

*Love doesn't hurt.*

**HEAR HER  
VOICE**

**Women's Aid**  
FEDERATION  
NORTHERN IRELAND

*Love doesn't hurt.*

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## A Brief Note On The Text

What you are about to read are the conversations between survivors of domestic abuse as part of the 'Hear Her Voice' project. Funded by Comic Relief, and supported by Allstate NI, the '**Hear Her Voice**' project aimed to capture the lived experiences of domestic abuse survivors in Northern Ireland.

Staff from the Women's Aid Federation of Northern Ireland (WAFNI) facilitated 'Hear Her Voice', in conjunction with representatives from each of its eight local Women's Aid groups.<sup>1</sup>

All eight local groups are members of WAFNI. By allowing 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 challenge attitudes and beliefs which perpetuate domestic abuse, and to promote healthy non-abusive relationships. WAFNI's vision for the twenty-first century is the elimination of domestic abuse.

Ninety-one women participated in 'Hear Her Voice'. The participation of these profoundly courageous, creative, and intelligent women belies the notion that there is any 'typical' survivor of domestic abuse: in the following pages, you will hear the voices of young mothers, grandmothers, nurses, teachers, retirees, care workers, lecturers, and managers, among others. Each of their voices is unique, and their stories are their own, but they combine into a chorus which tell of our institutional and societal failings towards domestic abuse survivors in particular, and women in general.

The women whose voices you will hear are referred to as 'survivors', 'experts', and/or 'experts-by-experience'. WAFNI does not refer to Women's Aid service users as 'victims', as this implies passivity, and is reflective of incident-led understandings of domestic abuse. Within WAFNI, 'survivor' is the preferred nomenclature. Within this project, participants were asked which term(s) they preferred to be called. Women's preferred terms – 'survivor', 'expert', and 'expert-by-experience' are used throughout the text. These terms recognise women's agency, and that they possess an expertise which needs to be at the centre of all conversations regarding domestic abuse.

The voices which you will hear often tell difficult, and sometimes heart breaking, stories. With this in mind, please be aware that you may find this text to be distressing. Distressing as the stories contained in this text may be, they are presented with a purpose: to challenge the silences which surround current understandings of domestic abuse. WAFNI believes that, by challenging these silences, and by putting survivors at the centre of all conversations about domestic abuse, we can make significant progress towards ending violence against women and girls.

Thank you for reading, and for hearing her voice.

**Mary Alice Connolly Clancy**  
**Belfast, October 2021**

<sup>1</sup> The eight local groups are: ABCLN (Antrim, Ballymena, Carrickfergus, Larne, and Newtonabbey); Armagh Down; Belfast and Lisburn; Causeway and Mid-Ulster; Fermanagh; Foyle; North Down and Ards; and Omagh. The author wishes to thank Bridie Crowley, Arlene Creighton, Janice Dale, Rachel Gataora, Charlotte Bradford-Gibbs, Charlene Hall, Kate Harrison, Bronagh O'Boyle, Margarita O'Donnell, and Anna Walsh. Without the support of these coordinators, 'Hear Her Voice' would not have been possible. Within WAFNI, she wishes to thank Karen Devlin, Elaine Hoey, Sarah Mason, Sonya McMullan, Sandra McNamee, and Lauren Sutherland, for their unstinting support and encouragement.



## PROLOGUE ONE:



### J'S STORY

Hear my words, hear my cries  
Let me see a change through these eyes  
You may think I won't be heard  
Still I raise this hand, spread this word  
These words of fire, of hope and desire  
And now I'll set them free.

**Celeste, 'Hear My Voice'**

### **I'm going to tell you a story about a stranger.**

*I was lying in bed, and I heard a man coming into my home and up my stairs. Panic. My three-year-old daughter was in my bed asleep beside me.*

*I was afraid but kept telling myself it'll be okay; he won't hurt you with your daughter here. I pretended to be asleep hoping he would just go away. I was frozen in fear not sure how to keep myself and my daughters safe alone in this house. Afraid to say or do the wrong thing, I lay still.*

*He shone a torch in my eyes forcing me to open them. He just stood there and stared at me. Cold. He told me to take my daughter to another room, he didn't want her there. I pleaded with him to let her sleep, not to wake her, to leave me alone and let me just go. I asked him to leave us alone. I begged him. He insisted. Afraid for my daughter I did what he said and legs shaking I carried her gently to her own room trying to not wake her and make her afraid. I lay down beside her when she stirred shushing her back to sleep.*

*He came into her room then, angry I was still there. He dragged me from her arms by my hair. Screaming, all I can hear is screaming, but it's not me. It's like an animal squealing. He drags me up the hall to my room, my mind is gone, he's going to rape me. He pushes me on to the bed and then he straddles me, my arms and body pinned beneath his. He's heavy. I can't move, I can't escape.*

*His two hands go round my throat. I can't speak, I can't breathe. He tells me I'm going to die. He's going to kill me. It's my fault he says I made him do this.*

*Still I can hear the screaming.*

*My mind is racing, I'm thinking I'm going to die, this man is going to kill me while my daughters are in the other room, are they going to hear me die. All I can hear is their screaming. He removes a hand from my throat, holds a fist close to my face, are you ready for this? Only one hand on my throat I can breathe. I beg him don't do this, please don't let me go, listen to them screaming, it's not too late, you haven't crossed the line, you can stop this I beg, please, please, please don't do this.*

*Suddenly yanked off the bed, I can feel pain in my arm and shoulder with the sudden force, pushed into the hall, hard shoves into my back sending me down the stairs, I grab the banister to stop.*

*Cowered in the hall beside the locked door I can't escape, he comes after me, shouting, I think he'll kill me here instead. He turns on the stairs and I see an open door in the back and I run into the garden out to the front and into a neighbour's drive and hide. What if he finds me? What if he gets my children?*

*If he comes after me, I'll die.*

*Are you shocked? Are you horrified? Are you sympathetic? Can you sense my fear? Are you outraged? Do you blame me? Do you feel sorry for him? Should I call the police? Would that shock you? If I called the police, would you care if it ruined his life or reputation? Are you thinking he must be stressed or mentally ill? Are you asking what I did to deserve this? Should I just try to forget that happened to me? Let it go? Will a court be sympathetic? Could anyone justify what he did? Could people take his side? Would you want me to ring the police? Make a statement? Get justice?*

*This man surely must pay? Would you believe me when I told you I was terrified? That I looked into those cold hate filled eyes and believed him when he told me I would die? Would you tell me to meet this man and have a coffee? Chat it through? Could we become friends? Forgive him? Let my children meet him?*

*Are you angry a man came into my home and attacked me? Put my children through this trauma? Terrorised me? Stole my sense of safety? Endangering my life twice? My world's forever changed. How does this make you feel for me? For my children? For him?*

*Now what if I tell you that man wasn't a stranger but my husband?*

*Have you changed your mind? Do you now feel differently?*

*For some reason if a stranger attacks, rapes or abuses someone, beats them, breaks into their home and terrorises them, we are all rightly horrified and demand to know why this happened and what is going to be done about it and looking forward to justice.*

*But if it's someone's husband, partner, brother, son we don't want to know.*

*It's not our problem, it's a domestic, she knew him. He must have been ill. She must have been hard to live with. He's still a good man, father, husband, employee, brother, colleague friend. Let them sort it themselves.*

*No one wants to see the horror when it's domestic abuse, we want to find excuses and explanations. All victims deserve to be protected especially those who've been hurt by someone expected to love and protect them. That doesn't make it better, more palatable less shocking. It makes it worse.*

If people could see through these eyes, let me see you change, spread these words, words of fire ...

**Celeste – 'Hear My Voice'**

## Hearing Her Voice: Challenging Official and Cultural Silence

**I listen when they speak ... I listen when they are silent ... Both words and silence are text for me.**

**— Svetlana Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War***

What images immediately spring to mind when you hear the words 'domestic abuse'? A physically battered woman? A man, fists raised, towering over a terrified woman? A child attempting to keep the peace? Who is the woman you see? Does she look like you, or is she nothing like you? A victim of her own choices, her unwillingness to leave?

While we know that these immediate images do not tell the whole story, our understanding of domestic abuse is still hampered by what we might call 'official silence'. The language of the state – statistics and court proceedings – give us only a fleeting glimpse of those who experience domestic abuse: She is first reduced to police incident and, perhaps refuge intake, reports. Should she make it to court, she is further reduced to 'victim' and/or 'petitioner' – perhaps even 'defendant' or 'respondent' – and her story is abbreviated to those parts which meet legal standards of evidence. And while statistics tell us that 30%<sup>1</sup> of domestic abuse victims in Northern Ireland are male, it is often forgotten that females do not constitute an equivalent percentage of perpetrators – in 2019/20, 86% of domestic violence perpetrators were male<sup>2</sup> – thus eliding the gendered nature of domestic abuse. So, most often, it is 'her' voice we are not hearing.

This official silence is compounded by cultural silences as well: a popular culture which often sends mixed messages about what constitutes 'love' and a healthy relationship; and cultures which, while not unique to Northern Ireland, continue to prioritise women's subordination within traditional family structures. There is also the silence which is encoded in the language we use to describe this abuse: 'domestic' suggests privacy and shame, and implicitly encourages us to look away. This silence in turn, allows us to ask the question, 'Why doesn't she just leave?', a question which ignores our own silence and complicity in the perpetuation of social systems and cultures which often make leaving all but impossible.

<sup>1</sup> PSNI (2020), 'Trends in Domestic Abuse Incidents and Crimes Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland 2004/05 to 2019/20' Available at: <https://www.psni.police.uk/globalassets/inside-the-psni/our-statistics/domestic-abuse-statistics/2019-20/domestic-abuse-incidents-and-crimes-in-northern-ireland-2004-05-to-2019-20.pdf> Last accessed 4 October 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Funded by Comic Relief, the 'Hear Her Voice' project seeks to challenge these silences by sharing the lived experience of survivors of domestic abuse. Through focus groups, interviews, and creative activities within each of the eight Women's Aid groups across Northern Ireland, 91 women shared their stories of domestic abuse and its lasting impact on their lives, families, and future.<sup>3</sup> While these stories showed that there is no 'typical' survivor of domestic abuse – women ranged in age from 22 to 61, came from every class, and included minoritised, bisexual, and disabled women – there were common themes throughout many women's journeys, particularly the feelings of being unheard, misunderstood, and/or dismissed.

The common themes identified by these survivors, or 'experts-by-experience', constitute the chapters of this book, with each chapter title drawing upon a woman's own words. Part One deals with women's lived experiences of domestic abuse and its aftermath. Part Two draws on survivors' expertise to show how we as a society can do better by domestic abuse survivors.

Recognising that much of lived experience escapes words, the 'Hear Her Voice' project also engaged women through creative means, such as photography, embroidery, painting, and vocal lessons. These contributions can be found throughout this book and the accompanying 'Hear Her Voice' website. We hope that readers will view this work, and will find it to be just as, if not more, powerful than the text which appears here.

The goal of 'Hear Her Voice' is not just hearing, but the creation of meaningful change by active and careful listening, both to what is said and unsaid. To this end, Women's Aid has aimed not to just consult women; rather, women have been encouraged to participate in all stages of the project, and the staff of Women's Aid wish to thank these courageous survivors and 'experts-by-experience' for helping to shape this book, along with all other project outputs. By replicating this participatory model to inform service delivery throughout Women's Aid Northern Ireland, it is hoped that it will become a beacon of good practice, and that legislators and statutory services staff will see the value of engaging survivors as 'experts-by-experience' at every stage of policy development.

Many survivors were motivated to share their voices so that other women might recognise themselves in their stories, and would no longer have to suffer in silence. It is important, however, to acknowledge the silences within this book.

<sup>3</sup> Research for the project took place from February-September 2021. Research consisted of fourteen focus groups, the vast majority of which were conducted remotely owing to COVID-19 restrictions. In addition to this, five women who participated in the focus groups requested individual interviews. In terms of creative activities, 'Hear Her Voice' consisted of 21 creative writing workshops, 15 embroidery classes, eight painting classes five 'Unlocking Your Voice' workshops, and five choir rehearsals. The author wishes to thank Andrea Hayes, Anne McCambridge, Briege McClean, and Veronica Owens for facilitating the project's creative activities, and for helping participants to explore those aspects of their lived experience which escape words.

To provide full support and confidentiality to participants, Women's Aid staff only engaged those survivors who have utilised Women's Aid services. This book does not, therefore, capture the lived experiences of those women who have never walked through the doors of Women's Aid. Nor does it capture the voices of Traveller women, who use Women's Aid's services, but not in ways captured by the qualitative methods used in this project.

Most, but not all, survivors' stories in this book also pre-date the COVID-19 pandemic, and the ending of lockdown will likely amplify our understanding of the many forms of abuse women and children suffered during this time.

The voices of bisexual survivors of domestic abuse can be heard in this book – and Women's Aid Northern Ireland staff actively support LGBTQ+ women and charities – but researching the specific experiences and needs of the LGBTQ+ survivors is a must.

While the project is called, 'Hear Her Voice,' it does not implicitly discount the experience of male survivors. Domestic abuse is a gendered crime, and a commitment to addressing its gendered effects can only help all survivors. As Rachel Snyder argues, the misogynistic culture that:

tells women to keep their family intact, to find love and be loved at all costs, is the same culture that emasculates and shames men in abusive situations, that tells men that if they are victims, it is because they are weak and not real men. It is the same culture that tells them violence is acceptable as a response to any external threat or internal pain, but tears are not. It is a culture that limits victim and perpetrator, the abused and the abuser.<sup>4</sup>

There is also the abuse that our statistics in Northern Ireland have not yet thought to capture, and officially at least, does not 'exist'. Apart from these silences, there are also the women and children from whom we will never hear – those who have been the victims of homicides, and those – as our Fermanagh experts remind us – whose deaths were chalked up to 'nerves' or depression.

By questioning silence, we hope to honour their voices and untold stories. In the silence that their absence brings, this book is dedicated to them.

<sup>4</sup> Snyder, R.L. (2020), *No Visible Bruises*, (London: Scribe UK), pp. 256-257.

## Part One: Hearing Women's Voices

### 'The Systematic Dismantling of a Woman Bit by Bit': Domestic Abuse in All Its Forms

If the common image of domestic abuse is physical, then it is an image that is shared by many survivors too. Some women began their stories by saying how initially they felt like a 'fraud' for not having experienced physical violence. Other survivors felt 'domestic abuse', more accurately captured their lived experience, as they felt it encapsulated a wider range of behaviours than 'domestic violence'. A Fermanagh survivor noted, however, that 'abuse' often leads to a minimisation of women's suffering:

*[T]he invisible bruises can be a bit more hard to explain. Or hard to, not convince people, but, you know [they think], 'Oh yeah, it was domestic abuse'. But when I say 'domestic violence' the first thing they want to know is, 'What, did he beat you?' I said, 'No, not with his hands or fists. Pushed and shoved, but emotionally, I'd been beaten.' 'Ah well, it's not really violence then'.*

Here again we can see how the language we use creates silence surrounding domestic abuse's dynamics. By conflating 'domestic violence' with physical violence, we fail to acknowledge other non-physical forms of harm which, according to survivors, are often more detrimental and traumatic. This conflation further fails to acknowledge that the invisible bruises of domestic abuse – emotional and verbal abuse; isolation; online and physical stalking; sexual assault within relationships; and financial control – lay the groundwork for its visible bruises.<sup>5</sup> Through this societal elision, we close off opportunities for women to recognise the harm they experience, and close off opportunities for intervention and support. As an expert-by-experience tells us:

It starts with the emotional anyway. I think the main thing to do with abuse is emotional. I feel like that's where it all starts, and that's where it will end ... And that's what you have to deal with for the rest of your life. Because no matter how long we are out of our journey, I feel like that's always going to be in your head ... But for me, like that's a challenge every day, is your emotional side of things ... The physical – that's what I felt like, if he had kicked me, or done something bad to me, I might have said, 'Right, that's it, I'm gone.' Or someone might see something that they could come to me, and then I would open up to them. I had none of that. So I didn't have the option of anyone seeing it that would make me question. So when it's all emotional you're dealing with it all on your own.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

And it's a battle the whole time, because they [the perpetrator] have you thinking that you're absolutely crazy. And then you're battling it yourself in your head and you can't tell anyone about it.

