health problem and a violation of women's human rights. Global estimates published by WHO indicate that about 1 in 3 (35%) women worldwide have experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime. Most of this violence is intimate partner violence. Worldwide, almost one third (30%) of women who have been in a relationship report that they have experienced some form of physical and/or sexual violence by their intimate partner in their lifetime. Globally, as many as 38% of murders of women are committed by a male intimate partner. Violence can negatively affect women's physical, mental, sexual and reproductive health, and may increase vulnerability to HIV. Available at: <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs239/en/>

4 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NLIXXt6WNSM>

5 Litrownik, A. J., Newton, R., Hunter, W. M., English, D. J., & Everson, M. D. (2003). "Exposure to family violence in young at-risk children: A longitudinal look at the effects of victimization and witnessed physical and psychological aggression." *Journal of Family Violence*, 18, 59–73

The consequences of domestic violence and abuse, however, go beyond the personal or private. Violence against women is a political, social and cultural issue, and its impact reverberates across all of society.

Domestic Violence; Cost to the Economy

The cost to the economy is considerable: in Northern Ireland, we currently spend £931 million⁶ per annum on domestic and sexual violence across our criminal justice system, health and social services, housing system and legal processes. The comparable cost in the UK is £5.7 billion a year.⁷ This figure is dwarfed when we consider that the total costs across our economic and social structures are estimated to be in the region of £23 billion per annum⁸ due to loss of productivity, loss to the economy, costs to the state, and costs to victims themselves. The estimated economic cost of domestic violence to the Irish economy is €2.2 billion a year.⁹ Domestic violence and abuse has an impact on all of us as individuals, on our communities, and across society. It also has a serious impact on children and young people.

Context

In March 2016, the Government launched its 7-year strategy, Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse in Northern Ireland, and this will provide the framework for the work to address these issues in the future. The vision of the Strategy is to have a society in Northern Ireland in which domestic and sexual violence is not tolerated in any form, a society where effective, tailored preventative and responsive services are provided, all victims are supported, and perpetrators are held to account. Women's Aid welcomes the Strategy and is committed to working with Government to ensure it is implemented effectively and meets the needs of victims.

In 2016-17 Women's Aid carried out a series of consultations with our service users covering a range of topics including:

- Recognition of domestic violence

6 Domestic and sexual violence Strategy for NI 2016. Available at: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/stopping-domestic-and-sexual-violence-and-abuse-northern-ireland-strategy>

7 The Cost of Domestic Violence: Sylvia Walby UNESCO Chair in Gender Research Lancaster University. Available at: http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/sociology/profiles/34/www.edvitaly-project.unimib.it/.../Cost_of_domestic_violence_update

8 Women's Aid Ireland, The Economic Costs of Domestic Violence. Available at: https://www.womensaid.ie/download/pdf/the-economic_costs_of_domestic_violence.pdf

9 Women's Aid, Ireland. Available at <https://www.womensaid.ie/about/policy/natintstats.html#X2012091712443914>

- Support needs
- Experience of Women's Aid Services
- Experiences of other services involved e.g. PSNI, Social Services, Courts, Criminal Justice
- Best and Worst Experiences when engaging with services

150 women took part in this consultation. The findings are recorded in this report, and recommendations have been developed in the light of these findings. As well as collating information from ongoing evaluations, the consultation process for this document involved two elements: 1) a written questionnaire sent out to women individually and 2) a series of focus group discussions. We would like to take this opportunity to thank all the women who took the time to give their views and ideas. The process has been extremely valuable, and we hope that the information gathered from women will help all services to engage more effectively with women and better understand their needs.

Women's Aid believe that survivors' voices and experiences must be central to informing the development and delivery of legislation, policy and strategy to ensure systems and services best meet survivors' needs.

It can take up to 35 incidents of abuse before a person seeks help

In 2016-17

- 710 women stayed in refuge with their children
- 245 women **could not access** refuge as it was full
- 7,030 women accessed outreach support allowing them to stay in their own homes
- 29,657 calls were managed by the 24 Hour Domestic & Sexual Violence Helpline

Consultation Summary

The consultation revealed eight overarching strategic areas on which current and future efforts should be focused:

1. The need for greater awareness of emotional abuse
2. The need to develop a whole-community approach
3. The need for all PSNI officers to understand domestic abuse and its impact on victims
4. The need for all services and organisations to work together and coordinate their efforts

5. The need for education about healthy relationships and keeping safe for all young people
6. The need for a better understanding of the impact of domestic abuse on mental and emotional health and wellbeing
7. The need for a consistently strong response to perpetrators from the criminal justice system
8. The need for a different approach in the criminal justice system's response to domestic violence and coercive control

Women told us there needs to be a more effective, joined-up approach to addressing domestic and sexual violence. We need to tackle the enduring social problem of violence against women and gender inequality, recognising that women are disproportionately impacted by violence and abuse.

Survivors asked that services work together to:

- Develop a more coordinated approach to prevention and awareness-raising
- Maintain and develop specialised support services for women and children
- Improve the response of criminal justice agencies
- Improve the response of health and social services
- Innovate and develop the ways in which we work together across all sectors, government departments and communities
- Include and involve women in the development and design of services, creating person-centred approaches to working with women and children
- Improve, develop and maintain support services for women and children

Women tell us that:

"Sometimes you don't even realise it's control till way down the line and it's too late."

"I didn't get any support as I was told by family members 'you made your bed, you lie in it'."

"I didn't know there was help."

"I still have problems with coping with mental abuse a year later."

"If I had a choice between being physically or mentally tortured, I'd choose the beating."

"Slap me, punch me, kick me, but don't put me through

one more hour of mental torture."

"I am so broken. He has broken me from the mental torture."

"I really didn't realise that I was being mentally abused until I was physically abused."

