

SURVIVOR ENGAGEMENT PRINCIPLES



Introduction

Women's Aid is the lead organisation addressing domestic abuse in Northern Ireland. The Women's Aid NI vision for the twenty-first century is the elimination of domestic abuse. Women's Aid exists to challenge attitudes and beliefs which perpetuate domestic abuse. We seek through our work to create healthy, non-abusive relationships. Our strong ethos has been built upon our long, rich heritage of campaigning to end domestic abuse, which began in the 1970s and continues to be based on our premise of: for women, by women, with women.

There are eight local Women's Aid groups throughout Northern Ireland. Local groups deliver a range of specialised support services to women and children who have experienced domestic abuse.

All eight local groups are members of the Women's Aid Federation of Northern Ireland (WAFNI).

By enabling the eight groups to speak with one voice, WAFNI aims to amplify the impact and influence of Women's Aid throughout Northern Ireland. Through lobbying, preventative education, and working in partnership with other agencies, WAFNI seeks to improve the lives of women, girls, and young people affected by domestic abuse.



Women's Aid Regional Offices

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| 1 Antrim, Ballymena, Carrickfergus, Larne & Newtownabbey Women's Aid
T: 028 2563 2136 | 4A Causeway & Mid Ulster Women's Aid - Causeway Office
T: 028 7035 6573 | 7 North Down & Ards Women's Aid
T: 028 9127 3196 |
| 2 Armagh Down Women's Aid
T: 028 3025 0765 | 4B Causeway & Mid Ulster Women's Aid - Mid Ulster Office
T: 028 8676 9300 | 8 Omagh Women's Aid
T: 028 8224 1414 |
| 3 Belfast & Lisburn Women's Aid
T: 028 9066 6049 | 5 Fermanagh Women's Aid
T: 028 6632 8898 | 9 Women's Aid Federation
T: 028 9024 9041 |
| | 6 Foyle Women's Aid
T: 028 7141 6800 | |

The Importance of Survivor Engagement

At Women's Aid, we recognise that our survivors are 'experts-by-experience' and that their voices must be at the heart at all efforts to end violence against women and girls. In line with the United Nations' Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and Resolutions 1325 and 1820,¹ Women's Aid acknowledges that women's participation in these efforts must be at all levels. At an organisational level, this means that a woman has a voice from the moment she walks through the doors of Women's Aid, and that her voice is listened to at all stages of her journey. This also entails facilitating survivor engagement in broader efforts to end violence against women and girls, such as: prevention and education efforts; and lobbying policymakers to guarantee that legislation and policy reflects the needs and experiences of women, girls, and young people.

Apart from improved legislation and policy, Women's Aid acknowledges that engagement can have a transformative effect upon survivors of domestic abuse. By empowering survivors to recognise the power and value of their voice, engagement can support women in their journeys of healing and self-discovery.

'... feeling overwhelmed how my life has changed from believing I was going to be killed by [my partner] to informing laws surrounded by the family I was once isolated from.'

— DA Survivor, who shared her story as part of the discussions surrounding Northern Ireland's Domestic Abuse Bill (2021)

While consultation with survivors has a role to play in developing legislation and policy, consultation alone does not constitute 'engagement'. Rather, survivors need to be involved at all levels of an initiative, including design, implementation, and evaluation. It is recognised, however, that funding and time limitations may lead to 'latticed participation,' where survivors exert different levels of influence at various stages of an initiative.² Women's Aid will implement robust feedback measures and design flexible engagement initiatives to guarantee that they respond to survivors' needs, and that Women's Aid moves towards full and sustained engagement with survivors in the medium- and longer-term.

The following document outlines the principles that guide Women's Aid's approach to working with survivors/experts-by-experience. To put these principles into practice, it ends by describing the Survivor Engagement Group Women's Aid will co-develop with survivors.

¹ United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (S/RES/1325), on Women, Peace, and Security (2000); United Nations Security Council Resolution 1820 (S/RES/1820) on Women, Peace and Security (2008).

² Cath Larkins, Johanna Kiili & Kati Palsanen (2014) A lattice of participation: reflecting on examples of children's and young people's collective engagement in influencing social welfare policies and practices, European Journal of Social Work, 17:5, 718-736.