In the literature on domestic abuse, the emotional abuse cited above is often the beginning, and a key component of, what is called 'coercive control.' Women's Aid Federation of Northern Ireland defines coercive control as:

*An intentional pattern of behaviour (often used alongside other forms of abuse) which can include threats, excessive regulation, intimidation, humiliation and enforced isolation. It is designed to punish, dominate, exploit, exhaust, create fear, confusion and increase dependency in a woman (or a woman and her children). Over time it can lead to a complete loss of self.<sup>6</sup>*

The term 'coercive control' was developed by academics to better capture survivors' lived experience, as societal conflation of domestic violence/abuse with physical violence led to a focus on individual incidents, rather than overlapping and reinforcing patterns of behaviour.<sup>7</sup> One of the Causeway and Mid-Ulster experts interviewed for this project described coercive control as 'the systematic dismantling of a woman bit by bit'. The invisible and visible bruises that lead to the dismantling of a woman have been outlined above, but our experts-by-experience describe these bruises more vividly and completely than the academic literature ever could:

*I think what people don't understand is how gradual, how insidious, domestic violence is... It's so insidious, and you don't see it happening until you're slap bang in the middle of the situation.*

*It's really insidious ... It really creeps in. And sometimes you don't even accept it*

*And he even makes you think, 'Gosh, did I dream it? Are we exaggerating it?'*

*Is this really happening to me?*

*I didn't realise that [the relationship] was probably abusive until I went to see a solicitor*

*I never knew that I was being abused. I thought that domestic abuse was being hit. I didn't know, and how cringey is that?*

*But I think the time you do realise how deep you're in there, you can't see any escape. It took me 40 years to leave him.*

<sup>6</sup> Women's Aid Federation of Northern Ireland, 'What Is Domestic Violence?' Available at:

<https://www.womensaidni.org/domestic-violence/what-is-domestic-violence/> Last accessed 29 October 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Stark, E. (2007), *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

*They chip away so discreetly, and such wee tiny portions. You're trapped before you realise.*

*[My husband] was a pillar of the community; he was all over local papers for all of these charitable works. He was volunteering constantly. I have a health condition, and everyone thought he was such an angel because he helped me so much with my health condition and helped me study. And all the time, he was just chipping away at my confidence all the time.*

*It's behind closed doors. And then when someone comes round they are king of the county, and charity giver, and hard worker and does everything for everybody, and helps out with the school, you know, 'I'll do this, and I'll do that' [...] 'Pillars of the community' [...] 'And me thinking, 'You don't know what I'm going home to, or what's going to happen tonight, or what happened last night.'*

*He was the great Christian man in front of everybody, 'Wonder Dad.' And at home, the kids were abused; we were treated like dogs.*

*He was kind of turning me, slowly, against my family and friends. And I started really depending on him and like, 'He loves me, and he supports me, and actually they don't care.' He was picking up on little stories and like, twisting them, to get me to turn against [them].*

*I wasn't really having any friends at all, and my family maybe didn't feel welcome in the house or whatever.*

*He manipulated everything, he would have played everything off as a joke; I was sensitive, everything was my fault. Money as well: he would have gambled a lot, and left me with no money to pay bills or a mortgage... but it was my fault, or he would have accused me of spending money.*

*The phone was took off me for years. And he was the one answering my phone calls for work.*

*Accusing me of messaging people, where it maybe was friends – grabbing my hand to take my phone, smashing it ... He was accusing me of doing things that he was doing, you know, that scenario. Which then started to make my mind question everything, everything about reality.*

*As soon as the ring went on, he changed*

*It happened very quickly. In the first three months I fell pregnant. As soon I got pregnant, that he started to change. It was, 'What are you doing wearing makeup? Why do you have your hair up? Why are you wearing clothes like that?' [...] It got worse: I wasn't allowed any friends. He smashed me phone; I wasn't allowed a phone. I wasn't allowed out of the house.*

*Multiple times whenever I was heavily pregnant, whenever he would have gone out on two, three-day benders I was actually locked inside my house. I wasn't allowed out: he would have taken the key and locked me in [...] He went out drinking for three days after my daughter was born. I had to sneak my sister in because I had been stitched and I couldn't even get up to go to the bathroom. And whenever he came back he went mental at me for having someone in the house without his permission.*

*It was very fast moving. Within five months we were engaged. Eighteen months later we were married. I got pregnant very quickly after we were married, and then I had another baby very quickly after that. And by that stage, you've all this commitment and two tiny children. And you'll do anything to make it work. And it's you who'll do anything to make it work.*

*He took me and me son's passports and he hid them in the [Christmas] decorations in the attic. And then hounded me for months, 'Why don't you book a holiday?'. And I was too scared to tell him I couldn't find my passport. And then one day I did tell him, and then, oh, the abuse I got, 'How could you lose your passport?'*

*I was just like a robot: I was told what to do, what to eat, what to wear. When to smile, when to laugh. Never owned a pair of pyjamas because I went to bed every night in me clothes because I was always threw out.*

*I met another partner; she was a lot worse, so she was. The manipulation, the head games. I would near prefer to have been hit than to go through this stuff ... it still plays on me and it's what, sixteen years later?*

*For me sometimes, I preferred a hiding to the mental torture of sitting, waiting on him coming in to beat me ... I could remember when I first came into refuge the first thing I done was just let me shoulders drop, and it felt like I hadn't done that it so long, and I was with my husband for twenty-five years. It was just being able to breathe.*

*It was the whole thing is 'nobody's going to believe me'. And I prayed – I've a good faith – and I prayed that he would kick me round the street, that he would physically abuse me ...because I'd've had the proof. And he had me convinced that I was mentally disturbed.*

*I was very naïve; first boyfriend, and then I was with him for 32 years. 32 years of being given lists in the morning of what to do, being told I was a waste of space, that I had no work in me due to health reasons [...] I did my lists every day, did my chores while I was on the phone because he'd get angry if I didn't do my chores and I had spent too much time on the phone; I worked part-time. I just thought he wasn't very nice to me. He only physically hit me once [...] He'd make a face if he went anywhere near me because I was so ugly. Wouldn't go anywhere with me in public as the years went on, and just mocked me [...] And if he hadn't left me, I'd still be there.*

*I was in an abusive relationship for 30 years, but I didn't know until he assaulted me. When we were sorting things in the house I came across a letter he wrote me almost 30 years ago and he was going mad at me in the letter because he tried to ring me four times and he couldn't get through to me, but I'd already told him I was going to see a friend. And my daughter said, 'Well, there's a red [flag] that you shouldn't be with him, that he's so controlling' [...] But that [letter] was just short of 30 years [ago], and I'm still going through things with the criminal trial ... and having an operation to have glass removed because of what he did to me. And if it wasn't for that one incident, I would still be there, and him still controlling me.*

*Apart from the marital rape thing – it happened to me as well – he never laid a finger on me. It's really hard to explain to people.*

*I went from a strong woman who could do many's a things – held down a really good job – to somebody who couldn't even boil a pot of water.*

*I was very competent at work. But then I went home, and that person went into a box and stayed there, and she did what she was told.*

*Going to work was a joy for me. I felt safer at work.*

*See in my own job and in my work, it was like I was two different people, or I had to be two different people, because in my own work I'm a manager; people would see me as a real strong person ... I'm a professional, I'm educated to degree level and I'm a real problem-solver at work; I'm one of those people [...] My manager who used to manage me used to say, 'I love managing you, because you never have a problem; you always come to me with, "here's the problem, and here's the solution."' And my home life was completely different. And there was that shame; I thought, 'I can't tell people what's going on here'. And it was trying to validate it, like, 'is this really happening to me,' or 'Am I really in this thing, this relationship?' [...] My stomach turned completely, constantly, and I just lived on sleeping tablets to try and escape me life when I went home. And I would go home and I would do what I had to do, and I used to just knock myself out with sleeping tablets for years.*

*I was in a controlling marriage. There was no physical violence until one event where he nearly killed me.*

*He never hit me. He would have shoved me, and he was verbally abusive, really terribly, but yet I didn't see it as domestic abuse. I thought I was dealing with aberrant behaviour because of his mental state and his alcohol abuse. It's been a big steep learning curve for me [...] I phoned the police two years ago, because my husband was standing over me when I was in bed with a hammer, and I thought I was a second away from being dead, and I was terrified.*

*The police came, and a doctor came. The police sergeant came in, and he goes to me, 'Do you know the man who attacked you?' I said, 'Aye, I'm married to him for 40 years and I've left him'.*

## **'I Didn't Understand Within Marriage That It Was a "Thing" That Could Happen:' Sexual Assault**

When reviewing an early draft of this book, Fermanagh experts felt that sexual assault needed to be more prominently highlighted. While sexual assault is mentioned above as a tactic to control and 'dismantle' women, a review of the transcripts showed that the Fermanagh experts were correct, as sexual assault featured in all focus group conversations. Although sexual abuse featured prominently in all focus groups, this does not mean that it is easy to talk about. The shame surrounding sexual abuse can mean that it is only referred to obliquely, or it can almost sound as if a woman is speaking about someone other than herself. The difficulty of speaking about, and therefore processing, sexual abuse, can render it a doubly traumatic experience. 'Assault' in its singular form doesn't capture sexual abuse within domestic settings: as the perpetrator has easy access to the survivor, assaults are often repeated, thus reinforcing a form of trauma from which it is already difficult to heal, owing to the shame, guilt, and secrecy in which sexual abuse is enshrouded.

For years, marital rape was also subject to official 'silence,' having only been acknowledged in UK law since 1992. While conversations concerning consent have evolved since then, rape and/or assault within a relationship remains enshrouded in silence. An Armagh expert explains:

*I didn't really understand what was going on, and I didn't really get it, because I didn't understand within marriage that it was a 'thing' that could happen. So, when I was sleeping at night time I would have woke up and he would have been doing stuff to me, or I would have said 'no', and he would have made me feel so bad that I would've given in to whatever he wanted. Or I would have said, 'no', and he would've just took what he wanted anyway. [...] He told me that, in order for me to have a third baby, I had to have my tubes taken out or tied, or whatever, I had to be sterilised, which I didn't really want to do, but we got it done, because I was afraid of him obviously leaving me. So, obviously, when that happened that gave him more room to do what he wanted to do, so it got to the stage where I didn't go to bed at night until about two, three o'clock in the morning because I knew what was coming, knew what was coming every night. Sometimes I would take a few shots of vodka just to get myself tipsy, erm, to get myself to bed because I knew what was coming but just, couldn't put it into words, and I couldn't put it into how I was feeling, because I didn't understand it, so I was just trying to go with whatever was working for me [...] even though I knew it was happening, I didn't understand that within marriage that it was something that happened.*

## Alcohol as a coping method for sexual assault is further described by another survivor:

*I started to have a drink to cope. My coping mechanism was to have a couple of glasses of wine to chill out, and to cope. Because, if he wanted to sleep with me and I didn't want to sleep with him, I would get thrown down the stairs or threw out the back, and I was to stand there until I was ready to come in. That's the way he done things.*

Women also described a range of other non-consensual sexual acts to which they were subjected, emphasising that these acts were a form of control: meted out as either a punishment, or suffered in the hopes of placating the perpetrator. While many of these assaults remained private, some women who did disclose assaults to the police regretted their decision:

*I would say I made the mistake of going to the police. And I got someone from the Rape Suite, or the Rape Team, or whatever you call them. He was horrible, he was horrific ... I disclosed it to the police first of all, they came to my house and I disclosed stuff and then this team was sent to my house [...] [The officer in charge] just sat there and said, 'Well, no one's going to believe you'. And that was the words.*

*[T]he experience I had was with the police, it was attempted rape, and it was awful. And it took me awhile to go to them in the first place [...] I would have loved empathy, compassion, to sit somewhere that wasn't with everybody else in a waiting area. You've just been through this traumatic experience, and you had got the courage to report it, and you were sitting with every Tom, Dick and Harry. Then you were taken in somewhere, and you knew everybody outside could hear what you were saying.*

*[M]arital rape, you know, it wasn't considered as being ... there's nothing wrong with it, so, when you did go to the police, it didn't even go to the PPS (Public Prosecution Service). They just made their own decisions there and then that it didn't fit their criteria. Then when you say to your solicitors that you do want to go to court, and you want to fight for your own rights as a woman, the solicitor doesn't believe you.*

And where one expert's case did make it to trial, and she had the strength to stand up in court and describe being raped, in the end, she was the one who was punished:

*I was ten weeks pregnant [when I was raped], I could have lost my baby [...] So, I walked at three o'clock in the morning to the police station in torn pyjamas, beaten black and blue, pushing a five-month-old baby in a pram. Got to the police station, rang the buzzer, was all in shock and everything, tried to explain what happened to me, and they told me I should ring 101. At that point I was like, 'Are you having an f'in laugh?' you know?*

*At that point then, a female police officer came over and she had obviously seen CCTV and she told them to let me in [...] For ages, he tried pleading to lesser [charges], but I just denied each one. He eventually pleaded guilty to rape, but because he pleaded guilty, he got leniency; he got four years, two of which are on licence. And he now lives in the same town as me, and I have to walk past him every single day [...] I'm doing (the 'Hear Her Voice' project) because I think the justice system in this country is ridiculous [...] I still can't walk into town by myself; I have to have someone go with me. And whenever I'm in town, I'm constantly looking over my shoulder ... my mum calls me a 'meerkat' because I'm constantly watching around me in town. The justice system is an absolute joke in this country. How someone could do that but still be allowed to reside in the same town as you, and walk about free will. I feel like I'm the prisoner, because I'm too scared to go out. I feel like I should stay in while he's allowed to go out and do whatever he wants.*

## 'We Can't Protect You': Rurality and Domestic Abuse

The particular problems posed by rurality and domestic abuse were captured by the first woman to speak during the Fermanagh focus group:

*[D]id anyone see the Mel B [Melanie Brown, Spice Girls] video on domestic abuse? It was very powerful wasn't it? ... [S]he was dressed as an ordinary housewife, and this guy was actually beating her and slapping her. And he was like a tall guy dressed, representative of her ex. And then the last thing it showed her running out the door, all bruised and battered into a field in the middle of Yorkshire. And my son was watching it and he said to me, 'Oh Jesus Christ, that woman is in the middle of nowhere; how does she get help?' He was so taken by it. He said, 'They all should be issued with these silent panic buttons.' And I said, 'Yeah, in the middle of Yorkshire, how would that work?' (laughs). It just highlighted how, if you're in a rural area, it's quite difficult to get out, and to get services.*

With the overwhelming majority of Women's Aid's groups in Northern Ireland serving rural populations, rurality is a particularly pressing issue. As our survivors tell us, geographic and economic structures, along with social norms, limit their space for action,<sup>8</sup> creating a silent panic.

Women's space for action is constrained by the double-bind of rural geography: women are often isolated with few neighbours, and the sparsely populated areas in which they live limit their support options. For instance, in North Antrim, women noted that they often had no choice but to attend, or have their children attend, the same GP as their perpetrator, making disclosure difficult. As our experts explain:

<sup>8</sup> Kelly, L. (2003) 'The Wrong Debate: Reflections on Why Force is Not the Key Issue with Respect to Trafficking in Women for Sexual Exploitation', *Feminist Review*, 73, 139-144.

*The GP was my husband's doctor, and when I moved ... I joined that practice, but unbeknownst to me, my husband had been in telling him a whole pack of lies about me.*

*So, when I went in to get my daughter seen to – it turned out that she had an impacted bowel; it took me 18 months to get that diagnosed – but he didn't even examine her that day. He said to me, 'You're projecting onto her. Get her back to school, and just go home'. And he wasn't even listening.*

*I'm with a rural GP and it was the same. It was the exact same: you know that he's [the perpetrator] been saying things about you before you've even went, and you don't have any other choice in who you're going to see. And when we went to meetings, he would insist on coming with me, so you didn't have a voice.*

The rural economy of Northern Ireland further contributes to women's 'silent panic'. Where women married into farming backgrounds, they often adopted the traditional roles of wife and mother, either staying at home or engaging in part-time work. Where women did work, their earnings were often put back into the farm. For many women, leaving the relationship often meant leaving the shared home, as the home was either attached to a farm, and/or was the perpetrator's 'home house' (i.e., it had belonged to the perpetrator's family for several generations). As an Armagh expert explains:

*I'm still struggling ... We moved out. I didn't even stay because I knew there was no point; it was his land, and his home house. So we're renting now.*

Where a woman did stay in the former shared home, often on the advice of her solicitor, the perpetrator's self-employed status could facilitate post-separation abuse. As a survivor notes:

*Now, I'm in a position with my husband, 12 years separated from him, I'm trying to get the property sold that we lived in, because I ended up leaving it because the police told me they can't protect me: 'You're living in a rural area, we can't protect you'. He had me tortured every night; turning my gas off, moving stuff. Always there, and then the courts allowed him to park his machinery on the property, so he was there 24/7 ... Now, he doesn't have to do anything to get me, because my barrister said that it was okay for him to come and look in my windows. I couldn't even get a non-molestation order ... I had to go to another solicitor to get a non-molestation order, and when I went to change my solicitor, the court refused to let me change them.*

With limited employment opportunities; few assets and little credit history; and debt accrued through financial abuse, a common refrain among rural women is that choosing to leave meant choosing financial precarity. Here, the responses of Fermanagh and Armagh survivors almost perfectly mirror one another: 'I walked out with nothing; I mean nothing. And I've looked for nothing [from my husband].'