Domestic violence and abuse has far reaching affects across our society and its impacts are multiple and diverse.

Children and Young People

UNICEF estimate that there are 32,000 children and young people living with domestic violence in NI

In 2016-17

568 children stayed in a Women's Aid refuge

7,878 children accessed outreach support allowing them to stay with their mums in their own homes

49 children with no recourse to public funds supported

Helping hands education delivered to 1253 children

Healthy Relationships education delivered to 890 children and young people

Domestic violence and abuse has adverse effects on children and young people and can impact upon all areas of their life, including health, education, recreation, social activities, and the development of relationships. The Hidden Victims Study of 108 mothers attending National Children's Home (NCH) family centres who had experienced domestic violence showed that 90% of children were aware of the violence, 75% had witnessed violence, 10% had witnessed sexual violence, 99% of children had seen their mothers crying or upset because of the violence, and more than half of the women (52%) said their children had seen the resulting injuries. The Hidden Victims Study also showed that more than a quarter (27%) of the children involved had been hit or physically abused by the violent partner¹⁰. Strategies for denying or minimising domestic violence are still evident in current social work with children and families.

¹⁰ NCH Action for Children (1994) The Hidden Victims: Children and Domestic Violence, London: NCH Action for Children.

Case Study - Joe's story

Joe is seven years old. He came to live in the refuge with his mum and one year old brother. When they arrived, their mum was very upset, and so was taken by a worker into the lounge area to talk.

Joe and his brother went into the playroom. They were shown around it, and the child worker stayed and played with the children until their mum had finished speaking. That same evening, they were taken around the refuge and shown their room. The workers made sure they had all they needed including food and any necessities. Initially Joe was very quiet and withdrawn and found it difficult to talk about his feelings and experiences.

The next day when the children came into the playroom, they found out more about the activities they could do, and met the other children. Their mum was helped to find local playgroups for the younger son but didn't need help to get Joe into a local school as he was already enrolled in one. As time went on Joe and his brother got to know everyone in the refuge, mums, workers and of course the other children. They participated in different activities the playroom had to offer. This included arts and crafts, playing games, cooking and going on outings. This all helped them settle into their new home and to express their feelings through play. Their relationship with their mum strengthened over time as she became more confident as a result of the support she was receiving.

The two boys went on the trips organised during the school holidays, such as to the cinema, swimming pool or the local park. Mum went on some of these trips but stayed at the refuge on others, to spend time doing support work. Joe also did activities in the playroom which helped him talk about his past and helped him express his feelings. This was done through play, an example being creating a 'memory jar'.

Joe participated in the children's meetings, which included talking about how he felt about living in the refuge, and any difficulties he was having. He was also involved in doing Transformers, a Women's Aid programme designed to help children who have experienced domestic violence. He also completed the Helping Hands programme to develop self-esteem and help him feel safe. Joe also attended the young person's group at the refuge in Belfast. The group was on twice a month, and he made new friends in similar circumstances to himself.

Joe's confidence grew and over time, he opened up and talked more and got the support he so clearly needed.

Joe's mum participated in Positive Parenting, along with other courses on offer and grew in confidence as time went on. Joe and his family stayed with us for over a year until their circumstances changed. He and his brother still come to visit along with his mum and they continue to get support from Women's Aid.

"Women's Aid has helped my child see that there is light at the end of a dark tunnel and that other children have been through the same thing and have come out the other side."

Domestic Violence & Pregnancy

Over 30% of all domestic violence in NI starts during pregnancy

In 2016/17

- **13 babies were born to women in refuge**
- **38 pregnant women were accommodated in a Women's Aid refuge**
- **179 pregnant women accessed Women's Aid outreach support in NI**

Older Women

Support from Women's Aid at Every Stage of Life

10% of women in our services are over 55

18% of women in our services were under 25

A 2010 study on older women's experiences of domestic and sexual violence, conducted at Queen's University Belfast¹¹, and with support from Belfast and Lisburn Women's Aid, found that there are a number of additional issues facing older women. Older women told us they have significant difficulty coping and seeking help due in part to economic dependence and a lack of family support. Lack of support from GPs and the police, as well as a lack of supportive programmes and settings that would allow them to 'tell their stories' safely and confidentially, were all considered by older women as barriers when it comes to seeking support or leaving an abusive relationship. In addition, older

¹¹ Anne Lazenbatt, John Devaney & Aideen Gildea, January 2010. Older women's lifelong experience of domestic violence in Northern Ireland: a CAP-funded research project report

women reported that services designed for older people had few methods for dealing with domestic violence. Older women also viewed domestic violence shelters as being unfamiliar with ageing issues and the special needs of older women, such as dealing with chronic illness, disabilities, or alcohol dependence, and said that very few had separate programmes specifically aimed at older women. Older women also tell us that there is sometimes confusion between the experience of domestic abuse in later life and “elder abuse” (a term which encompasses all forms of violence, abuse and neglect experienced by older people), which can result in women falling into the gaps between the systems designed to offer them protection. We need to increase protection and access to appropriate support services for this vulnerable group.

Case Study Collette’s story

Collette came into refuge after a referral from the local Women’s Centre. She was on her own, had six children who had since grown up and left home. She was 62 and had been married for 42 years. On that particular morning Collette had got up as usual, however she knew she was unable to go on “coping” with her abusive husband.

The worker in the Women’s Centre contacted the Women’s Aid Outreach Worker and she brought the woman to a local refuge where a bedroom was ready for her.

Collette told us she was at the point of ending her life as she could see no way out of her situation. She felt she was too old to start again and that she did not have the strength to do what she needed to do.

Collette was supported through the first few days by simply sitting with her when she needed it and by reassuring her that after a few nights sleep and a bit of space she would start to think more clearly. She was exhausted trying to cope with the emotional and financial abuse. The actual physical assaults had diminished over the years and were a more prominent feature when her children were smaller.