Pathways to Engagement

Women's Aid's survivors/experts-by-experience are a diverse group of women and girls, all of whom are extremely intelligent and talented, and from whom Women's Aid has much to learn. To facilitate their engagement, Women's Aid staff are committed to developing multiple pathways which draw on survivors' strengths, interests, and expertise. 'Engagement' is not limited to large events and/or advocacy efforts; survivors have roles to play in all aspects of Women's Aid work.

Meaningful engagement requires that all voices are heard. It is acknowledged, however, that there are many barriers which may prevent survivors from engaging: caring responsibilities; multiple and complex needs; regional and/or cultural barriers; and physical and/or learning disabilities. To guarantee that all voices are heard, Women's Aid will co-design multiple engagement pathways which recognise survivors' diverse roles, backgrounds, and strengths. With survivors at the centre of Women's Aid's work, women will always be asked how participation can create value for them, and, where possible, engagement pathways will be adapted to realise this value for experts.

1 United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (S/RES/1325), on Women, Peace, and Security (2000); United Nations Security Council Resolution 1820 (S/RES/1820) on Women, Peace and Security (2008).

2 Cath Larkins, Johanna Kiili & Kati Palsanen (2014) A lattice of participation: reflecting on examples of children's and young people's collective engagement in influencing social welfare policies and practices, *European Journal of Social Work*, 17:5, 718-736.



Trauma-Informed Engagement

Women's Aid values the creativity, agency and intelligence of its survivors while also acknowledging the trauma engendered by domestic abuse. It also recognises that trauma's effects are non-linear and can impact a woman at any stage. As such, all engagement pathways will have support mechanisms for both survivors and the staff working with them. These mechanisms will be co-designed with survivors and staff; they will be flexible enough to meet a woman's needs while also acknowledging domestic abuse's broader effects.

Survivors state that being asked to retell their stories over and over has the potential to be retraumatising and can cause a woman to feel that she has lost ownership over her own experience. Acknowledging this, Women's Aid will create engagement pathways which allow women to retain their voice and agency. As part of this, every woman will have a dedicated worker to support her when serving as a survivor/expert-by-experience on behalf of Women's Aid.

Where third parties seek to engage with survivors, Women's Aid will support women by working with these parties to co-develop a trauma-informed approach. Women's Aid will also support a survivor's right to say 'no' to participating in internal and external engagement efforts, and to withdraw her participation at any time without adverse consequences. Staff will also be clear that being in receipt of Women's Aid services does not carry an obligation of participation.

Women's Aid believes that a woman's value derives from her humanity, and not solely from her experience of domestic abuse. To this end, we acknowledge that women have a right to identities other than that of 'expert-by-experience' or 'survivor' and can exit engagement pathways whenever it feels appropriate or necessary.

When engaging with experts-by-experience, all information will be handled confidentially, and will be processed in accordance with the EU's General Data Processing Regulation (2016/679). Where safeguarding issues arise, Women's Aid staff will follow internal policy to guarantee that all survivors can be heard.



Equitable Decision Making & Mutual Accountability

Women's Aid acknowledges that a woman has a right to be involved in all decisions concerning how to best support her, and this right extends to when she engages as a survivor/ expert-by-experience. Women's Aid commits to providing survivors with an equal voice in decision-making over engagement pathways and outcomes. Women's Aid staff will be transparent in their decision making and will seek to redress power imbalances where they exist. While a survivor/expert-by-experience should have autonomy and agency over her own voice, participation in an engagement initiative necessitates that she is also accountable to other survivors of domestic abuse, so that all voices can be heard and respected.



Facilitating & Resourcing Engagement

Sustained, meaningful engagement requires significant time, planning, and commitment, both by survivors, and the Women's Aid staff who support them. Meaningful engagement must be properly resourced and should be appropriately costed into all engagement project budgets. Appropriate budgeting should include both staff costings and recognition of survivors' value and time.

In recognition of the time and commitment required for meaningful engagement, the Women's Aid Federation of Northern Ireland will begin by developing a Survivor Engagement Group. The Survivor Engagement Group will seek to recruit a diverse group of survivors/experts-by-experience to guarantee that all voices are heard. By carefully committing to the Survivor Engagement Group, the Women's Aid Federation of Northern Ireland will develop the learning experience and peer mentoring networks necessary to cascade meaningful and sustainable engagement throughout the entire organisation.



Acknowledgements

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