When I left my husband, I had nothing, and I mean not a single penny. And with debt, and no car.'

Women's attempts to establish themselves financially, however, often came at a price. Post-separation harassment was common, with perpetrators often trespassing on isolated properties. While some women praised community safety officers for their assistance in evaluating their properties, women often bore the brunt of implementing the officer's security recommendations. Much like Legal Aid, women were ineligible for financial assistance if their income was above a certain threshold. A Tyrone expert explains:

*Social Services refused to let me move back home without some cameras, and whenever I asked them for some support in buying these cameras they said, 'Oh, you can move back home; it's fine'. And at that point, I didn't feel safe moving back home ... It was only the girls [Women's Aid workers] in the refuge who got me a grant. It wasn't even meant to be for CCTV. It was meant to be for new belongings, new furniture for us to move back home and replace the things that were broken. But I had to take that grant and use it for security cameras.*

And even where women were eligible for support, they faced unconscionably long waiting lists:

*I had the Community Safety Officer out to the house. And he said, 'You would need to get that door sorted, and you would need to put up CCTV cameras and the rest.' And I was like, 'I'm a single parent; he doesn't give a penny to his children. Is there no way you can help me out to do this?' He said, 'Your landlord will sort the door'. I says, 'My landlord will sort the door because he said he'd sort the door. But it's not that. I am isolated. I am intimidated in my own home. I am scared to be in my own home.' ... There wasn't enough funding ... The waiting list was that long that by the time they got to me it would have been half a year later.*

As this expert went on to explain, CCTV cameras were not something that would just be nice to have; they were essential. When the police came to her home to take her statement after she was initially assaulted, they got lost on the way to her rural property. As the only witness to her assault was her four-year-old son, she did not have sufficient evidence to obtain a non-molestation order against her perpetrator. As she said:

*Unless you have CCTV cameras, you're going no road [...] The police let you down when you are so rural, because there is nobody about. You have to live in ransom, you have to have cameras up all round your house to be believed, because I feel like I wasn't believed.*

The above demonstrates how rurality, combined with our societal expectation that women should be the arbiters of their own safety, puts survivors at risk. Or, as another survivor put it, makes them 'sitting duck[s]' and 'prisoner[s]' in [their] own home[s].'

This may lead someone to ask, 'Why doesn't she just leave?' Apart from the underlying misogyny of such a question – as a society, we expect women to be arbiters of their own safety, rather than creating a society where women feel safe – leaving often means a survivor, and possibly her children, leaving her support network. A Mid-Ulster expert who is also a young mother of a child with special needs explains:

*The amount of times I was asked, 'Why didn't you just leave?' I did leave; I just couldn't get away from him. You know, I was harassed, I was stalked, and this went on for five years [...] I was asked multiple times why I was still living here ... and if I was to leave, I would have nobody; I would be on my own. So, if I had left, where would I be?*

Apart from support networks, there are also questions surrounding whether new accommodation will be fit for purpose or make a woman and her children safer. Several experts noted that the accommodation was not appropriate for mothers with children. As a Tyrone expert explains, moving into emergency accommodation in a town actually made her feel less safe:

*I felt quite safe in my rural area after [the assault] happened, because I could close my gate. I took up camping in one of the girls' bedrooms so every time somebody opened the gate, I could hear it ... I was like in a fortress in a castle, or a prison. It was a prison [...] It's now that I've moved out into emergency accommodation that I feel back to square one, because I'm in a row of houses, and there's lots of youngsters and they're arguing and they're in and out of each other's houses. I'm just stuck in this one-bedroom place in the back where I can't see anyone [...] I feel isolated even more.*

The above has shown how geography and economy contribute to rural women's panic. More often than not, this panic is silent owing to social norms. Prioritisation of traditional family structures, combined with a veneration of males, renders rural women largely invisible:

*'Fermanagh boys' ... Everything's 'the boys' [...] even at [my mother's] funeral, the minister – which kind of grates on me – talked all about 'the boys' and what 'the boys' done for granny, and 'the boys', 'the boys'. There was no mention of me being there every day.*

*I married the only son from a farming background. It was expected of me: I was the mother, I was the cook, I was the cleaner.*

*I'd only left [my marriage] a week when the priest landed on my doorstep asking, 'What've you done wrong?' And that's not just the Catholic Church, it's the ministers too.*

*I'm a very strong woman, very independent now, but I still see a lot of my family, which are very rural farmers, whereby it's seen that women have a role, and men have a role, and I find that unreal in 2021. Even my nephew joking, saying, 'Oh, I just need to find myself a good wife to look after the kids and stay at home'.*

*My mum said I was 'damaged goods' because I had a child out of wedlock. So, you know, you just be thankful for what you have.*

*If shame still accounts for much of the silence surrounding domestic abuse, it is particularly acute in rural communities:*

*And because you don't have many neighbours, you can't run to the neighbour. And you wouldn't want the other neighbours to know anyway. And your friends phone you and you say, 'Everything's fine, it's fine'. You don't want to create a commotion. And this thing about, 'Oh, the stigma of people talking about me'.*

*I'm still of that mindset of, 'You can't have the country talking about it'.*

*The shame and embarrassment [...] It's the shame, and because it's a rural community and everybody knows everybody*

*There's still things I haven't disclosed, or I've only disclosed to very few people because it's [a rural area]. And what if something gets back to him?*

## 'Unless We Speak Up and Speak Out, Nothing is Going to Change': The Experience of Minoritised Domestic Abuse Survivors in Northern Ireland

Discussing a documentary about the effects of domestic abuse, the writer Doreen St Felix argued that our 'image of victims of assault, and victims in general is terminally white and female'.<sup>9</sup> Given the gendered nature of domestic abuse, there is good reason for viewing its victims as female. There is no reason, however, to assume they are white. Northern Ireland is no different in this regard: it has always had minoritised populations,<sup>10</sup> - and these have grown significantly in the post-conflict era, particularly with the expansion of the EU in 2004. Between 2002-2021, there was a 915% increase in Northern Ireland school pupils who did not have English or Irish as their first language,<sup>11</sup> which gives some sense as to how migration is changing Northern Ireland

<sup>9</sup> St Felix, D. 'After the Abuse, The Possibility of a Better Man', New Yorker, 19 November 2017. <<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/after-abuse-the-possibility-of-a-better-man>> Last accessed 12 August 2021.

<sup>10</sup> 'Minoritised' is used here in recognition that those who are often considered 'ethnic minorities' in Northern Ireland often constitute the global majority, but have their 'minority' status foisted upon them via migration. 'Minoritised' also recognises the diversity of those individuals and groups who become minoritised are culturally and politically heterogenous, and should not be subject to the 'one size fits all' solutions that 'ethnic minority' implies.

<sup>11</sup> Department of Education, 'Number of Newcomer Pupils in Northern Ireland', Department of Education Northern Ireland, 21 March 2021, Available at: <<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Newcomer%20pupils%202001-2002%20to%202020-21.xlsx>> Last accessed: 16 August 2021.

Like domestic abuse, however, migration and minoritisation are subject to statistical silence: the PSNI only began reporting hate incidents in 2004, and these incidents have exceeded sectarian incidents from 2016/17 onward.<sup>12</sup> Northern Ireland, however, does not have any specific hate crime legislation. It is also the only part of the UK to not monitor race or ethnicity, meaning that minoritised populations' experiences of intimidation and discrimination are underreported at best, and often not reported at all.<sup>13</sup>

Migration is also reflected in Women's Aid's service users: all eight of Women's Aid's groups support minoritised populations, with significant populations in Belfast and the North West. While Women's Aid Northern Ireland does not offer specialist services, it does support minoritized populations. In 2019/20, Women's Aid supported 100 'Black and Minority Ethnic' women and children in refuge, with 20 of these women coming from the Traveller community. Of this group, 39 women, and 23 children had 'No Recourse To Public Funds'. Outside of refuge, Women's Aid supported 291 'Black and Minority Ethnic' women via outreach support.<sup>14</sup> It should also be noted here that Belfast and Lisburn Women's Aid does run a project for trafficking survivors.

Minoritised women were represented in the Belfast and Lisburn; North Down; and Causeway and Mid-Ulster focus groups conducted for this project. While this was a relatively small number, differences between these women underscore the difficulty of a catch-all category such as 'Black and Minority Ethnic.' Even where women share the same religious and ethnic background, they are still individuals who are separated by their own 'internal multiplicities and differences'<sup>15</sup> and, ultimately, the unbridgeable gap between the self and the other. Similar experiences will not necessarily lead to shared interpretations, as the exchanges between two Muslim women from the same national community<sup>16</sup> illustrate. One of the women wanted Women's Aid to acquire a fuller understanding of Islamic divorce and female genital mutilation (FGM).<sup>17</sup> In response, however, the other woman stated:

12 Police Service of Northern Ireland, 'Incidents and Crimes with a Hate Motivation Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland Update to 31 March 2021', PSNI Statistics Branch. Available at: <<https://www.psnipolice.uk/globalassets/inside-the-psni/our-statistics/hate-motivation-statistics/2020-21/q4/hate-motivations-bulletin-mar-21.pdf>> Last accessed 16 August 2021; Police Service of Northern Ireland, 'Trends in Hate Motivated Incidents and Crimes Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland 2004/05 to 2019/20', PSNI Statistics Branch. Available at: <<https://www.psnipolice.uk/globalassets/inside-the-psni/our-statistics/hate-motivation-statistics/2019-20/hate-motivated-incidents-and-crimes-in-northern-ireland-2004-05-to-2019-20.pdf>> Last accessed 16 August 2021.

13 North West Migrants' Forum et. al, 'Evidence Paper: Inquiry by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee Concerning the experience of minority ethnic and migrant people in Northern Ireland', *North West Migrants Forum*. Available at: <<https://www.nwfm.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Final-Evidence-Paper-NI-Affairs-Committee-11-June-2021.pdf>> Last accessed 16 August 2021.

14 Women's Aid Federation of Northern Ireland (2020), 'Annual Report 2019/20'. Available at: <<https://www.womensaidni.org/assets/uploads/2020/12/Final-Womens-Aid-Annual-Report-2019-20.pdf>> Last accessed 30 October 2021.

15 Watson, C. (2009), 'The "impossible vanity": uses and abuses of empathy in qualitative inquiry', *Qualitative Research*, 9(1), pp. 105-114: 108.

16 This is not disclosed here to protect anonymity.

17 It should be noted here that FGM is only practiced by certain ethnic and cultural groups, who happen to be Muslim. It is not mentioned in the Qu'ran, and it is practiced by non-Islamic groups (e.g., Animists).

*I'm not in total agreement... I feel like Women's Aid have got no involvement in how they would process your religious divorce, for example; they've got no jurisdiction in that, and they've got no say in it ... they can't fight FGM or help you through an Islamic divorce which is Sharia [law] involvement. I'm not so sure ... For example, myself, I would not think to blame Women's Aid as such for not knowing about my faith or my cultural background or the type of abuses that exist within my culture, I think that's something that I can educate Women's Aid about, and moving forward with progress that's what I would do anyway, that's something I look forward to working with Women's Aid for the near future. I think Women's Aid as an establishment they've done fantastically to make themselves available for us and women in need. And I think they are always open to learn about anything that comes through the door and accommodate whatever it is that they need to accommodate with.*

While the women disagreed on the content of, and extent to which, Women's Aid should acquire a greater understanding of their religion and culture, they did agree that statutory and voluntary agencies require greater knowledge in both these areas. As a Belfast expert who also works for a statutory agency argues:

*As a professional now, I can see that it doesn't happen. I was engaged with police; whenever I told them about honour-based abuse they had no clue – the first few police officers had no clue. In the end I had one police officer who had training from England on honour-based abuse; he knew then what I was talking about, and he knew how serious it would be. My life is still at risk now having left ... even though I left five years ago, I am still being pursued by my ex- [husband] and he has made death threats ... I've been working from home for the past five months because of the death threats that he's made.*

As the survivor further suggests, this type of understanding requires a level of sensitivity and nuance that is not normally acquired through a one-day training course:

*And even understanding that 'ethnic minorities' are not a homogenous group. I know it's not an easy task to know all these cultures, and I don't expect people to know all of these cultures, but at least making an effort to know how these cultures shape ... for example, I constantly have to reiterate how ... I'm a Muslim revert,<sup>18</sup> and part of how I am now has nothing to do with my religion but a lot to do with my culture, which is different.*

Beyond this, agencies would benefit from an understanding of how an 'ethnic minority' identity intersects with a woman's other social identities — for instance, one of the women quoted above is also disabled — to produce multiple forms of marginalisation.<sup>19</sup>

18 A 'revert' is an individual who returns to the Islamic faith.

19 Crenshaw, K.W. (1991), 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color', *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), pp. 1241-1299

For example, a woman on a UK spousal visa experiencing domestic abuse would have no recourse to public funds,<sup>20</sup> making her economically dependent on her perpetrator.<sup>21</sup> Or, as a Belfast expert puts it, *'I didn't leave that relationship because I couldn't afford to.'*

This feeling of dependency could only be deepened if the woman wasn't confident speaking English, as the lack of translators within the National Health Service (NHS)— combined with the hostile environment created by mandatory immigration reporting within the NHS<sup>22</sup>— could double a woman's dependency upon her perpetrator while closing off a possible avenue for disclosure. These identities and experiences would inform a woman's response to domestic abuse, as would any experience of racial abuse. If a woman and her family had been subject to racial abuse, which is not uncommon, this might make her reluctant to move her children into a new area, be it in a house or a refuge, for fear of racial intimidation. Also, if the police response to any racial abuse was poor, this would likely also impact her perception of how any report of domestic abuse would be handled.

If domestic abuse is the 'systematic dismantling of a woman', then it is clear that addressing domestic abuse suffered by minoritised women requires an understanding of how societal barriers are utilised by perpetrators to 'dismantle' minoritised women. Minoritised experts provided specific suggestions on how to facilitate this understanding, and these suggestions appear in the section on education.

This understanding, however, is more than just 'racial literacy' and 'cultural competence'. Rather it is a constant attentiveness to silence – to the populations who don't engage very much with non-specialist statutory and voluntary agencies, or don't engage at all. As our experts argue, this silence can best be attended to through representation: that is, through members of minoritised communities serving as staff, board members, and advocates for statutory and voluntary agencies. This is not to suggest that a minoritised representative can speak for all members of her community, or that an individual can be reduced to her ethnic or racial identity. Rather, it is to suggest that such individuals may be able to hear what we cannot. By amplifying those voices we cannot hear, we can work together to create services which improve the lives of all domestic abuse survivors.

20 'No Recourse To Public Funds' means that a woman is ineligible for social benefits, including housing benefits. Although Women's Aid operates an open door policy, the lack of housing benefit limits the amount of women without access to public funds it can accommodate in its refuges. Although there is a Destitute Domestic Violence (DDV) Concession in UK law, this only applies to individuals on UK spousal visas; it does not apply to spouses or dependents of migrants.

21 McWilliams, M., Yarnell, P., Churchill, M., (2015). 'Forced Dependency and Legal Barriers: Implications of the UK's Immigration and Social Security Policies for Minoritized Women Living in Abusive Intimate Relationships in Northern Ireland, *Oñati Socio-legal Series*, 5 (6), 1536-1556.

22 Coddington, K. (2020). 'Incompatible With Life: Embodied Borders, Migrant Fertility, and the UK's "Hostile Environment."' *Politics and Space*, pp. 1-14.