Collette had no idea of what she was entitled to in terms of financial support. She was frightened of phoning various departments herself as her confidence in dealing with others had been eroded over the years.

Her needs were assessed at an appropriate time and a tailored support plan was drawn up. She was supported practically to make a claim to ESA and to present as homeless to the Northern Ireland

Housing Executive. She was supported emotionally to deal with the issues arising from her abuse over the years through needs led one to one support.

After being with us for about three months Collette agreed to take part in the Journey to Freedom programme we were running in-house. As well as receiving support for herself she offered tremendous support to other younger women in the group. After about seven months living with us in refuge, Collette was allocated a one bedroom bungalow close to her daughters. She was delighted! She was supported by a Women’s Aid aftercare worker to complete a successful community care grant form and accepted emotional and practical support to help her get resettled.

Collette now lives independently and comes back to the refuge on a weekly basis for group support via aftercare. She has regained control of her life and plans to volunteer with us in the future.

Black, Ethnic and Minority Women

Supporting All Women

BME Women in refuge 167

BME women getting outreach support 533

BME calls to helpline 300

Traveller Women in refuge 50

41 women with no recourse to public funds supported

The impact of domestic and sexual violence on black and minority ethnic (BME) women is compounded by the fact that they often face additional barriers to seeking the support and protection they need. As well as enduring abuse from the perpetrator, they can also be subjected to racial discrimination and marginalisation in society. This can undermine their ability to seek help and lead an independent life

Survivors from BME communities are likely to have the following additional barriers to receiving support:

- Lack of information and awareness about services and options due to language barriers and lack of familiar community networks
- Insecure immigration status and no recourse to public funds
- Pressure from family members on the pretext of

honour and shame

- Concerns around access to a suitable cultural environment for praying or specific socio-religious food habits (for example) in temporary accommodation
- Fear of isolation and racism within a mainstream service
- Increased vulnerability to other forms of abuse, e.g. threats of deportation and abandonment, isolation, entrapment, and violence condoned by family and community

Case Study Adriana's story

Adriana emailed our resource centre with a simple message in English "Please help me", this message was passed on to the refuge.

Adriana's use of English was limited mainly due to the lack of contact she was allowed with others. However, she had been able to use the interpreting bar on the home computer to translate her needs from Polish to English. Refuge staff returned her e-mails to advise that we may be in a position to help her if we had some more details.

Adriana was frightened and reluctant to give us her address and she had no access to a phone in order for us to direct her to the Helpline. Adriana had four children and was living in terror of her husband. She was totally financially dependent on him as he worked full time. Adriana was unsure if she would be entitled to any benefits including social housing and was terrified of making a move in case he found out she was planning to leave. She was also frightened of disrupting the children, having to leave their schools etc.

We were able to communicate with Adriana by email and advised her of what support was available for her from Women's Aid. We encouraged her to bring important documents such as passports, birth certificates and any personal belongings she could get out of the house in order to help the children settle in. She had no money and no access to getting any. We encouraged her to delete all the emails before leaving in case she could be traced.

Adriana made an appointment with Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities (NICEM). She gave us the time and day of her appointment and with her permission we were able to work with a member of staff there who was fluent in Polish.

We agreed to hold a free room for a couple of days in order to allow Adriana to maximise her and children's safety in terms of finding the best time to leave. When Adriana was ready to leave we were able to organise a taxi to bring her to the refuge.

Through using the Big Word telephone interpreting service we were able to identify areas of support in relation to housing, benefit entitlement and immediate practical needs for Adriana and her children. We have also been able to do some work with the children in relation to helping them through their experiences as their English is quite good.

Adriana and her family have settled well into refuge life and Adriana is growing in confidence each day. The children have since settled into local schools and have been accepted onto the list for social housing.

LGBTQ+ Women

The impact of domestic and sexual violence on LGBTQ+ women is under-researched in Northern Ireland, but LGBTQ+ women tell us that they face additional barriers when it comes to accessing domestic abuse and sexual violence support services. LGBTQ+ women can find it difficult to access support and justice processes and we are mindful of the need to improve accessibility to services, offering flexibility, confidential access and inclusivity. As well as being under-researched the issue domestic and sexual violence is under-reported by LGBTQ+ women, and this is something Women's Aid will prioritise in the coming year.

Women with Disabilities

32% of women in our refuges had a disability or complex need

23% of women in refuge and outreach services disclosed a mental health issue

Research suggests that women with disabilities are more likely to suffer domestic violence and sexual assault than women without disabilities. Women with disabilities also report abuse that lasts longer and is more intense in nature than women without disabilities. Like other women, women with disabilities are usually abused by someone they know, such as a partner or family member. In addition, women with disabilities face the risk of abuse by healthcare providers and caregivers. Caregivers can withhold medicine and assistive devices, such as wheelchairs or braces. They can also refuse to help with daily needs like bathing, dressing, or eating.

Women with disabilities can also be trapped in an abusive relationship because they are carers, because they have homes that have been adapted for children with disabilities, or because they cannot risk a change to a child's routine. Women with disabilities are often unable to defend themselves, or to recognise, report and escape abuse.

"There are road safety and fire safety ads to prevent people being killed, yet so many people lose life through domestic violence".

Case Study Hannah's story

Hannah is a 36 year old woman who was referred to refuge by the PSNI in a crisis situation. Hannah suffers from Multi Sclerosis and is a wheel chair user, fortunately our refuge have the facilities to support women with disabilities.

Hannah has been married for seven years; her husband is also her carer and claims benefits for this. There are many myths around women with disabilities that they are almost free from abuse, Hannah's story certainly dispels this belief.

Hannah's condition had deteriorated over the last five years, she states that her marriage had started to become abusive after a year. She noticed that she was becoming more and more isolated and her relationships with family and friends had almost disappeared.

Her husband had become less and less tolerant of her; she could see his frustration growing daily. He shouted at her all the time but over the past six months he had started to slap and punch her, at first he said he was sorry and she blamed herself having put him in this position of looking after her.

Hannah's husband told her not to tell anyone as if she did he would no longer be able to look after her and she would be on her own.

One morning when Hannah had spilt her cereal on her bed her husband lost his temper and lashed out at her, he punched her in the face and her upper body. Hannah was very frightened and feared for her life.

The next day Hannah's Social worker called on a routine visit, her husband stayed in the room when the Social Worker asked about the marks on her face Hannah's husband made up a convincing story about how Hannah had fallen out of her bed. Hannah was too frightened to say anything.

Fortunately the Social Worker was suspicious and reported the marks to her senior who put a call into a Domestic Abuse officer in the PSNI. They called to the house and spoke to Hannah alone and she confirmed her husband had abused her.

Initially Hannah was very quiet in-refuge; she was allocated a key worker who went about assessing her needs and building a good relationship with her. Hannah spoke often of her feelings of guilt having put her husband in this situation, but over time with support Hannah realised the effects the abuse had had on her, she reached out to her family and friends whom she had become estranged and they were only too happy to offer her support. Hannah is currently waiting for a house and is looking forward to an independent life in the community. Hannah continues to receive support from the Adult Safeguarding team.

Domestic and sexual violence cuts across all policy areas, affecting women in their homes, at school and university, at work, in healthcare and legal institutions, in social life, and in their communities. It is a stain on our society.

Women's Aid recognises that the only way we can achieve real change for all women and children is if national and local government, local partners and agencies, and communities work together to prevent women from becoming victims in the first place. We must address the toxic sexism that runs throughout our society, and challenge harmful male attitudes and behaviours. We must decide not to accept violence against women in any form in our workplaces, schools, universities or communities. We must ensure that support is there for victims and survivors who come forward and seek help. And, most important of all, we must listen to the voices and experiences of women and children whose lives have been affected by domestic violence and abuse. This will help us to develop services that focus on their needs, their human rights and the support they need to recover.

"There needs to be more awareness of domestic violence through media adverts to prevent it from happening."

"There needs to be a government initiative to help deal with the effects of domestic violence, both immediate and long-term."

"More funding for something that's happening 365 days a year!"

Women's Aid conducts ongoing consultations with women in our services, and this document provides an

overview of our findings. It details women's experiences as service users across a broad range of support and criminal justice services, highlighting their concerns and ideas, and offers valuable insight into how services engage with women.

Strategic Area 1: Greater awareness of emotional abuse

What women said:

"My eyes were opened while being in Women's Aid. Being in Women's Aid made me realise the abuse because some of it I didn't see as abuse, whereas now I'm more educated."

"It was a girl that worked in the local shop. I just happened to break down with her one day about what my ex-husband was doing and she was like 'you need to go to Women's Aid', and I was like 'no way' – he'd never hit me."

"I remember saying to my support worker 'I don't know if I've been abused or not'. I genuinely didn't know if he was just a bastard or whether this was classed as abuse."

"My mum sent me a link to Focus on the Family emotional abuse and when I was read it I was like...that's me."

"I was his."

"It was when he hit me that I thought that that was domestic abuse and I didn't realise that any of the other stuff was abuse. I just thought it was a crappy relationship, that it was normal, and it was only coming to Women's Aid that I realised that it wasn't normal."

But otherwise if he hadn't hit me I don't know at what point I would have realised."

"You knew if they raised their hands to you what it was. It was deep seated: if a guy hits you, its domestic violence."

"All you're told is abuse is physical. You don't know that abuse is so many other areas – blind to it."

"The first time the hand was lifted to me I knew it was wrong but to me it wasn't physical abuse because it wasn't happening to me every day or every week or even every month."

"I think if there was more awareness of the different types of domestic abuse then people would be more aware of the services."

"It was all emotional, I was never hit. He had constantly put me down and you just got on with it."

"The relationship felt like you couldn't breathe. You couldn't breathe deep, and you couldn't breathe freely."

"I didn't think that I would ever be in this situation and I didn't know that abuse was abuse."

"When the relationship ends, the abuse doesn't. Whether it's through finance or housing or kids and contact, it just keeps going on."

"He was just using the court system to take money from me and to control me through my child."

Women were clear that in most instances the media only shows the most 'extreme' cases of visible physical abuse. A general lack of awareness around non-physical forms of abuse was identified by all the women who spoke to us. This was understood as one of the reasons why women were sometimes unsure themselves that what they were experiencing was abuse. One woman said she didn't realise she was being abused until she read about emotional abuse online. Another woman talked of how she was reluctant to seek help because, even though she was suffering, she had never been physically abused and therefore didn't think her case was serious enough to be deserving of support. Lack of awareness in society created a barrier for women in terms of accessing support, with women describing how they felt unable to talk about what was happening to them, even to friends and family. Being unable to talk anyone increased their sense of isolation and had a negative impact on their mental health. Almost all the women we spoke to said that the impact of the emotional abuse was the worst part of the abuse inflicted upon them.

ACTIONS

1. All organisations working to end domestic and sexual violence need to develop campaigns to increase awareness of emotional abuse and the impact this can have on victims. The recent PSNI campaign 'Walking on Eggshells' is a good example.
2. Ensure that we highlight emotional abuse with all media contacts and make it a focus of future campaigns
3. Develop our capacity for partnership working to ensure a coordinated cross-sector approach
4. Increase awareness of the 24 Hour Domestic and Sexual Violence Helpline
5. Develop relevant educational programmes, such as Developing Social Guardians to Deliver Helping Hands and Heading 4 Healthy Relationships, and work with education providers to ensure that these programmes are delivered to all children aged five years and older.