As a survivor argues:

*Unless we speak out and speak up, nothing is going to change. It's a bit of a chicken and egg situation: if there's no representation [in voluntary and statutory services], people aren't putting themselves out there [i.e., engaging with statutory and voluntary services], and if people aren't putting themselves forward, there's no representation ... The positive stuff that I've taken from Women's Aid ... if women in our community had that, there's so many who would leave. The spiritual abuse in the community is unbelievable, it's unbelievable.*

### 'Hear What We're Not Saying: Multiple and Complex Needs'

If domestic abuse is 'the systematic dismantling of a woman,' then our piecemeal approach to supporting survivors merely mimics the abuse they suffer and is therefore fundamentally flawed. As an expert argues:

*At the moment, they're only concerned with wee bits of you; like you're chopped into wee bits, 'I can sort out this wee bit of you, but I can't sort that' [...] I'm with Community Mental Health Services. Things to do with addiction, you have to go to Extern.<sup>23</sup> Things to do with [my ex-husband], you have to go to Women's Aid, or to a solicitor. It's all connected; it's all affecting my well-being. You tell something to someone who's somebody, and by the time it's passed down the chain it's changed, and it's completely lost its value. It would be good if there was just a person literally to just represent you, and to speak to your well-being.*

Domestic abuse is connected to a woman's total well-being, particularly those survivors who present with what are called 'multiple and complex needs'. 'Multiple and complex needs' refers to individuals who present with three or more of the following: homelessness; offending; problematic substance use and/or mental ill-health.<sup>24</sup> This is the standard definition, but it is acknowledged other issues regularly feature, such as experience of: domestic and sexual abuse; childhood physical and/or sexual abuse; physical and/or learning disabilities; the loss of custody of one or more children; and involvement in sex work. It is often the trauma from these issues which makes multiple needs 'complex', as they impact a woman's ability to cope, and previous encounters with service providers can create a mistrust of professional interventions.<sup>25</sup>

23 Extern is a charity in Northern Ireland. One of the services it provides its support with addiction and substance misuse issues.

24 Changing Lives, 'Too Complex for "Complex Needs"? Learning from work with victims of domestic abuse, who also have multiple and complex needs', (London: Changing Lives, 2018), p. 7.

25 McCarthy, R., Parr S. et al. (2020), 'Understanding Models of Support for People Facing Multiple Disadvantage: A Literature Review', (Sheffield: Sheffield Hallam University), p. 5.

In addition to their own needs, it should be acknowledged that women can also be living with partners with multiple and complex needs. This can lead women to downplay their own experience of domestic abuse — erroneously linking it to their perpetrator's own mental ill-health — and this minimisation can be encouraged by service providers. As an Antrim expert describes:

*[M]y GP actually told my husband – I was actually in the room at the time because his mental health was starting to go, but I've been since told [his mental health] had nothing to do with [the domestic abuse]. He was being violent, and hitting stuff, and my GP, he actually said, 'That's normal. You're a young man, you've got lots of testosterone, get yourself one of those punching bags, or those things that are made to look like people to assault. And I'm like, 'What? Okay, we're at the GP's here; surely, goodness, it is not normal to like fly into rages and shout and stuff'. I couldn't say anything though. I was just sitting thinking there, 'This is advice? That this is normal; you're a man, you're allowed to give off?' And then of course by the time it got to the stage where I 'fessed up to everything that was going on, he knew to be on his guard; he knew to be perfect, charming, you know, he had them [agencies] all set up.*

She continued:

*[G]etting agencies actually working together, I find it really disjointed [...] I didn't actually know I was being abused. It all started mentally, and gaslighting – I'm sure you know the term – I thought I was going insane. And he was plying me with alcohol. And I thought it was all my problem. It was only when he got sectioned and went into hospital that I got a carer's assessment, and the social worker said, 'Erm, this isn't right'. And the carer's assessment turned into a MARAC<sup>26</sup> assessment; that's just how out of it I was. But again, all his needs came first. It was about looking after him, and they were sending him home to me even though they knew that he tried to strangle me. He did this, he did that, and yet I was going to be his primary carer [...] I was expected to live with my husband in the house, and when the psychiatrist came out to see him, they had to come two at a time because they were too scared to see him alone [...] And they were like, 'Just phone the police.' I mean, I live in the middle of nowhere, you know?*

*By the time the police got here, you know ... And then I went to live with my brother in [another county] for three months, and my husband had death threats against my parents next door. And it was no organisation whatsoever: I couldn't even get my prescription pills moved to a chemist in my brother's town. I had to come to my doctor here, possibly be seen by my husband to get them and all. The whole thing, there's no coordination. The only thing that stayed the same was that I had the same Women's Aid worker. Everyone else had to change: addiction worker, everything. Just, it's so frustrating: you get a relationship with somebody and you have to cut it off, and cut it off again.*

<sup>26</sup> Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC). A MARAC is where specialist staff from Women's Aid, the PSNI, Social Services, and other relevant agencies meet to discuss the highest risk domestic violence cases.

This woman's story shows that a piecemeal approach is not only flawed, but it is also potentially fatal. On the one hand, the actions of an observant social worker led to a MARAC assessment. On the other, however, a failure to understand the dynamics of domestic abuse led to the woman still becoming a carer for her perpetrator. It is hard to fathom why such a recommendation would have been made, particularly after a MARAC referral. Leaving that aside, if the service providers were aware that prior victims of non-fatal strangulation are seven times more likely to become victims of femicide,<sup>27</sup> would such a recommendation still have been made?

Other aspects of the woman's story suggest that the dynamics of domestic abuse were not understood, or were ignored. By not being able to move her prescriptions, addressing her mental health meant that this woman had to put herself at risk of potential abuse from her perpetrator. Conversely, prioritising her safety by not collecting her prescriptions could have jeopardised her mental health. A piecemeal, siloed approach, however, forces women to make choices such as this.

Apart from being potentially fatal, siloed approaches which treat domestic abuse's trauma as just one more piece of the puzzle — rather than the dynamic which shapes and links each piece — leads to interventions which are ineffective, and potentially re-traumatising. As a survivor describes:

*I had an experience of whenever I was in hospital again where I had been in for a number of weeks and I was struggling to take a shower. And there was a member of staff who, I don't know, it seemed like her life's mission to make sure that I got into the shower, and she pushed and shoved ... And eventually, I did what a lot of our children do to placate them and get them off your back. So, I had a mental breakdown getting into the shower ... Had the shower, came out, seen this member of staff and I walked up to her, quite casually, quite calmly, and I just sort of leaned over to her and I said, 'Do you ever think there might be a reason why someone doesn't want to do something?' And I said, 'My ex-husband forced me into the shower to do things. Just think about that'. And she just sort of 'Hmm' (dismissively) and walked on [...] [Professionals need to] hear what we're not saying. Because I couldn't tell at that time, because I was unwell but also because of the domestic violence I'd been through, I couldn't tell anyone I didn't want to have a shower because of what my ex-husband, what I'd experienced with him. And sometimes, I admit, it's harder to do, but if somebody takes the time to get to know you, they will begin to hear what you're not saying. Especially in a mental health setting, we need that compassion. For me, I needed that compassion – I got it eventually – but I needed that compassion to get well.*

<sup>27</sup> Glass, N., Laughon, J. et. al, 'Non-fatal Strangulation is an Important Risk Factor for Homicide of Women,' *The Journal of Emergency Medicine*, 35(3), 2008, 329-335: p. 329.

Hearing what a woman is not saying is key, as not all aspects of trauma can or will be verbalised. As a Foyle expert-by-experience contended:

*I think people need to be re-educated to listen in a different way. And that is that they can listen understanding that trauma is a huge part of everyone's lives who has experienced domestic abuse, and that trauma is held in the body. And where they've had their voices silenced – and they are always silenced in abusive situations – we have to learn a different way of listening to the things that they are saying through their body language, and the language of trauma that's embodied within them.*

It seems unlikely, however, that a woman can be heard in this way when her support workers are always changing, and when these workers are tasked with addressing 'bits' of a woman, rather than her whole well-being. As shown in the section about sexual assault, two women discussed how they used alcohol as a coping method. One of the women quoted was in treatment for substance misuse and had lost custody of her children. If we use this woman's case as an example, it is unlikely that treating her addiction without addressing her experience of assault would be successful.

A more productive approach requires significant time: the woman would need to develop trust in her support worker, who would need to skilfully and sensitively draw out the connection between trauma and addiction. In an age of austerity, however, time is what most agencies do not have. Moreover, if trauma's effects are non-linear, agencies' reporting requirements are not. Funding is limited, and reporting requirements lean towards the statistical, so there is an implicit assumption that after a programme is finished, that a woman is more or less 'healed'. Trauma, however, is less about a fixed end point of 'recovery', and more about an ability to process events in a healthy way. As the woman who was in treatment for substance misuse that was linked to her experience of sexual assault argued:

*[S]ocial services and things they seem to expect you to after you maybe do the first Journey to Freedom (a Women's Aid programme for domestic violence survivors) and things like that, you're mended up. But, you know, it really is a long journey for me to figure out what domestic violence is, if you understand, it just takes time. You just don't know overnight. I'm only learning now and I'm 36, and I'm starting only now to see the signs.*

Processing domestic abuse and its trauma does take time, and this poses particular risks for women experiencing mental ill-health. In mental health settings, there is always a very fine line between processing an experience and making an allegation. While women understood that support workers do have a duty to report, they felt that this duty wasn't adhered to consistently, leading them to tell the same stories in multiple settings with no repercussions until there were. An expert explains:

*I'd been with mental health teams, I'd been in [a mental health facility], obviously been in the ward and stuff, and other people knew the abuse that I had experienced. And nobody said, 'We need to report this, we need to look at this'. Until I met this one psychologist who had decided that I had made a disclosure, and that it needed to be reported to the police, but, in doing so, it really freaked me out. Because, she did report it [...] I didn't say things directly, but this was going to have to be reported, and it was going to place me in danger. That's the bit that gets me the most is that reporting is one thing, but saying allegations have been made when they haven't and, placing someone in danger, as the authority that is supposed to protect an individual, they are placing them in grave danger. And that gets me. It angers me, it scares me.*

Another expert added:

*When I was in [a mental health facility] in a group session, I said something and it certainly wasn't intended as an allegation or anything, it was just something about the way I was living. Next thing after the session, the social worker took me aside and said, 'Due to what you've revealed, I'm going to have to inform the police', and I'm like, 'What? You can't do that, you can't do that. You're going to put my Mum and Dad – they live right beside him – you're going to put them in serious danger.' It just completely took it from your control [...] And you go in, and you don't mean to make an allegation. You're trying to sort yourself out, obviously, you're in [a mental health facility]. And they literally create problems. They literally create a problem that wasn't there.*

Supporting women who have experienced domestic abuse and mental ill-health requires an approach which acknowledges the ways in which domestic abuse affects a woman's overall well-being and her ability to cope. Throughout this project, numerous women disclosed having experienced mental ill-health, underscoring the importance of developing holistic and trauma-informed approaches. There is, however, a danger of attributing everything a domestic abuse survivor experiences to 'mental health'. As an expert asks:

*Why are we all looked on as if we have mental health problems when we speak up? I was the same, I ended up getting tested to see how my mental health was. It can't just be classed as 'mental'. We're not saying anything that makes us mental; we're just telling the truth ... Now, don't get me wrong; there's nothing wrong with having mental health issues. It's the fact that we're being labelled, and we're not.*

This is a very important point. As the writer Michelle Orange has argued, 'there has always been conspicuous connection between a society's shortcomings and prevailing self-interests and what it defines as "crazy."<sup>28</sup> In a society unwilling to address its misogynistic underpinnings – and with the logic of austerity politics making psychopharmacology the intervention of choice — there is a danger that a woman's experience of domestic abuse will be subsumed within a catch-all category of 'mental health', which implies that domestic abuse is a personal, rather than societal, problem. Conflating the experience and effects of domestic abuse with mental ill-health also runs the risk of repeating and reinforcing the emotional abuse inflicted by a woman's perpetrator. An exchange between two focus group participants describes this danger:

**Participant 1:** *[My perpetrator] had me convinced that I was mentally disturbed.*

**Participant 2:** *That's the gaslighting.*

**Participant 1:** *And I even went to the doctor and got on to antidepressants! And I was no more depressed [...] it was very much coercive control.*

As argued earlier, referring to the abuse women experience as 'domestic' allows it to be framed as a personal, and by implication, neither a societal nor terribly serious problem. This is wrong, and exposes the 'conspicuous connection between a society's shortcomings and prevailing self-interests and what it defines as "crazy."<sup>29</sup> As an Antrim expert argues, had she not experienced domestic abuse, but rather:

just an attack from a random person in the street, everyone would have dealt with it so differently. And in other cases, any perpetrator of violence and the victim put together again wouldn't happen. At the minute, I'm having to do ... Systemic Family Therapy, where basically [psychologists] want me and my ex [partner] to sit down, hold hands, and sing 'Kumbaya' again – I've said to them, 'The plan that you've put in place has been tried, and tested and failed; you're putting us all at more risk.

And the definition of 'insanity' is repeating the same thing again and expecting different results. But, as I said to the man running it, 'Do you know what? As always, I'll try, and when it fails as it has done in the past, I'll just succumb to insanity by definition because, at this point in time if I don't do what is being asked of me, I'm not going to get to see my kids again.

28 Orange, M. (2013), 'War and Well-Being, 21° 19' N., 157° 52' W.', in *This Is Running For Your Life: Essays*, (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux) [Kindle edition: no page numbers].

29 *Ibid.*

## 'He's Keeping Remote Control of You': Post-Separation Abuse'

*So, in a lot of ways, it's nearly been worse since I've left because he just wouldn't let up. I mean everything from tracking devices on my vehicle, to people watching my house, to private investigators following me for months.*

The words of the Armagh expert above further reveal the folly of the question, 'Why doesn't she just leave?' As demonstrated, 'just leaving' often entails financial precarity – if not destitution — and the severing of vital support networks for women and their children. The immediate post-separation period has also been identified as placing a woman at increased risk for femicide.<sup>30</sup> Even when the danger of the immediate separation period has passed, a woman is still likely to be subject to harassment and harm from her perpetrator. Our popular incident-based understandings of domestic abuse — which assume that abuse and control end when a perpetrator leaves or is removed — do not account for the fact that post-separation abuse is common, and oftentimes can be worse given its unpredictability. How can this abuse be worse, a reader might ask?

Perhaps unwittingly, but oftentimes owing to an unacknowledged misogyny, the institutions which are charged with helping a woman after she has left her perpetrator — the courts; solicitors and barristers; the Public Prosecution Service; Social Services; and the police — often provide perpetrators with the means to expand their repertoires of abuse. The following sections will cover the many ways in which perpetrators use institutions to continue to control women, and how these institutions can end up perpetuating the harm that women experienced with their perpetrators.

In the sections below, women tell of the many ways they and their children have been subject to post-separation abuse. The impact of this abuse is perhaps best summed up by a woman whose case was referred to MARAC from the outset. After an endless cycle of broken non-molestation and restraining orders; arrests; sentences and appeals, this expert-by-experience described herself as feeling as if 'I was in the sea, and every time I got hit by a big wave and tried to get up. I got hit again. And it was that feeling of, literally drowning, because where was it going to stop, and when was somebody going to do something about it?'

30 Campbell, J., Webster, D., Kozoi-McLain, J. et al. (2003), 'Risk Factors for Femicide in Abusive Relationships: Results From a Multisite Case Control Study', *American Journal of Public Health*, 93 (7), pp. 1089-1097: 1092.

## Child Contact

In the 35+ hours of focus groups and interviews for this project, it is clear that women's experiences of social services and the court system merit separate books in their own right. The refrain 'I feel let down' reverberates throughout the project, but 'let down' is euphemistic: fuller conversations revealed deep anger about the unfair and arbitrary ways in which they and their children were treated.

Where women had children with their perpetrators, child contact was often turned into an avenue for further abuse. There were women who described having amazing social workers who recognised the threat the perpetrator posed, and acted accordingly. Many women also expressed empathy with social workers, acknowledging the pressure they face, and the high rate of staff turnover. Nevertheless, a failure to understand the dynamics of domestic abuse has allowed social services to become a means of continued abuse. As a one survivor says, after years chipping away by her husband, until she was 'just a shell', 'now it's the authorities that are chipping away at me'.