"You're not just abused by him; you're abused by the system afterwards."

Strategic Area 2: A whole-community approach

What women said:

"A girl in work gave me a lip balm with the number on it and I phoned."

"It was a girl that worked in the local shop. I just happened to break down with her one day about what my ex-husband was doing and she was like 'you need to go to Women's Aid!'"

"My mum sent me a link to Focus on the Family emotional abuse and when I was read it I was like...that's me."

"I was early stages of pregnancy so I spoke to my midwife and she was very supportive."

"I spoke to my GP who offered to go above and beyond her duties; she recognised where I needed help."

"For me Women's Aid was the only support. Nowhere else has really been supportive whatsoever."

"My family could see the effects of it. You can't see it yourself when you're in it."

"Had that GP or that doctor just asked a bit more, they would have had their finger on it. Whereas I couldn't express it because I had no idea what was going on."

"My church was amazing, absolutely amazing. You just don't know who's struggling in silence."

"My church here was brilliant; they really put a layer of protection between him and me."

"Women's Aid held my hand in the beginning just to get me that bit stronger to see me through everything. Now I've started doing more stuff for myself and trying to look more to the future."

The impact of domestic abuse extends into all aspects of a woman or child's life, and women identified the need for all social and community institutions to be aware of the signs and effects of domestic abuse. Women felt it would increase and improve access to help if those working in communities, health and social care settings, churches, etc. could recognise the signs of domestic abuse and respond to it at the earliest stage possible. When asked who first reached out to them and got them help, women cited many kinds of people, from GPs and school principals to midwives and local shop assistants. However, other women said it was years

before they got help because the people around them, including their own GPs, friends and family, didn't recognise what was going on, or, if they did, didn't know how to respond. Similarly, many women interviewed expressed fear at the idea of moving on from Women's Aid support services because there was no support in their communities and they worried about 'falling back' after all the progress they'd made in their recovery. This shows the importance of wider awareness within the community, not only to the early intervention and protection of survivors of domestic abuse, but to their ongoing support and recovery as well.

ACTIONS

1. All organisations and partners need to create innovative and proactive approaches to identifying need and acquiring the resources to provide support
2. Improve quality of and access to services, developing a stronger, more resilient sector, to support individuals and families who are either at risk or are struggling with the consequences of violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence
3. Ensure that we increase awareness through training and information-sharing across services
4. Increase awareness of the 24 Hour Domestic and Sexual Violence Helpline

Strategic Area 3: Understanding within the PSNI of domestic abuse and its impact on victims

PSNI Statistics 2017

In the twelve months upto 30 September 2017 there were 29,404 incidents recorded where there was a domestic abuse motivation. This is the highest recorded figure since the statistics were first recorded in 2004/05

Police responded to a domestic incident every 18 minutes of every day

Domestic violence crime accounted 14.2% of all crime reported to PSNI

25% of all murders in Northern Ireland had a domestic motivation

What women said

"PSNI were not proactive enough some of the times I had to call them out."

"PSNI still require more education and training, especially regarding same-sex partnerships."

"My worst experience was PSNI not believing me. PSNI response depends on individual officers."

"Telephone handler [PSNI] was very supportive and patient during one episode and stayed on the phone to me talking me through returning to my home."

Whilst women's experiences with specially trained Domestic Violence Officers (DVOs) and officers from the Rape Crime Unit were very positive, women's reports of their experience with PSNI officers responding to domestic abuse incidents were inconsistent. Many women said they had very positive experiences with responding officers when they called the police because of a domestic abuse incident. In these cases, officers were sympathetic, showed an understanding of domestic abuse, and signposted victims to specialised services, such as Women's Aid or Victim Support NI, where they could seek support. However, many women told of bad experiences with responding officers, with everything from officers appearing irritable and making the woman feel she was wasting police time to police taking one woman's children away from her for a week. The overall impression is that an in-depth understanding of domestic abuse is not consistently applied across the PSNI, and it comes down to the 'luck of the draw' whether a woman gets an officer who understands the situation properly or gets one who doesn't.

ACTIONS

1. Increase awareness of the 24 Hour Domestic and Sexual Violence Helpline as an information source for PSNI and other agencies
2. Develop and find funding for additional PSNI training locally and regionally – through Garnerville and in local PSNI stations
3. Implement coercive control training, designed and delivered by Women's Aid specialists, for a range of professionals and practitioners
4. Secure Justice Worker/IDVA funding to improve victims' experiences with PSNI and increase confidence and engagement, with a view to improving outcomes and increasing likelihood of engaging with PSNI in future

Strategic Area 4: A coordinated, collaborative approach

What women said

"All the services need to stop banging against each other. Their definition of abuse is completely different to what Women's Aid's definition is; they don't sing from the same hymn sheet."

"More money is needed to improve all services to give help to victims of domestic abuse."

"More accommodation for victims of domestic violence is needed."

"My best experience was Women's Aid, they helped me greatly."

"I feel more time and resources are needed to raise the profile and awareness of services."

"Give more funding to domestic violence services particularly in rural areas."

"The feeling of someone believing you is so great."

"Get off your backside, out of your office, and do the footwork to find out what's going on and how serious domestic violence is in this country. It's ridiculous that in this day and age the numbers are so high of women going through it."

"I have still not recovered and that is one and a half years ago, that he left."

"My one-to-one support from Women's Aid is the single most important thing in my life."

"Women's Aid needs more funding so that they can tackle the massive problem that is domestic violence."

"Women's Aid needs better support from the Government because they are helping abused women more than doctors, police and legal system put together."

"More backup is needed to confront social services who are leaving children in risk situations."

"Social services have no idea of domestic violence and back up perpetrators."

Women talked about their difficulty in dealing with multiple organisations and services at once and at a very vulnerable time in their lives i.e. Social services, family courts, and specialised services like Women's Aid. The current set-up made them feel as if they were pulled between the different organisations because

Strategic Area 5: Healthy relationships for all

What women said:

"My children did the Helping Hands programme there and it really, really helped them."

"If my son does want to talk about things, I'll know better how to approach that with him."

"Even though my daughter doesn't come to Women's Aid, Women's Aid go into her school, so that has helped me and her even more."

"Put more funding into educating young people about domestic violence, especially in schools."

"Please start this in school. Make young people understand what's right and wrong in relationships. Help them to know what respect is."

"Please implement into school curriculum what healthy relationships are, what domestic violence is, and how to get out."

"Education in school is the future."

cooperative behaviour with one service would often be seen as unhelpful behaviour by another. This is because each service has a different understanding of domestic abuse and a different image of how the 'ideal victim' should behave. For example women with children find it very difficult to navigate the social services/child contact system in situations of domestic abuse.

One woman, for instance, was told by a social worker that she could help the situation by not provoking her ex-partner to act abusively, a message that conflicted with what she was learning in Women's Aid (that abuse is never her fault). Many women echoed this point, stating that although Women's Aid was their best experience of seeking help, it was 'bittersweet' because the help they got there was not mirrored in the world outside of Women's Aid. They felt that the more work they did with Women's Aid, the more they realised the extent of their abuse and the more they needed support; support which sadly wasn't there for them in their communities or in other organisations they were in contact with. One survivor said:

"My best experience was Women's Aid but it was kind of bittersweet because you had all this help from Women's Aid but you didn't have a legal system to support you."

ACTIONS

1. **Seek to raise the profile of Women's Aid among donors and the public to increase our unrestricted income from fundraising and to ensure that we can continue to provide and develop innovative services**
2. **Work closely with those bodies responsible for commissioning victims' services to ensure that women and children are given the support they need**
3. **Public services need to work together to protect people experiencing violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence from suffering any further harm and to protect children within the family**
4. **Development of programme of Women's Aid support workers based in social services teams, and investigates the feasibility of a similar service in A&E departments**

"My son is starting to accept that he is not responsible for the choices others make about how they behave and is beginning to understand that his dad's behaviour was his own choice."

Almost all women we spoke to stressed the importance of education for children from as young an age as possible. They pointed out how some children experience abuse long before they even enter the school system and it is never too early to learn about the signs of domestic abuse and how to deal with it. They also pointed out that children are the future doctors, teachers, solicitors, judges, police officers, etc. and that early education could go a long way to creating a future with the kind of wider community support and understanding that they felt wasn't there for them. Women talked about how Women's Aid's preventative education programme, Helping Hands, gave them and their children the tools to talk about the abuse they had been through, which helped their child-parent relationship and their recovery from abuse. One woman spoke of her gratitude that her child was doing the Helping Hands programme because at the time he was being exposed to things in the contact centre that she would have preferred to shield him from.

ACTIONS

1. **Focus on children to make sure they understand what constitutes a healthy relationship and how to recognise the signs of domestic abuse**
2. **Maintain preventative education programmes, Helping Hands and Heading 4 Healthy Relationships, and develop new partnerships so that these programmes can be rolled out across all schools in Northern Ireland**

3. Create a multi-agency strategy for the preventative education programmes to ensure that robust and effective programmes are developed for children and young people
4. Develop a working group to investigate and create a strategic framework for delivering information about healthy non-abusive relationships in all educational establishments across NI
5. Develop a central web-based portal for professionals providing accessible training materials and resources for use in classrooms and training sessions

Strategic Area 6: A better understanding of the impact of domestic and sexual abuse

What women said:

"I came to Women's Aid and said: 'It's OK it was just emotional abuse'"

"I'm me; I'm allowed to be me. I was never allowed to be me."

"I left my job, I drank more, and I suffered loss of identity and not knowing who I was anymore."

"The loss of my identity, my self-esteem and all those things, and then beating myself up over allowing myself to lose those things."

"There's a resetting of so many goals and targets."

"Domestic abuse changed me totally as a person. I was so down and found it so difficult on a day to day basis. I had such low self-esteem."

"My kids need me to sort out my mental [health] issues so I can be the mum I know I can be."

"Ten years after I left I still have problems with my mental health. Mental abuse is as bad as or worse than physical."

"I still have flashbacks."

"It will take a long time to recover if ever."

"I can honestly say since I had my breakdown I have felt totally let down by the mental health aspect of the NHS."

"Better mental health is needed for people who have experienced domestic violence as depression is a major factor because of all the abuse over a long period."

"People think it's all about physical violence. I never experienced physical violence but the emotional

violence leaves scars that aren't visible and has a huge impact on your life."

Related to the lack of understanding of emotional forms of domestic abuse, there is a lack of understanding of the impact that domestic abuse can have on the mental health and emotional wellbeing of an individual – an impact that women tell us lasts long after an abusive relationship ends. Women said that the most damaging and long-lasting effect of domestic abuse on their lives was their sense of loss of identity and self-esteem. This negative impact on their mental health can lead to other problems too, such as physical illness caused by stress and drug and alcohol addictions, among others. Women stressed their desire to be active, contributing members of society; they don't want to be a burden on healthcare systems through addictions or other complex needs resulting from domestic abuse.

One survivor summed it up when she said that recovering from domestic abuse was about 'women getting well and being responsible members of society.' Women said there was also a need for a greater focus on mental health within Women's Aid services. This was echoed by Women's Aid staff themselves who said they came up against mental health issues every day and they identified the need for training around the issue in order to be able to better support the women they work with.