An expert's experience illustrates how social services allow perpetrators to perpetuate abuse. Social Services first became involved with her family while she was still living with her perpetrator. At that time, in her home, *'cameras were set up, recording devices were set up, so he [the perpetrator] could review what I had to say when I got home. And he would have made himself scarce because if he got angry, it would have reflected badly, so it was up to me to ensure that we got rid of Social Services.'*

Given the coercion she had faced while still living with her perpetrator, she asked Social Services to take this into account when children later retracted allegations against him, and asked that social workers meet children at a neutral venue, and not in the home. As she said, 'They listen to the voice of the child, but they don't understand that the influence and the coercion from the perpetrator, that it's actually the perpetrator's voice coming out in the child'. This was a common refrain among women, where their children would have told them that they retracted statements and/or told social workers what they wanted to hear 'So's they would go away and leave me alone' and to 'keep them off my back'.

While social workers initially took her concerns seriously, a new social worker reacted sceptically to the survivor's concerns, and she was accused of parental alienation, a controversial and contested phenomenon.<sup>31</sup> The expert describes the absurdity of losing custody to her perpetrator when:

*[Social workers have] said, 'We will not go in [to the perpetrator's house] on our own'. And chairs of meetings saying, 'Trust employees will not be put at risk', but in the next breath, they're placing two very young children with him for unsupervised contact.*

<sup>31</sup> Lubit, R. (2019), 'Valid and invalid ways to assess the reason a child rejects a parent: The continued malignant role of "parental alienation syndrome,"' *Journal of Child Custody*, 16:1, 42-66.

*But yet now, I am required to have supervised contact with my children because I've been accused of speaking negatively about them to their father [...] which I have never done. But yet, I now require supervision the entire time, yet I have three younger children at home that I don't require any supervision for. And it doesn't make sense. And in fact, only recently I was offered a job where I would have to liaise with this very social work team on a professional level in order to safeguard families (laughs).*

If the above is absurd, it is not uncommon. Experts describe the lengths travelled to allow their children to have relationships with their fathers, and to shield them from the abuse that they, as mothers, experienced. As an Armagh expert explains, survivors often engage in the exact opposite of parental alienation:

*When I left, which was six years ago, I never vocalized anything, not even my mum my dad, nobody knew there was any violence [...] Last year – since I left, my ex-husband I think has had three different partners – two of those partners have come out and very publicly shamed him about domestic violence. As a result of that, the girls have chosen not to see their father. Social Services have gotten involved in that, and at the moment, he is trying to take me to court for parent alienation, which is really, really tough for me because I hid everything from the girls, and it's only as they've got older and with his new girlfriends they witnessed things. So even though the physical abuse ended six years ago, the torture still goes on in terms of trying to really take away my voice, trying to disregard anything that I've said. Not that I've said much, but if I did say it, trying to take anything that is genuine that happened, just rip it apart and make me out to be this woman who is promoting parent alienation and turning his children against him, rather than him even taking ownership of what happened in those six years since we separated, which is tough.*

Returning to the woman who lost custody of her two children, despite initially being ignored, she has continued to use her voice to advocate both her own case and for other women and children:

*I have taken this right to Government level. Two complaints about social workers were upheld, but no changes were made. I've now a third one in and took that to [the NI Minister for Health] Robin Swann. Now the emails fly back and forward where they are trying to listen. And the Advisor for the Chief Social Worker in Northern Ireland ... he personally phoned me because of the treatment, and how things have progressed, and he's not happy how the directions he has written, and the policies and procedures for victims of domestic abuse, and how children are managed within Social Services – they're not following that pathway he created with Women's Aid, where children shouldn't be left alone with perpetrators. It's not just me; I've enlisted a reporter and they've got the voices of other women who've had this experience. So, fingers crossed, things might change. It might be too late for my case, but if it helps someone from behind.*



*I fled from my home ... there was really nowhere to go because of COVID and everything was locked down. I didn't have letters to prove that it was domestic violence; hadn't reported it to the police until I was way out of town. I had non-molestation orders in place, and I came back home eventually. He breached that; he drove at my mum and me one night, to intimidate us, to scare the heart out of us. When we got to court, they used that against me, and said, 'Yeah, but was this guy prosecuted?' The prosecutor who was representing me was grand; he could only ask questions in a certain way, so he can't be biased at all. Whereas his defence attorney tore me to literal shreds [...] [My ex-partner] apologised to me [...] he came in pleading guilty, but I said 'no' because I wouldn't get my say, and the truth wouldn't get out there. He'd just be literally saying 'I did it', but it was just going to be a caution, because they were trying to get everything reduced down, which I thought was a joke [...] There was no evidence on his part at all, apart from the defence attorney tearing me to shreds [...] He was acquitted on medical grounds, because there's a three-year waiting list for maxillofacial specialist to look at my jaw [...] I can't control a three-year waiting list [...] I thought, 'I am never, ever, ever trusting the legal system again, because it just has thrown me under a bus'. He then skipped out of court to go and brag that he got away with smashing my face in [...] He told lies on the stand, and he was given a pat on the back and, 'Nice one. We'll see you later'. Until he does it again.*

Despite the trepidation surrounding a trial, women persist because they want to have their voices heard, only to be asked to silence the story of what really happened to them through negotiation. As a Foyle expert describes:

*I had a court case that nearly broke me. I was supposed to go to court at the beginning of February (2021) and give my testimony as to what had happened the night of the assault, which was the last time that I saw my ex-partner. And it nearly broke me [...] I was due to be in on the Tuesday morning, and on the Thursday I got a call from the Prosecution Office, saying that there was a deal on the table, and if I agreed to say that I hadn't been strangled then he would admit to the criminal damage that had been done, and I wouldn't have to give my testimony in court. And I couldn't cope with that at the time, because I would have basically have to had lied about what had happened on that night, just to get a conviction, and that wasn't the point for me.*

Another expert described a similar situation:

*The barrister said that he had the knife in the car because he was clearing out his mum and dad's house, so was taking things to the skip [...] They couldn't prove that on that day he did intend to murder me. They said, 'intent is very, very hard to prove'. She said to me, 'if we proceed with the intent, we could end up losing the Grievous Bodily Harm [charge]'. She said to me, 'That's the thing you're up against, is intent' ... The knife was from my house; it was a steak knife out of my house. But it's one of them things: do you go for intent, and end up losing more, and it's very, very hard to prove [...] I understood what she was saying, but it's not fair because, at the end of the day, he could have killed me.*

As we saw in the earlier section regarding rape by a partner/spouse, when a perpetrator relents and pleads guilty, he can still be shown leniency, despite earlier disavowals:

*For ages, he tried pleading to lesser [charges], but I just denied each one. He eventually pleaded guilty to rape, but because he pleaded guilty, he got leniency; he got four years, two of which are on licence. And he now lives in the same town as me, and I have to walk past him every single day [...] How someone could do that but still be allowed to reside in the same town as you, and walk about free will. I feel like I'm the prisoner, because I'm too scared to go out. I feel like I should stay in while he's allowed to go out and do whatever he wants.*

A Tyrone survivor who was physically assaulted by her partner further reveals the ways in which women are often imprisoned by the criminal justice system: *'I can't get a divorce until after the criminal trial. How bizarre is that? It's all still working in his favour as far as I can see.'*

A Causeway and Mid-Ulster expert, who was also violently assaulted by her husband, also shows how the system works in a perpetrator's favour:

*Victim Support used to ring me up and go, 'Could you not apply for a divorce? Because at least that way, it will make him realise that you're not going back.' And I went, 'No, I'm not paying for a divorce, because that piece of paper will not keep him away from me. You are asking me to do something to help you do your job.' I looked into the price of the divorce; you're talking £3,000 for a normal divorce. But mines won't be a normal divorce; he will drag it out and drag it out [...] I had a non-molestation order twice, and both times he broke that, and both times it cost me £600 for a piece of paper.*

If the criminal courts appear to work in a perpetrator's favour, class and gender biases often combine to guarantee that they do. As a North Down expert explains:

*I was in a controlling marriage. There was no physical violence until one event where he nearly killed me. I have to say, I couldn't speak more highly of the police, or Social Services, or Women's Aid, or even the magistrates in the court. But I would be really, very critical of the Prosecution Service, and very critical of the judge, which was an appeal judge in the Crown Court, who allowed my ex-husband to walk free. And said that he realised that he had a notable career as a professor, and if he were to jail him, he would lose his job, and that would impact on international research ... And the message was to me, just because you have a fancy title and a really nice career, you can walk free. If perhaps you hadn't, we might have dealt with you differently. There's no cognisance given to the effect on family and children. And the Prosecution Service, I challenged them because the police had originally arrested him for attempted murder. And what he actually had a conviction for was assault occasioning actual bodily harm.*

*Although they said that there's no such thing as plea bargaining in Northern Ireland, in effect that was the deal that one set of lawyers had with another set of lawyers that would secure a conviction, but not necessarily the right one. Because on the Crown Prosecution Service's website in England, strangulation is an automatic GBH [Gross Bodily Harm], but in Northern Ireland the prosecutors couldn't define why that's not the case in Northern Ireland. My experience is where a convicted abuser has a custodial sentence reduced, and I think that's appalling.*

Another expert-by-experience in North Down described a similar situation with an appeals judge:

*My case was referred to a MARAC at the outset. I phoned the police two years ago, because my husband was standing over me when I was in bed with a hammer, and I thought I was a second away from being dead, and I was terrified [...] I get a non-molestation order, and my husband went on to breach that non-molestation order five times, and yet, it wasn't until the fifth time that I had a domestic abuse officer in my home. The Magistrate took such a dim view of it: he was remanded in custody ... and he gave him the hardest sentence he could give him, which was six months in custody and six months on licence, with no parole. And yet, he appealed it, and this was the second time he appealed the custodial sentence, and another judge let him out: no conditions, no nothing [...] When I did find out [the outcome of the appeal], it was left to me to phone the police ... I phoned that police officer in the domestic violence unit, and he couldn't believe it; he just could not believe that a judge had overturned that, after everything that had happened.*

It would be comforting to think that the above stories were extreme cases, plucked from a pile of more mundane, and positive, encounters with the judiciary. Unfortunately, they are not. The above stories are representative of many women's experiences with the criminal justice system. As a North Down expert-by-experience argues, how can ordinary response police be expected to respond appropriately to domestic abuse survivors when, 'our judiciary behave in that way with absolutely *no regard for what's happened*'?

If the behaviour of the judiciary, along with that of barristers, solicitors, and the Public Prosecution Service<sup>34</sup> implicitly tells the police that a survivor's experience does not matter, then what message does it send to perpetrators? As the experts above have argued, it implies that their actions don't matter, and they are free to repeat them. Or, as one survivor put it, 'Just bide your time, sunshine'. Returning to the woman whose perpetrator was acquitted of injuring her jaw, she describes how, after the trial, she received unsolicited messages from women who her perpetrator had also abused:

<sup>34</sup> It should be noted here, however, that the Public Prosecution Service, along with solicitors and barristers, have begun to request training from the Women's Aid Federation of Northern Ireland (WAFNI). As of this writing (October 2021), no member of the judiciary has ever requested training from WAFNI.

*It was a couple of different women saying that he done this to them, he tortured them. I'm not the first person, and I won't be the last after all this. And that's what sickens me the most: some other poor girl is going to have to deal with this.*

The criminal courts actions also send a message to survivors of domestic abuse. In Northern Ireland we have the Domestic Violence Abuse Disclosure Scheme (DVADS). Known in England as 'Clare's Law', DVADS allows individuals to ask the police if their partner, or the partner of a friend or family member, has a history of domestic abuse. While this is intended to protect individuals, learning that a partner not only has a history of domestic abuse, but a history of getting away with it, creates a law of unintended consequences, as a Tyrone survivor shows:

*I discovered that he had escaped from two court cases before with accusations, so I thought, 'I will never be believed so there's no point'. I never contacted police; just hid it all.*

## Family Courts

Given women's experiences of being 'torn to literal shreds' in the criminal courts, they could be forgiven for hoping that the experience of family courts would be less adversarial and traumatic. At a minimum, women could regain a measure of privacy in the family courts, where the press is not allowed. In the artwork created for the 'Hear Her Voice' project, it is telling how many women who experienced the criminal courts incorporated the news reports of their trials into their art as a way of demonstrating how their privacy was violated and how they lost ownership of their own story. Or, as one expert-by-experience remarked, '[F]rankly, it got to the point where if I wanted to know what was going on in my life, I could have read about it in The (County Down) Spectator, and really none of us want to be dealing with that.'

If the family courts allow a modicum of privacy, the lack of a press presence has also led to a lack of oversight. Recent articles and documentaries have revealed the appalling actions in family courts throughout the United Kingdom.<sup>35</sup> In the previous section on child contact, it was demonstrated how custody was granted to a perpetrator with whom Trust workers were not allowed to deal with alone for safety reasons; and custody was taken away from a woman who was offered a job liaising with the very same Trust workers who supervise her visits with her children now that she has lost custody to her perpetrator.

<sup>35</sup> Tickle, L. 'I discovered my partner was a paedophile. He took me to court 37 times to get my kids', *The Times*, 18 July 2021. Available at: <<https://louisetickle.co.uk/Downloads/NEWS%20REVIEW%2018%20July%202021.pdf>> Last accessed 15 September 2021; Channel 4, 'Dispatches: Torn Apart: Family Courts Uncovered', 20 July 2021. Available at: <<https://www.channel4.com/programmes/torn-apart-family-courts-uncovered-dispatches>> Last accessed 15 September 2021.

Absurd as this may be, it is not uncommon: women are first socially shamed for staying with an abuser and, therefore, exposing their children to abuse. When they leave, and attempt to protect their children from further abuse by limiting or preventing contact with the perpetrator, they are then accused by the courts of 'parental alienation', a scenario which the current Shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Louise Haigh, MP, has deemed 'Kafkaesque'.<sup>36</sup>

For women who have been through the criminal courts, there is frustration that nothing from the criminal trial is deemed relevant for family court proceedings, which is a derogation from established guidelines relating to child contact/residence hearings and domestic abuse.<sup>37</sup> This elides a very relevant portion of a woman's story from proceedings, and this elision in turn makes family courts complicit in continued harassment and abuse by the perpetrator. A survivor whose ex-husband was initially arrested for attempted murder explains how the family courts become an avenue for further abuse:

*I don't think there's any end to this because my incident was in 2015. He's had no contact with me or the family, and he's still pursuing, in and out of court, to try and get access to his children. And what does that do? It re-introduces fear. New magistrates don't know the history. They're so bloody obsessed — excuse my French — with his human rights, and not the human rights of a woman and her children. And, how much does it cost? Well, last year, I had to spend twenty percent of my salary, my take home pay, defending it, because I can't stand up in court and respond to this. I am terrified about the final cost, not only financial, but on the well-being and safety of my family.*

*Moreover, the abuser is permitted to continue to mete out his written domestic violence and threats with impunity, re-writing history and emphatically insisting shocking untruths; these are confidential to the court so I cannot even take them to the police to explain how I am being intimidated. Given the circumstance of extreme domestic violence, rather than simply an acrimonious divorce, the courts facilitate such inhuman actions and I just wonder if one-day people will look back and consider how cruel our system is just as we look back with horror at the slave trade.*

If domestic abuse isn't deemed relevant in family court proceedings, neither is a criminal conviction for child cruelty. As an expert describes:

<sup>36</sup> Tickle, L. (2019), 'Double-dealing', *Tortoise Media*, 19 December. Available at: <<https://www.tortoisemedia.com/2019/12/19/domestic-violence/>> Last accessed 15 September 2021.

<sup>37</sup> In the case of *Re L, V, M, H* (Contact: Domestic Violence) [2001] Fam 260, the Court of Appeal laid down guidelines for courts in such cases. In contact cases where there are allegations of domestic abuse. The Court of Appeal determined that that courts should consider the nature and impact of alleged violence as soon as possible when determining contact arrangements. This normally takes place through a fact-finding hearing and a risk assessment. Hunter, R., Barnett, A., and Kangas, F. (2018), 'Introduction: contact and domestic abuse', *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law*, 40:4, 401-425.