ACTIONS

- Develop a Training Framework which will help professionals deal with disclosures of abuse and ensure consistent training is available for specialist professionals
- Awareness of domestic violence, including emotional abuse, must be built into training for PSNI, social services, teachers, hospital staff, etc.
- Awareness of domestic violence, including emotional abuse, must be built into training for companies across all sectors – public, private and community/voluntary

BARRIERS TO LEAVING

Threats and intimidation from perpetrator, and sometimes from family and community also

Lack of appropriate support from friends, family community and services

Shame and stigma attached to domestic violence

Fear of not being believed

Fear of losing children

Fear/sadness at the loss of family/love life and relationship with perpetrator

Dependence on perpetrator – financial, legal status (in the country on a spousal visa) housing, etc.

Children not wanting to leave their home

Cultural and religious reasons, and other reasons relating to faith

Strategic Area 7: A strong response from criminal justice

What women said

“Two years on away from my partner and I am not recovered still. Divorce and legal system does not protect or support victims. The process is so long.”

“Courts and legal system were a minefield and costly. At the moment, I feel I will lose as I don’t have strength to fight and face court.”

“Prosecute offenders – lead by example, zero tolerance.”

“Victims of domestic violence should not have to spend hours explaining in a cold interview room with chairs nailed to the ground where you feel like the criminal. Police and courts need to have more suitable ‘suites’ to interview victims of domestic violence.”

“Courts and police need to realise that the set-up they have for family courts and in police stations are not fit for purpose. You should not have to sit facing your offender.”

“This country still sees domestic violence as an acceptable crime.”

“The Government need to start investing in making women stronger and giving them the help they need.”

The justice system doesn't punish perpetrators appropriately for domestic abuse crimes, sending the message to perpetrators and victims alike that the justice system doesn't take crimes of this nature seriously. This message leads perpetrators to believe that there will be no consequences for their actions, thereby increasing the likelihood of repeat offences and putting women in greater danger. Women feel that non-molestation orders, one of the main legal recourses for people affected by domestic abuse, are not taken seriously either by the criminal justice system or by perpetrators, rendering them ineffective tools for protection. Perpetrators know that, even if they are

arrested for breaking a non-molestation order, they will be released again almost immediately with no further consequences.

ACTIONS

- All sectors need to work together to develop a consistent, coordinated approach to ensure that perpetrators are dealt with appropriately
- Work through the new governance process at department level to ensure an effective, coherent approach to domestic and sexual violence, and to build communication, information-sharing and training opportunities between sectors and services
- Ensure agreement and implementation of coercive control legislation
- Deliver training to PSNI, PPS and judiciary on coercive control legislation and the impact of domestic abuse on victims
- Commission NI-based research to evidence the differences between sentencing for the same offence within and outside of a DV relationship
- Develop the ability of courts to protect victims: special measures are needed to ensure victims are not re-traumatised and re-victimised as part of the justice process

Strategic area 8: A different approach to criminal justice

What women said

“Not enough convictions to send out message that it is unacceptable.”

“Our lives and that of our children depend on you for protection from being murdered in their own homes. My ex has attempted to strangle me three times and got away with it – next time I may not be so lucky.”

“In the courts, I have been treated like a criminal. All evidence pertaining to his previous behaviour has been disallowed.”

Victims of domestic abuse incidents and crimes are often forced to repeat the details of their experience many times to different police officers. Going over a detailed account of sexual abuse, for example, multiple times re-victimises a survivor and can be an extremely traumatic and painful experience. One woman described being made to go over every detail of her sexual abuse over the phone with a police officer she'd never met and whose interrogative style of questioning showed a lack of sensitivity to the subject matter.

Having multiple police officers deal with a survivor's case means that a survivor will be expected to repeat their experience to each new police officer they come into contact with. The need to avoid re-victimising survivors of domestic abuse suggests that assigning a single police officer to oversee sensitive cases of domestic abuse would be in keeping with a more victim-centred approach. This approach would also help police officers to recognise and understand the full picture of a case of domestic abuse. As domestic abuse is a pattern of behaviour or 'course of conduct', it cannot be understood properly by looking at individual incidents and crimes. If there are multiple police officers responding to victims at different times, this pattern or 'bigger picture' will likely not be seen and the full extent of the abuse could be missed. Based on their experiences with the police, many women in our services felt that, operationally, the criminal justice system does not understand victimhood or re-victimisation, and that something needs to change.

ACTIONS

- 1. Advocate for national and local solutions that advance the ability of the criminal justice system to support victims and punish perpetrators**
- 2. Develop new coercive control legislation that is capable of incorporating and responding to the true nature of domestic abuse**
- 3. Develop an awareness raising programme around coercive control and emotional abuse to coincide with changes in legislation**
- 4. Develop and deliver training on coercive control and emotional abuse for agencies working with victims**
- 5. Develop multi-agency forums and groups that can work together to effect change in the criminal justice system**
- 6. Investigate the introduction of a specific law on stalking and strengthen current harassment law**
- 7. Improve processes for all victims through joint working and a more collaborative approach across departments and sectors**

DOMESTIC AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE SERVICES

24 hour Domestic & Sexual Violence Helpline

Local Women's Aid Groups

The Rowan (SARC)

Nexus

PSNI

Out of hours Gateway Support

Solicitors

Rainbow Project

FGM Helpline (NSPCC)

Men's Advisory project (MAP)

Men's Action Network (MAN)

Domestic abuse Workplace policies

"Looking at the way sentencing reflects domestic violence, I do not think it's taken seriously at all. If someone stole my car they'd be more likely to get a serious sentence than if they tortured me for years."

"If coercive control was a law, I would have gone to the police earlier".