*He has a conviction for child cruelty, which is very unusual. We plea bargained it down to that [...] But even with that conviction, the battle that I had with regards to the family courts and everything, it has been unbelievable ... I had an amazing solicitor, but between social services and child court officers, and believing the narrative because he's not the stereotypical ... he's quieter, he's a businessman, he's seen as kind of more reserved, so this couldn't be him, do you know what I mean?*

Again, we see how class bias influences how a perpetrator is treated. As an Antrim survivor argues, it is not only class bias, but perhaps the sense that judges, barrister, solicitors and social workers are perhaps too sophisticated to be taken in by perpetrators:

*My husband's got a senior position with the government, and he can go anywhere and he can talk the talk and look the part. And be such a gentleman, and look so docile and calm and a loving father to any professional. And following after that, it's very hard. You wonder why these people cannot see behind that they're the perpetrator.*

In addition to class bias, the courts' gender bias perhaps best subtly expresses itself in the prioritisation of an ethic of justice — a concern with, or 'caring about', rights and due process — over an ethic of care, which is a concern with, or 'caring for' a child's safety and best interest.<sup>38</sup> The prioritisation of an ethic of justice is perhaps best demonstrated by the words of a young girl as described by her mother, who is only a survivor of domestic abuse owing to the actions of her daughter, who was seven at the time. This young woman explained to a court officer why she did not wish to have contact with her father, who had been arrested for attempted murder, only to have the judge grant contact. As this young woman asked, *'Why did the judge ask me if he was going to do what he wanted anyway?'*

The ethics of justice and care are never neatly separated, nor are they solely articulated by one gender. When combined with class bias, however, prioritisation of an ethic of justice often render a woman's articulation of an ethic of care suspect. As an Armagh Down expert describes:

*What I found with mine is, he's never physical, but he seems to come across well, initially, to people. He got up in the family courts last year, and he was like a male Mary Poppins; I'd have moved back in with him, you know? And it was a fairy tale that he told. And you felt that they sucked it in. My daughter, with anxiety, she's afraid to speak to him and talk to him, but my solicitor said that it's generally seen, just like [another participant] said about the parent alienation, if I say anything that I'm causing trouble and I'm trying to withhold the children from him. And that's the way a lot of times the courts see it. They're not realizing what's been going on.*

<sup>38</sup> Smart, C. (1995), 'Losing the Struggle for Another Voice: The Case of Family Law', *Dalhousie Law Journal*, 18(2), 173-195, p. 176.

Gender bias, however, also expresses itself not so subtle ways. As an Antrim survivor explains:

*The last court case I had, the judge actually complimented my husband on his Scott Schedule (schedule used in family court to set out which allegations are in dispute) and the appeal that he had put in; she was praising him on that. And I'm going, 'I'm the one taking him to court for domestic abuse, for marital rape, for attacking my child, and causing all this distress, and you're praising him?' So, from the judge down, everybody needs to be retrained.*

Another Antrim expert, who left the marital home after being told by the police that they couldn't protect her from her perpetrator, who was trespassing on the property, relayed a similar experience:

*I have a female judge at the minute. And they initially thought, 'Well, that's your first female, she should be okay'. She's the worst I ever had; tore strips off me at court, and told me I left him – I moved out of the marital home, and left him with all the bills. She tore strips off me.*

And if the judge shut down this expert's voice, the court's evidence criteria further silenced her:

*I have been attending a counsellor that was recommended through my doctor because of what I was going through, but when it came to court, although I had been speaking to that woman every week for months, the court ruled it out because she wasn't recognised by one of their professional bodies, and that was one of my biggest amounts of evidence. And that was my voice shut down again.*

What constitutes sufficient evidence, qualitatively and quantitatively, is a particular stumbling block to ensuring the safety of survivors and their children. As a Tyrone survivor argues, perpetrators are well-versed in how to harass and stalk whilst remaining on the right side of the law:

*I don't have a non-molestation order because he's too crafty [...] It's very, very difficult. The whole stalking process too ... you have to have so much evidence to prove that someone's stalking you, and even when it's their families as well that's playing a hand in it. It's just really difficult, you just have to have so much evidence in order to get the non-molestation order just to help keep you and your family safe. This keeps coming back up... I thought, 'Oh God, is it just me?' But it's actually not, it's happening all across the board.*

Within the ABCLN focus group sessions, there were many discussions about how women's voices are silenced through the courts. The main theme to emerge from this discussion was how arbitrary the judicial system could be, with outcomes dependent upon which judge was presiding, and what mood s/he happened to be in on a given day. Women also described how the arbitrariness surrounding the violation of court orders often emboldened perpetrators:

*I had court orders that he was to take my child for a specific period of time, and then bring her back. On two instances, he didn't bring her back. Nobody knew where he was. Two days later we were still trying to find them. And when the police tracked him down, it was another day trying to negotiate with him to come back. But my barrister, nor my solicitor, took it to court, to do anything about it, and he got away with it. Hence, he did it again and again and even when I went to Women's Aid in desperation saying, 'I've just come from the solicitors. They can't give me answers; they're not taking this to court.' Women's Aid phoned them, and they just got a lot of waffle. To be quite honest, we don't know why they didn't take it because we couldn't get an answer. So that gave him the power to keep going. And at the end of the day, that's a legal document; may as well be a toilet roll for all the good it did me. And I know there's other women out there that have similar experiences of court orders being broken and nothing happening.*

As shown above, family courts can be a further avenue for perpetrators to abuse survivors of domestic abuse. Child contact hearings and vexatious litigation force a woman back into court, draining her both emotionally and financially. Given the financial precarity in which many women find themselves, continued financial abuse through the courts is something of which the judiciary, along with barristers and solicitors, need to be made aware.<sup>39</sup>

Beyond this form of financial abuse, there is also the sheer cost and aggravation of getting a divorce. In closing this section, the final word will be given to our Fermanagh experts, who describe the 'Kafkaesque' nature of trying to remove a perpetrator from their lives via the family courts:

**Participant 1:** *Even the regulations for divorcing and that is so different than over in England. You have to prove everything.*

**Participant 2:** *I looked into divorce, and it's too much effort. I just can't cope with it. There's so much stuff you have to do to actually get divorced.*

<sup>39</sup> In recognition of the prevalence and impact of financial abuse via the courts, WAFNI campaigned for a Legal Aid waiver for survivors of domestic abuse, and this was introduced as an amendment to the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Bill (2021) in October 2020. Owing to the alleged financial implications of extending Legal Aid in this manner, the NI Minister for Justice delayed the Bill's passage when the Justice Committees' members refused to remove this amendment. BBC (2020), 'Domestic abuse: Landmark bill's passage at Stormont postponed' BBC Northern Ireland, 8 December 2020. Available at: < <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-55216342> > Last accessed 31 October 2021.

**Participant 1:** *Sorry, I'm going to stop you. You know how long it took me to get divorced? Eleven years, girls!*

[Room is in shock. 'What?' is heard throughout the room]

**Participant 2:** *I reckon I'll be the same.*

**Participant 3:** *From when you first applied?*

**Participant 4:** *That's unbelievable.*

**Participant 2:** *That's unbelievable.*

**Participant 1:** *And it cost me £35,000*

**Participant 5:** *I put my ex-husband out in February 2018, and I'm divorced last year. And financially it cost me £20,000.*

**Participant 3:** *That's disgusting.*

**Participant 5:** *Two years.*

**Participant 4:** *Does what you've gone through make a difference? What he did to you, your ex?*

**Participant 5:** *No.*

**Participant 2:** *No one wants to bring that in if you've children.*

**Participant 6:** *That's it. I have three children ... and they came with me. The eldest boy, it was like [Participant 2's] situation – he was turning into his daddy. He was pleading with me, 'Mummy, someone's gonna end up dead and it'll not be Daddy, it'll be you.' He knew what was happening, but I was being the good mother. I left the marital home, but I encouraged them to go back and see their daddy. And he manipulated them. [Tearing up] my eldest hasn't talked to me in 12 months. The youngest only talks to me when he wants something. But I can very much see they've been manipulated. I'm three years gone in November, and I walked out with nothing, I mean nothing. And I've looked for nothing. But divorce? No, fuck that. Excuse my language, but no, I wouldn't be strong enough for it.*

## Paramilitaries

Some readers might be curious as to why paramilitaries are included in a section describing how formal institutions often perpetuate post-separation abuse. While paramilitaries are not officially part of Northern Ireland's political or judicial system, they are a fact of life. It is also a fact that paramilitaries of all political persuasions manipulate official institutions to ruin many women and children's lives.

For example, paramilitaries manipulate official institutions, such as the Housing Executive's intimidation points scheme, to harass and control domestic abuse survivors. The largest number of points are awarded to those experiencing intimidation, with 80% of applicants reporting paramilitary intimidation.<sup>40</sup> This allows paramilitaries to wield significant power: if a woman and her children are being abused and assaulted by a partner with paramilitary connections, paramilitary leadership can simply deny the intimidation, leaving a woman with no other choice than homelessness. With no intimidation criterion for domestic abuse, and with most housing estates being segregated and paramilitary-controlled, a woman and her children can languish for years on housing waiting lists.

The role of paramilitaries in either perpetrating and/or mediating domestic abuse has been noted in the earliest accounts of domestic abuse in Northern Ireland.<sup>41</sup> While the peace process has changed the dynamics of paramilitary involvement, it has not ended it. The relative acceptability of the PSNI in nationalist/republican communities has allowed more women from those communities to contact the police.<sup>42</sup> There is a danger, however, in overstating the extent to which the peace process has taken the 'gun' out of Northern Irish society. In a literal sense, the Independent Monitoring Commission, the body charged with overseeing paramilitary activity from 2004-2011, noted that decommissioning was far from complete,<sup>43</sup> an assertion that has been backed up by the United States and Irish governments.<sup>44</sup>

40 The Northern Ireland Housing Executive, '2017-18 Housing Statistics', Available at: <<https://www.nihe.gov.uk/Working-With-Us/Corporate-data/Housing-statistics>> Last accessed 14 September 2021.

41 McWilliams, M. and McKiernan, J. (1993), *Bringing It Out In The Open: Domestic Violence in Northern Ireland*, (Belfast, HMSO).

42 Doyle, J.L. and McWilliams, M., (2018) 'Intimate Partner Violence in Conflict and Post-Conflict Societies: Lessons From Northern Ireland', (Edinburgh: Political Settlements Research Programme), Available at: <[Intimate\\_Partner\\_Violence\\_in\\_Conflict\\_and\\_Post\\_Conflict\\_Societies\\_Insights\\_and\\_Lessons\\_from\\_Northern\\_Ireland.pdf](https://www.ulster.ac.uk/~ulster/Intimate_Partner_Violence_in_Conflict_and_Post_Conflict_Societies_Insights_and_Lessons_from_Northern_Ireland.pdf) (ulster.ac.uk)> Last accessed 14 September 2021. It is important to emphasise, however, that this acceptance is relative. See McAlister, S., Neill, G. Carr, N. and Dwyer, C. (2021) 'Gender, violence and cultures of silence: young women and paramilitary violence,' *Journal of Youth Studies*, 1-16.

43 IMC (2006), 'Eighth Report of the Independent Monitoring Commission,' (London: The Stationery Office), p. 20.

44 Clancy, M.A.C (2010), *Peace Without Consensus: Power Sharing Politics in Northern Ireland*, (Aldershot: Ashgate), pp. 141-170.

Additionally, a key, if less discussed, aspect of the peace process has been the UK and Irish governments' willingness to turn a blind eye to paramilitary and criminal activity.<sup>45</sup> While it could be tempting to justify the governments' decision to largely ignore paramilitary activity in the interest of 'peace', such a justification effectively turns working-class communities in particular, and women in general, into second-class citizens. As an expert describes:

*The MARAC and everything ... My ex-partner is a convicted terrorist with guns and drugs. I bought into the whole, 'He changed his life around, he turned to art', and really pulled the wool over my eyes [voice breaks] ... He moved in really quickly, but everything else was quite slow and I didn't see what he was doing and what was happening.*

*And with COVID and the isolation and everything else that was happening, it put me in a difficult position anyway [...] it was all going famously, everything was going great and then there was just a couple of things that just weren't making sense. He was having strange phone calls, disappearing to make these phone calls. And then he was having these phone calls in front of me where I was getting fairly uncomfortable [...] I was using any excuse to get him to go to his mum's and to move back home. Lots of coercive control, and then there came to a point where there was an altercation [...] Mentally drained, financially drained, you name it. I was supporting him, as was his mum. And then he assaulted me: it was flying head butts where I've ended up with a jaw injury [...] The whole court process ... every time I was getting solicitors contacting me, I was getting the UDA (Ulster Defence Association) passing messages to me [...] I fled my home [...] and I came back home eventually [...] I've been exhausted from being hypervigilant and having to look over my shoulder because of these 'men' [makes air quotes], just the jeers, shouting, whatever. But it's not just him. It's his paramilitary friends, and it's so misogynistic, like, the whole 'women should be in the home'. And I have an international career, but that's been on hold with my injury and everything that's gone on [...] And it's a small town. This group that he's a part of — or not a part of, I don't even know. This affiliation thing I don't know what it means — said they're going to make an example out of me for standing up to him. I don't know when that's going to happen. The non-molestation ends here on Friday, and [the police] they're telling me to extend it, and I'm going, 'Well, no because that's only going to rock the boat. And you know what? They'll just use it against me if anything else does happen.' So I'm exhausted. Can't eat right; still on a soft diet. 'Let down' would be an understatement; the legal system has royally thrown me under a bus.*

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

## Police

As we have seen above, many experts-by-experience have had negative experiences with the police, particularly when it comes to sexual assault. As shown in the criminal courts section, however, another woman 'could not speak more highly' of her experiences with the police. What, then, accounts for the difference? A Fermanagh expert who initially had a 'horrific' encounter with a PSNI Rape Team, described a change in the police force:

*I had a very bad experience with the PSNI, and then I had two or three really good experiences. It just takes that one person. At that time Michelle [from Fermanagh Women's Aid] was training all the PSNI from Fermanagh and Omagh district. This gentleman (from the Rape Team) was from Portadown and hadn't got the training. And it was like chalk and cheese; it really, really was. So it is about educating people.*

A Belfast expert echoed the importance of education:

*I was engaged with police; whenever I told them about honour-based abuse they had no clue – the first few police officers had no clue. In the end I had one police officer who had training from England on honour-based abuse; he knew then what I was talking about, and he knew how serious it would be.*

If education can end these arbitrary, 'chalk and cheese', experiences, then what training is required? As a North Down expert-by-experience argued, it is educating the police in both the dynamics of domestic abuse and trauma:

*And certainly ordinary response police need to understand the issues, because when they come and talk to you as a traumatised person, they don't seem to recognise that this is not just a run-of-the mill occurrence, and that they're dealing with someone who really is traumatised. I think that will make a difference. I don't think they're being cruel or unkind, I think they just don't understand because they've no experience of it.*

As the expert noted, however, such education will be in vain 'as long as our judiciary behave in that way with absolutely no regard for what's happened'. Beyond training, better lines of communication between the police and judiciary need to be developed. As a Belfast survivor argued:

*In the past two years, I've had to call the police at least a dozen times. All of the 12 times I've had to say what he's done to me over the past 20 years ... You do disengage. There needs to be a more streamlined service from the police to the court because we're constantly having to say the same thing to every professional, and somewhere down the line somebody is going to be misinterpreting what we said, or as I said earlier, my statement was shown to my abuser, and that should never have been the case because that led to even more abuse.*

A North Down expert-by-experience speculated that part of the breakdown in communication and the judiciary stemmed from budget cuts, as the arresting officer is no longer required to attend court proceedings. This often leaves police in the dark, and survivors having to chase up the PSNI for updates. As this same expert-by-experience, whose case was referred to MARAC, explains, updates on a survivor's case are a vital component of keeping a woman safe. Although her husband was arrested five times, only once did a PSNI officer contact her

*I got a phone call from an officer in [North Down], because it had been in Downpatrick Court, who phoned me to tell me what had happened. So, out of those five times, I was the one who had to do the chasing, had to try and find out what was happening. Was this man, who I was terrified of, was he back out on the street or not? I think that is a very, very big failing. When I did find out in January [that her husband's sentence had been overturned on appeal], it was left to me to phone the police ... I phoned that police officer in the domestic violence unit, and he couldn't believe it; he just could not believe that a judge had overturned that, after everything that had happened.*

An expert whose husband is on the violent offender list, underscores this point:

*He was supposed be in court at the end of January [...] I have to chase the police to find out was he at court, what happened. And his risk manager will say, 'Oh, it was postponed'. Now, that was January, and it's now May, and I don't know whether he's been to court, because the police haven't bothered to tell me. I want to know what happened because it involves me, and it involves my son as well. I hate that, where you have to chase the police.*

A Belfast survivor further explained the terror and trauma brought about via poor communication:

*One incident where he breached [the non-molestation order] and they arrested him in front of me. And I was told, 'He'll be taken to the cells where he'll stay overnight, and in the morning he'll go to court. So, you've nothing to worry about.' But in the middle of the night, I got a phone call from the police to say that they released him – his word against mine – in the middle of the night. I was so distressed, that an officer did call me the next day – a different officer – and apologised for it.*

While incidents such as unexpected release from custody can trigger trauma, it's clear that police need an understanding of how trauma manifests in smaller ways. Perhaps this is best illustrated in the second session of a focus group with experts from Causeway and Mid-Ulster. While the group chatted, one of the participants mentioned that her children sent her flowers to let her know how proud they were of her for taking part in 'Hear Her Voice'. This elicited an audible gasp from a young woman in the focus group.

When asked why she was taken aback, she explained that her perpetrator, whose sexual assault had resulted in pregnancy, had sent her unwanted flowers:

*The police were just like, 'But that's nice he's sending you this'. There were like wee letters saying 'I love you'. And I was like, 'But I don't love him. I want him to leave me alone'. I'm getting all this unwanted attention; I'm not asking for it'. I just think they don't understand [...] I don't think it has to be threatening; it's how it affects the victim.*

Following on from this, another participant in the group mentioned how police, probation, and solicitors were manipulated into continuing the perpetrator's harassment:

*The night he was arrested after he attacked me with a friggin' knife, he says to the police, 'Tell her I'm sorry'. And the policeman goes to me, 'He says to tell you that he's sorry.' And I'm thinking, 'You don't pass messages on like that to me'.*

The participant continued:

*He always told me if I left him, he would cut my throat. And he assaulted me in this house, and I left him, and I told the police what he threatened to do [...] No matter how much I told them what he threatened to do, it was only a threat, until such time as he carried out his threat, and he did, in a public place. Once that happened, he was arrested and then the Domestic Abuse police got involved. And I think you need a unit that is domestic abuse police, because they were a lot better than my local police [...] Local police, they're not trained the same, they don't take your concerns seriously until the threat is carried out.*

Here we can see just how important knowledge of domestic abuse is. A North Down expert-by-experience shared a similar situation:

*The police did their best. I think they should have been here, well the domestic officer should have been here, long before the fifth time. And I see in the consultation on the new (Domestic Abuse) legislation that they're saying [the domestic abuse officer should visit the survivor] after the second time, and I definitely think that should happen.*

Improvements in training and communication are clearly needed, but this still leaves the issue of when police officers themselves are the perpetrators. In three separate focus groups, women had been harmed by current or former members of the police. Where does a woman go when her perpetrator knows the system intimately, and when it will likely be his colleagues who will be answering her call for help? As a survivor explains:

*My ex was high up in the police, so I felt, 'What can I do here?' It was very difficult: I felt very alone, I didn't know who I could turn to. I don't know in that situation, how you could help. I'm sure there are many women who are married to policemen that are in the same situation.*

*And they know the law, they know how to classically manipulate truths. And I feel like I wasn't very good at speaking because of how he could control me [...] I was so worried that I was going to get into trouble.*

An expert-by-experience from North Down felt that, when combined with narcissistic traits, her husband's former career as a police officer influenced the pattern of abuse she experienced. Specifically, she felt he pleaded guilty to all charges because he 'knew what he had to do,' but that continued violation of non-molestation and restraining orders reflected his belief that he was 'above the law'. When it came to court proceedings, her husband's career was used to minimise her experience:

*To read in The [County Down] Spectator that the defence barrister said that my husband 'had an outstanding career in the RUC, and was highly respected'. That's all true; he did have an outstanding career, and he was very respected. But why does it matter?*

## Financial Abuse

While societal conflation of domestic violence/abuse with physical violence may lead us to assume that it is the latter which puts women most at risk, it is financial insecurity which places women in the greatest danger.<sup>46</sup> This form of harm is also subject to statistical silence: As a society, we are currently fixated with identity theft, a crime which largely occurs between strangers. But what of the more intimate forms of identity theft — identity obliteration, really — which occur between a woman and her perpetrator?

This section deals with post-separation financial abuse. It should be noted, however, that financial abuse often begins during a relationship, reducing a woman's space for action,<sup>47</sup> and making the idea of leaving all but impossible. Our survivors described the many ways in which they were entrapped by financial abuse:

*There was money withheld. I had no money at all. He controlled every aspect. I lifted ten pound out of a joint account, and that was the worst thing I could ever do [...] It got worse and worse, and I thought, 'How am I going to leave this man?'*

*He had my bank cards, and he done everything.*

<sup>46</sup> FreeFrom, (2020) 'Survivors Know Best: How To Disrupt Intimate Partner Violence During COVID-19 And Beyond', (Los Angeles: FreeFrom), p. 5

<sup>47</sup> Kelly, L. (2003) 'The Wrong Debate: Reflections on Why Force is Not the Key Issue with Respect to Trafficking in Women for Sexual Exploitation', *Feminist Review*, 73, 139-144.

*I'm still paying a loan. Whenever I left, it was £11,000, now it's down to £4,000. And even though it was in my name, I never had a penny; he had my bank cards, he had everything [...] I worked nights, and I was making good money, like brilliant money.*

*I paid rent, I paid insurance, I paid everything. But every inch, every penny was took off me. I had money for food, and for diesel in the car. But, saying that, if I was low on diesel he checked the miles on the car. He took the [bank] cards, and if I didn't give the cards like that, it wouldn't be physical, it would be sexual abuse that I would have to put up with.*

*My daughter's confirmation ... Mummies dress for a confirmation as if they're going to a wedding. I wore a £6 pair of trousers out of ASDA, and a £12 top out of ASDA [...] And you just felt so dowdy. He went in a suit out of [S.D.] Kells.*

*I didn't leave that relationship because I couldn't afford to.*

*People think financial abuse is keeping you at home and not letting you work. I was the opposite: he pushed me to work. He just didn't give me one penny towards anything [...] I was paying the mortgage ... I remember one Monday morning I had £8 in my purse, and I wasn't getting paid until Friday. And I have a family of five. I hate Lidl. I refuse to go to Lidl. And I've nothing against it, but do you know what it was? For years, it was the only shop I could afford to go to. And you were going for years at five to six in the evening to get the ten pence mince [...] I never had money for treats, so if we went for days out, what did the children see? It was daddy taking the wallet out, and, 'Daddy's great, Daddy's great.' Yet, you hadn't money for sanitary towels [...] For a woman not to have sanitary towels, how wrong is that? Yet, he's driving around in a Mercedes?*

The above stories in many ways definitively answer the question 'Why doesn't she just leave?' They show how a woman will either, literally, have nowhere to go or will, literally, leave with 'absolutely nothing'. And I mean nothing' as an Armagh Down expert stated. What is less obvious in the above stories, however, is often how financial abuse often renders a woman invisible: she may have to leave with no proof of address, no credit history, and possibly no recourse to public funds, effectively rendering her a non-person. So, it is not simply a case that a woman cannot leave; financial abuse means that she cannot start over, either.

Financial abuse does not end when a relationship ends. Rather, it often increases as it is the easiest way to continue to control a woman from afar. As an Armagh Down survivor explained:

*Initially, yes, when we separated and we had space from him, [not] living on eggshells was great; he was gone. But he just went into overdrive because the control wasn't there and he couldn't dictate everything anymore. And he controlled the finances, so the financial abuse just went through the roof.*

The courts, however, are often unable to see this form of 'remote control'. Within marriages that did not feature domestic abuse, it is true that much of the remaining emotion between a separating couple may be expressed through protracted financial and custody negotiations. In marriages marked by coercive control, however, lengthy negotiations are often about retaining control. As a Causeway and Mid-Ulster expert described:

*I pay the mortgage, and I pay all of the household bills. I also had to pay a loan he took out. It wasn't in my name, but it was being paid out of the joint account, so if I didn't pay it, it would be a mark against my name. So, in my late 30s, I had to go to my mum and dad and ask them to pay my ex-husband's loan [...] I also pay his life insurance. I won't get a penny of that back, because the courts will view that I have been 'enjoying' living in this house. Don't get me wrong: there is a level of understanding on my part that he's had to get a rental property. But, he was operating the business he owns out of that rental property, so he wasn't out of pocket. It came out of the overheads for the business. But the courts won't recognise that.*

She continued:

*I have been paying all of these bills for two years. He's not playing ball ... he won't come off the mortgage on this house, he won't produce discovery information, or agree a settlement, even though I've put offers to him, but he's never come back with a counteroffer. It's just like this dragging, dragging out, and as my mum calls his 'remote control of me' and trying to persecute me through finances because he sees that I'm actually managing.*

When asked what this control was like before it went 'remote', the expert described the following:

*I wasn't able to go to Tesco's on my own. And I couldn't get home delivery because he didn't want the delivery man in the house. He didn't even want the children to have opportunities. I enrolled my child in swimming lessons, and he accused me of trying to 'keep up with The Joneses.' I mean, [swimming lessons are] a life skill. I had to give him notice before we could go out on family days. He was controlling what I'd wear. If I was going to work, and maybe wearing a dress and a pair of thick black tights, he'd say, 'I think you can see up your skirt, bend over and let me see.'*

The above shows how the protracted financial negotiations between this expert and her husband are not the sort that feature in many divorces. In fact, they are not negotiations at all. Rather, it is a means of continuing to exert coercive control from afar.

If the courts cannot see this form of control, it is clear that post-separation financial abuse is invisible to other institutions, and to society in general. For instance, the natural instinct is to view the violation of a non-molestation order as a threat to a woman's safety. While it is a threat to safety, it is also a form of financial abuse. A woman has to pay for each order, so a perpetrator can continue to drain her financially while reminding her that the order is no guarantee of safety. As another Causeway and Mid-Ulster survivor stated, *'I had a non-molestation order twice, and both times he broke that, and both times it cost me £600 for a piece of paper.'*

As other sections have shown, divorce is often just a 'piece of paper,' and a very expensive one at that. It was telling that, despite criminal proceedings being finished, women often remained legally married to their perpetrators, because the financial and emotional cost of divorce was simply not worth it.

Continued legal proceedings, along with non-payment of support, are other ways of draining a woman financially and emotionally. Women who work are often put in a particular bind, as they do not qualify for legal aid. This can leave women with astronomical debt and on the verge of destitution. As a North Down survivor stated, knowing that a woman is struggling financially can also embolden a perpetrator to commit further abuse. As she explained, when her perpetrator began to violate the child contact order:

*I went to see my solicitor. The perpetrator thought I wasn't going to do this because I was struggling financially after [those] first legal fees I had after the first contact order but when you want to save your child, you just go for it [...] I had to show the court ... I started recording videos of him threatening me, and it was only then that I was taken seriously, because before that, nobody believed me. He's got no contact with the child, and I will fight to keep it that way.*

Fighting to 'keep it that way', however, comes at a significant cost. As this section has shown, pre- and post-separation financial abuse is a significant, and significantly effective, form of coercive control. Like much coercive control, however, it is largely invisible, particularly in the courts. As a Causeway and Mid-Ulster expert argued:

*I said to my barrister, 'Why can you not stand up and paint the picture of him in its true light? I just don't understand it.' And she said to me, 'Unfortunately, that is a bitter pill you've got to swallow.'*

## Cyber and Technological Abuse

Over the course of this project, it was telling how many women spoke of having their mobile phone smashed by their perpetrator. With so much of our lives now lived online, smashing a woman's phone is the twenty-first century equivalent of taking a woman's car keys; curtailing her freedom, and cutting off her means of escape.

With our lives being lived virtually as much as physically, it is unsurprising that perpetrators target women online. Given the prevalence of online abuse experienced by domestic abuse survivors — one UK study found that just under half of respondents had experienced online abuse.<sup>48</sup> In another study, this number rose to just over half once a woman had left the relationship<sup>49</sup> — it has been referred to as 'digital coercive control'.<sup>50</sup>

Before discussing 'digital coercive control', it should be noted that, as of this writing (October 2021), stalking – be it physical or virtual – is not a criminal offence in Northern Ireland.<sup>51</sup> While it is not fit for purpose, the current law on harassment does acknowledge the reality of virtual harassment, as the PSNI has recorded 'malicious communications' as a form of domestic abuse since 2017.<sup>52</sup> Technology, however, evolves more rapidly than the statistics which seek to capture its effects, and current law does not acknowledge the nuanced ways in which perpetrators deploy technology to stalk and harass women. As a Tyrone survivor describes:

*There was damage done to my car, and he had to pay to fix it. He had a fine, and he was messaging me to pay these fines, and because I wasn't replying it was screenshot, screenshot, screenshot, and there was all these notifications coming through — I mean, hundreds. Because I reported it to this detective, it didn't mean anything because it wasn't a physical message, he wasn't approaching me in the street, it didn't breach his bail conditions. But it's still intimidation ... He knew the ins and outs; he always laughed that the police couldn't touch him. He knew how far he could go without crossing that line, and I think that line needs to be a wee bit lower, because there's too many people being let off with things, and they need to take into consideration how these smaller things are affecting girls.*

48 Snook, Chayn, & SafeLives. (2017). 'Tech vs Abuse: Research Findings,' *Comic Relief*, <<https://www.techvsabuse.info/research-findings>> Last accessed 2 September 2021.

49 Laxton, C. (2014), 'Virtual World, Real Fear: Women's Aid Report into Online Abuse, Harassment and Stalking', *Women's Aid England*. Available at: <[https://www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Women\\_s\\_Aid\\_Virtual\\_World\\_Real\\_Fear\\_Feb\\_2014-3.pdf](https://www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Women_s_Aid_Virtual_World_Real_Fear_Feb_2014-3.pdf)> Last accessed 2 September 2021.

50 Bridget A Harris, B.A. and Woodlock, D. (2019) 'Digital Coercive Control: Insights From Two Landmark Domestic Violence Studies', *The British Journal of Criminology*, 59:3, pp. 530–550.

51 The Protection from Stalking Bill was formally introduced to the Northern Ireland Assembly on 18 January 2021. The Bill passed its Second Stage on 8 February 2021 and has been referred to the Justice Committee.

52 Police Service of Northern Ireland, 'Domestic Abuse Incidents and Crimes Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland', *PSNI*, 15 May 2020. Available at: <<domestic-abuse-bull-domestic-abuse-bulletin-mar-20.pdf> (psni.police.uk) etin-mar-20.pdf> Last Accessed 31 August 2021.