The Legal Context in NI

A new specific offence relating to domestic abuse/coercive control is in development and this will add clarity to our understanding of understanding abuse, particularly its emotional and psychological elements. The new legislation should help everyone understand the nature of domestic abuse and all our campaigns and training must also highlight this. The specific domestic abuse offence will strengthen our acknowledgement of the seriousness of domestic violence, both as a crime against adult and child victims, and as an issue for society. It will also give legal recognition of domestic violence as a systematic course of conduct calculated to gain control of a victim. It will provide better protection and justice to those experiencing repeated or continuous abuse. Women whom we spoke to about the proposed legislation told us that they felt that the lack of effective punitive sentencing and criminal recognition of psychological abuse allows perpetrators to act with impunity. They also felt that the system was inadvertently colluding with abusers, by sending the

message that the State does not take abuse seriously or punish the behaviour effectively.

Women in all groups voiced how difficult it was to explain what coercive controlling abuse does to victims. Their descriptions of the psychological abuse were tantamount to 'torture'. One woman likened her experience to the film '10 Cloverfield Lane', where a woman is held captive in a bunker. Women described the abuse that surrounds a single physical incident, both before and in the aftermath. One woman spoke of years of constant emotional and financial abuse before physical violence even started happening, and how she "turned to the drink" to cope with the abuse. She spoke of all the repercussions her alcohol abuse had for her in terms of her ability to look after herself and her children and hold down her job. She felt that it was all because of his abuse and coercive controlling behaviour, yet she was paying the price for it. Many women noted that they would not have called the police about abuse that was not physical as it is not a crime and they don't see the point. They felt that a coercive control law might give them more confidence to come forward and report abuse.

The Global context

The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence ('Istanbul Convention'), to which the UK is a signatory, sets out to: a) protect women against all forms of violence, and prevent, prosecute and eliminate violence against women and domestic violence; b) contribute to the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and promote substantive equality between women and men, including by empowering women; c) design a comprehensive framework, policies and measures for the protection of and assistance to all victims of violence against women and domestic violence; d) promote international co-operation with a view to eliminating violence against women and domestic violence; and e) provide support and assistance to organisations and law enforcement agencies to effectively co-operate in order to adopt an integrated approach to eliminating violence against women and domestic violence. Women's Aid across the UK were heavily involved in campaigning and lobbying the Government to ratify the Istanbul Convention, in order to help guarantee specialised support services and support for gender equality. It was ratified at the end of April 2017. Our work in Northern Ireland supports the Convention to:

- a) Raise awareness of healthy relationships through preventative education programmes and public awareness campaigns
- b) Combat and reduce discrimination against women
- c) Train professionals to recognise and respond to situations of domestic abuse

Alongside the Istanbul Convention, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) also provides a platform for addressing discrimination against women. As well as CEDAW, we also support the principles contained in the UN Sustainable Development Goals, including Goal 5: Gender Equality. This goal to empower all women and girls includes eliminating violence against them. Goal 5 draws the link between gender inequality and violence against women, stating that we must: (1) End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere; (2) Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation; and (3) Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation.

Conclusions

Our discussions with women make it clear that we all need to work together to tackle domestic and sexual violence in Northern Ireland. The 7-year government strategy, along with proposals for new legislation designed to make domestic abuse a specific offence and the focus on domestic abuse from government ministers, are all positive steps. However, changes to funding and the implications of Brexit and Welfare Reform are worrying, and we need to ensure that specialised support services for women are maintained and developed, and that the needs of women and their children are met.

This consultation raises specific issues and we are keen to work to address these, strengthening and developing our partnership approach and our work with government and the public sector. We believe that if we are going to improve the economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being of people in Northern Ireland, creating a prosperous, resilient, cohesive, healthier and more equal society, domestic and sexual violence must be addressed. Women and children must be able to live free from violence and the fear of it.

USEFUL CONTACTS

Organisation	Email	Telephone
ABCLN Women's Aid	womensaidareaoffice@btconnect.com	028 2563 2136
Armaghdown Women's Aid	lisaw@womensaidarmaghdown.org	028 3025 0765
Belfast & Lisburn Women's Aid	admin@belfastwomensaid.org.uk	028 9066 6049
Causeway Women's Aid	administrator@causewaywomensaid.org	028 7035 6573
Fermanagh Women's Aid	womensaidfermanagh@btopenworld.com	028 6632 8898
Foyle Women's Aid	louisa.young@foylewomensaid.org	028 7141 6800
Mid Ulster Women's Aid	admin@midulsterwomensaid.org.uk	028 8676 9300
North Down & Ards Women's Aid	info@ndawomensaid.org	028 9127 3196
Omagh Women's Aid	info@omaghwomensaid.org	028 8224 1414
Women's Aid Federation NI	admin@womensaidni.org	028 9024 9014
Nexus	http://www.nexusni.org/	028 9032 6803
The Rowan	therowan@northerntrust.hscni.net	028 9442 4340
Men's Action Network	man_in_derry@yahoo.co.uk	028 7137 7777
Men's Advisory Project	info@mapni.co.uk	028 9024 1929

24 HOUR

Domestic & Sexual Violence Helpline

FREEPHONE

0808 802 1414

Open to *all women and men* affected by domestic & sexual violence

☐ text support to 07797 805 839 ✉ 24hrsupport@dvhelpline.org

women's aid

Federation Northern Ireland

Working to end domestic & sexual violence

129 University St, BELFAST, BT7 1HP.
Tel: 028 9024 9041 Fax: 028 9023 9296
Email: info@womensaidni.org
Website: www.womensaidni.org

Charity No: XN45049 Company Reg No: NI21741

24 Hour Domestic & Sexual Violence Helpline: 0808 802 1414
Text **support** to 07797 805 839 Email: 24hrsupport@dvhelpline.org
Open to *all women and men* affected by domestic & sexual violence