An expert further describes how perpetrators make sure their communication, however, unwanted, remains non-threatening in the eyes of the law:

*He was bailed in Liverpool, and he was told by the judge not to get in contact with me, or try to get in contact with me through anybody else. Now, the emails he sent me were telling me how much he loved me [...] The police [PSNI] went to Liverpool and arrested him ... because the emails weren't threatening, he was allowed to go back to Liverpool ... He knows what he's doing ... He's on the violent offenders list, and what does that list mean if he can still get in contact with me?*

Returning to the Tyrone survivor, she goes on to describe how her perpetrator then used social media to try to disrupt both her life and the work of Social Services:

*He was causing a lot of drama and trouble for me to even move back home, for [Social Services] to even trust that I wasn't in a relationship with him anymore. He would like put up my name or photos up on Facebook and try and make them believe that we were still seeing each other ... One of the reasons our social workers have changed so many times over the years is because he is good at getting personal information about them, to the extent where one of the social workers had to leave. Because he found out where she was from, that she was a single mother and had two kids [...] He started finding out more and more stuff about her to the point where she was no longer able to handle our case.*

The above shows the level of virtual intimidation of which the expert's perpetrator was capable. The level of physical intimidation to which the expert was subjected led the police to provide her with a personal alarm. The PSNI's attempt to keep up with technology, however, actually made her less safe as a domestic abuse survivor:

*I had a police personal alarm, but they returned all them, saying that they would be replaced with an app on your phone ... I have a history of getting my phone broken. Obviously, in a confrontation, the first thing [a perpetrator's] going to do is break your phone; they don't want you to call for help. The wee button would have been so much more discreet, but it's no longer in use. I was thinking that even I would have to get an Apple watch that has fall detection to protect me if I was out in the town. It's wild that you have to protect yourself [...] I was thinking that it's so bad that I have to physically take these matters into my own hands, and I'm still literally paying for the consequences of his behaviour.*

Even where perpetrators have been blocked on social media, they can still resort to more 'traditional' means to make a woman pay. As a North Down expert-by-experience describes:

*I blocked him on everything that I could, including social media. He could still phone the house phone, but I don't answer that. But he could still leave messages. And then one day in February, I had 17 phone calls from him, including to my work.*

*And that was really bad because the second day this was happening, I had to go to my line manager and say, 'Look, this is happening.' Because my colleagues were trying to cover up because, let's face it, it's embarrassing. But at that point, my line manager contacted our phone providers and got them to block his number.*

When, a reader might ask, does this stalking end? When does a woman have to stop 'paying' for her perpetrator's actions? Owing to the current law's inability to keep up with technology, and because stalking is not currently a specific criminal offence in Northern Ireland, stalking seemingly stops when a perpetrator decides it ends. And, as an Armagh Down expert who has been away from her perpetrator for over six years described, it is the unpredictability of this harassment and stalking which makes it so terrifying:

*He spoofed emails from my son to his newest partner, pretending that my son was harassing him. He has fabricated phone calls that I have been making apparently [...] but the police phoned me like two weeks ago to say that he's alleged that I've been harassing him at his new place of work. You know, just making it up. I know, sometimes people say, 'But you know it's not true'. But that's the worry: I wake up in the morning with that anxiety wondering what is going to be fabricated again. Is he trying to get it thrown out of the Family Court into the High Court so he could ... I don't know why ... I don't know what his game was, and think that's the anxiety that I live with, because at least when I was in the house, he was able to control me, but now it's just like [makes explosive gesture with her hands] ... it's crazy, mad, the things that he's come up with.*

## **'It's A Lot of Crazy Work That You Have to Do in Your Head: The Legacy of Domestic Abuse for Survivors and Their Children**

*I was speaking to my daughter last night, and I did laugh. I said to her, 'There's a question here on how domestic abuse affects your children' and she goes to me, 'I could write an essay on it' (laughs). She said to me, 'Tell them' – my daughter's [in her late 30s] – 'Tell them your daughter's been in the NHS – been in counselling for this last 20 years, and your son's a hypochondriac!' I did laugh whenever she said it. It's interesting, I said to me daughter the other day, 'When can you remember what your upbringing was like?' She said my son was two and she was four, and she was sitting in my son's bedroom with her arm around him telling him that it would be okay, because she could hear her dad arguing with me. And that is so sad. And my daughter is badly, badly damaged. My husband never abused the children, but he thought because he sent the children their rooms that they didn't hear or know. My daughter, I don't know if my daughter will ever be ... she's full of anxiety, over thinks everything. And that makes me so sad. She always says to me, 'I know it's not your fault, that you managed him'. As I say, I'm so proud of my kids, but you don't realise how bad it is. Like, when she told me that she was four and he was two ... I never thought she'd have memories as far back as that. But, it's just whenever I look back on it, I wish their upbringing had been so, so different. It just affects everybody.*

Since its beginnings in the 1970s, Women's Aid has worked with children and young people who have been affected by domestic violence, and staff have witnessed the effects that domestic violence has on children of all ages. In 2019/20 alone, 11 babies were born in Women's Aid refuges in Northern Ireland, and 316 children stayed in refuge. Outside of refuge 5,143 children benefitted from outreach support from Women's Aid in 2019/20.<sup>53</sup> Additionally, Women's Aid staff have undertaken an in-depth exploration of domestic abuse's effects on children through the 'See, Hear, Act' project, which is an excellent exploration of what children experience, and what support they need.<sup>54</sup> As so many of the women who participated in the 'Hear Her Voice' project are also mothers, domestic abuse's effects on their children naturally emerged as a topic of discussion. Throughout almost every focus group, women described how their children were often the catalyst for leaving an abusive relationship:

*My girls had said to me, 'Mum, you need to do something'. They were older; my boys were oblivious. They were well aware that this wasn't right, but I just ... I couldn't put a word to it why I couldn't leave.*

*My son was kind of the whistle-blower back when he was eight, so the girls were only babies. [He wrote], 'My mum's husband beats me, and he beats my mum'. And that was put in the worry box at school, so that's kind of how it all erupted.*

*[O]ne night after a sexual incident, and he came in, and he toddled in, in his wee nappy, and he just hugged me, and he went back to bed, and he didn't scream, he didn't cry. And that was the moment I knew that this was affecting him.*

*The eldest boy ... he was turning into his daddy. He was pleading with me, 'Mummy, someone's gonna end up dead and it'll not be Daddy, it'll be you.'*

*Eventually, in the end, my children were starting to speak to me the way he was speaking to me, and that was a real trigger for me too. And a really, really good friend of mine said, 'Them children are speaking to you the way he's speaking to you' [...] 'It's like a lioness that just fights for her cubs. And I really think you do; you've got the strength ... And I dread to think actually if I didn't have my children: I don't know what would have been my motivating factor to get out of that relationship, because my whole sense of worth [was] depleted.*

*As my son got to teenager years he started to belittle him, put downs, everything was a joke. I think it was until he actually assaulted my son for something really simple, and that was the point where I said, 'No. I can't put my child through that; I have to go'.*

<sup>53</sup> Women's Aid Federation of Northern Ireland (2020), 'Annual Report 2019/20'. Available at: <<https://www.womensaidni.org/assets/uploads/2020/12/Final-Womens-Aid-Annual-Report-2019-20.pdf>> Last accessed 30 October 2021.

<sup>54</sup> Women's Aid Federation of Northern Ireland, 'See, Hear, Act'. Available at: <[See, Hear, Act: A strategy for children and young people 2019 - 2029 - Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland \(womensaidni.org\)](#)> Last accessed 29 September 2021.

*You see, originally, the thing that got me to get his dad to move out was the way he was treating my son. That was the thing. And my son had said to me, 'It's either him or me; he has to go'.*

*It took my son who was then 11 saying 'I don't want to live like this anymore'. And that was the lightbulb moment for me, that my own child had to say to me, and he was the one who took the brunt of the abuse as well, and that's something that I still carry guilt with to this day.*

*Even when children themselves were the catalysts for leaving, women still retained significant guilt about uprooting them from everything they knew:*

*My children were very young when they went into refuge. To this day, they don't know why mummy suddenly moved. To be honest, they're in kind of a fairy tale with regards to the issue that made me do such a drastic thing. They think they lived in a hotel. To this day they think the Women's Aid workers are my friends. I have to create a bubble for my children. I'm not so confident to share my issue with them [starts to cry]. I think I feel ashamed more than anything for taking them away from everything they knew. Sometimes I have to put extra effort into making their life extra happier.*

As a Belfast expert described:

*You're dealing with all the emotions of domestic violence and the whole uprooting yourself, and trying to deal with your own ... and then it's killing you inside, what you're doing to your children because you think, 'Oh my God, this is so damaging to them' ... because I felt like I was damaging them by leaving, I was damaging their mental health. They had to go to school, in the middle of this, while we were living in refuge. They couldn't tell their friends ... my kids were all different ages, and I had to leave my one daughter behind, she was older, she went to go live with her friend. We didn't get to see her; it broke up the whole family dynamic. But, I have to say, my kids are far stronger. The kids that they met in the refuge are their friends, they have kept a connection with them ... So, at the time, I thought this was destroying my children, but I do believe, personally and in my children's experience, it made us stronger. Stronger as a family, and made my children stronger, and more aware of other people, other children in their class, their friendships, what they might be going through.*

As the above demonstrates, guilt is mixed in with mothers' recognition that their children are resilient. Returning to the Belfast survivor who felt she had to make her children's lives 'extra happier':

*I do try to subtly educate, especially my girls, who I feel need more empowerment about domestic abuse in all its forms. I have experienced it from their dad, and I am more vocal. I have a sister in Bangladesh who has cut off her relationship with my mum, my very elderly mum, because her husband said, 'You can't go to your mum's anymore'. And I don't even know; that's not even religious, I don't know what kind of culture that is. And when I relayed that story to my eleven-year-old daughter, she said, 'Why would you do that? She should just leave the man; she's not going to get her mum back again'. And I was just so proud of her when she said that. And I just said to her, 'Look, I don't want you to feel like you need to do anything for a man. If a man in your life, whether it's your dad, your brother, your uncle, your husband – someone that you love – if they don't empower you and make you feel happy or healthy in your process of success, don't be there. And mummy's always here for you: as much as I can be, and as much as I'm alive, I'm here for you. I'm really proud of my girls for that, especially this daughter, she's quite the woman.*

If, however, trauma is a process with no fixed end point of 'recovery', then it is unsurprising that children's resilience and strength can falter as they develop, particularly during adolescence. As a Belfast expert observed, *'With teenagers, that's where I saw it manifesting a bit more. Because they're dealing with puberty, they're dealing with growing up, they're dealing with other issues in school. And somehow, it all gets muddled up.'*

The 'muddling up' of trauma and adolescent development was of particular concern for many women. For some survivors, it was the combination of their sons now being roughly the same size as their perpetrator, combined with the inarticulate anger of adolescence that triggered flashbacks to the domestic abuse they experienced. For others, it was abuse from their sons. As a Fermanagh expert, whose decision to leave her perpetrator was prompted by her son described:

**Participant 1:** *A few times I've said to him when he's kicked off in the house, because he has done it a few times, and I always said, 'Oh, God love him, he has been through a lot with his Dad' ... I've got him every counselling that's going. I've got support from Women's Aid, I've got him CBT [Cognitive Behavioural Therapy], got him to the Family Trauma Unit, everything [...] And a lot of it is probably a consequence of what he's seen [...] And I can't have him in the house smashing things up. And he squared up to me, he picked up his fists as if he was going to punch me, and I just said, 'If you don't leave now, I'm calling the police'. And, he left.*

**Participant 2:** *Has he ever acknowledged it and spoke to you about that incident, or apologised, or...*

**Participant 1:** *He would say to me, 'I'm sorry for losing my temper, but, it's what I did that raised it.*

For other experts, their children were confused and/or angry about why their mothers had left their fathers. In many cases, mothers withheld information because they did not want to be seen as 'belittling' a child's father, or because the nature of the abuse (e.g., sexual abuse) was not appropriate to discuss with a child.

Trauma is non-linear in its effects, and there is no clear way of predicting how it will affect any child who witnesses or experiences domestic abuse, but interviews for this project have shown the long lasting and painful effects it has had for so many children. During an ABCLN focus group, an expert shared a story her son had written about domestic abuse she discovered after he left for university. While the contents of that letter will not be shared here, it was clear how much guilt the survivor's son continued to carry. This guilt carries on into adulthood, as an expert demonstrated. This expert was attacked in public by her perpetrator. The attack was in public, and an off-duty police officer, an off-duty nurse, and a bystander intervened to thwart the attack and assist her. As the expert recounted:

*The nurse, she hugged me and she said, 'Never go back to him. My mother, her husband threw her down the stairs and broke her back.' The man who helped me first, he got a bronze award. And I went to this award [ceremony], and he told me that his mother was abused by her partner. He said he was a young kid, and he watched it, and he was never able to help her, but he was able to help me'.*

Apart from what children experience, there are also the short- and longer-term effects on women themselves. There are large and small ways that domestic abuse reverberates throughout survivors' lives. While domestic abuse's larger effects are sometimes captured in our statistics (e.g., increased risk of mental and physical ill-health, etc.), this doesn't mean that we should discount the smaller effects which elude them. What statistics cannot capture are the simple, quotidian pleasures that make up much of the joy of our lives. Joys that are no longer so simple, as a Tyrone survivor described:

*Yesterday when I had to come into the town, I stopped at the Zumba. I used to love Zumba, you know, in the leisure centre? One of the girls down there, she said, 'Oh just call down and see us for the craic', you know because I'm still on crutches [from the assault]. It was lovely, but I was constantly looking 'round to see if there was anyone I knew, watching for me. So, I still find it very tough [...] It feels like he's still in control.*

Many survivors argued that effects of non-physical abuse were worse and longer lasting. As a Fermanagh expert demonstrated, coercive control has corrosive effects which last long after a relationship has ended:

*People don't realise you're out. I've changed. Like I didn't change me appearance. People don't realise, even coming here today, people don't realise the impact this has on you, three years down the line. I was never called 'darling' or 'love'. It was 'you're a fat, ugly bitch. Look at the set of ye'. Even today, I've never wore this shirt before, and I was pulling it, and I thought, 'Is this alright?' Three years later, coming to [speak to] a group of women, who haven't even noticed what I'm wearing? But that's still in your head.*

As another Fermanagh expert added, there is also the difficulty of navigating a new, and healthy, relationship after so many years of walking on eggshells:

*I'm in a new relationship, and it's an amazing relationship. But I still sometimes think, 'Isn't this awful boring?' Because I've walked on eggshells for so long, when you go into a new relationship and you're like 'Why is he not intense?', and you don't know what to with yourself. And it's a lot of crazy work in your head. But I'm happy, and I'm not saying that the relationship isn't good, but it's just learning to not be terrified every day of your life. That's what it is. Or 'What way is he going to be if I say this?' Or 'What if I go somewhere?' Whereas now, I'm like, 'I'm away, and I don't care what you think'. And [my new partner] is supporting it.*

A Foyle survivor described how coercive control impacted her cognitively:

*I'm five years down the line [...] Like, I went for a job interview four weeks ago, and that is the first time since 2005 that I filled out a job application. I could not have concentrated to fill out a job application, I couldn't have remembered what my qualifications were, I couldn't have filled out forms, I couldn't have went for an interview. And that's almost five years now, and I feel like I am only really healing now [...] it is just so important – the long-term impact it has on you, and just how long it takes you to come back to yourself, you know? I was just in such a space and such an emotion that even filling out a form would have been a challenge for me. And I don't mean that as patronising, but that's me: I'm educated to a degree level and I couldn't fill out an application form, and that's the impact that it had on me, and my mind.*

In Armagh Down, women at different points in their journey discussed the differing ways domestic abuse continued to affect them:

**Participant 1:** *Yeah. It's like me coming here [refuge] to my ex is like firing a bullet, and I'm waiting on a bullet being fired back.*

**Participant 2:** *I'd love to wake up without that feeling in my stomach, that feeling of like, 'Ergh'. You know, you can wake up with like, peace, knowing that your kids are safe, just not having that as soon as you open your eyes in the morning ...*

**Participant 3:** *Sometimes I feel guilty, being a mum, for having that, though. Because sometimes you'll be constantly on edge, or you're having a really bad day.*

**Participant 2:** *But they'll be things that will trigger. I'll go out for a walk, and I'll have a look at something and I'll remember that we did that, and it will trigger the bad thing. Or I'll see something in a shop, or something will come on, a travel programme, and I'll go 'Oh we went there on holiday', and all those memories will flood right back as if it happened yesterday.*

**Participant 3:** *Does it ever get easier? 'Cause I'm like three years away from my ex.*

**Participant 2:** *I don't know.*

**Participant 4:** *It does get easier. Your triggers will still be there, but it does get easier to manage and easier to control. It does take a while. I'm out of the relationship with my kids' father for 18 years, and I broke up with the girl [because of] the domestic abuse where I was with her, erm, 12 years. It does get easier, but there's no time frame on when.*

**Participant 3:** *It's hard though. Sometimes I just wish there was a switch where I could just be like, not normal and I don't mean it like that, I just mean like I want to be present for my kids because sometimes I just feel so far away. How do you ground yourself? My thing is trying to ground myself, like going out in the rain and let you feel it and to ground yourself to remember that you're here and you're not so far away.*

**Participant 5:** *That you're not looking in on something and that you're part of it?*

**Participant 6:** *That you're not like kind of hovering above?*

**Participant 3:** *Yeah, yeah.*

The above has shown the small, and idiosyncratic, ways in which domestic abuse reverberates throughout the lives of survivors and their children. It should be noted here, however, that survivors' stories are not only of trauma and pain.

A Foyle expert-by-experience viewed her journey as one of 'post-traumatic growth' where she is becoming a fundamentally different person. To demonstrate this growth, and the happiness which is interwoven with the pain women experience, this section will end with the words of two experts quoted earlier. To begin with, there is the survivor who was attacked in public by her perpetrator:

*It took me 40 years to leave him, but I did. And the saddest thing is, my mum died three years ago. And I go to her grave and I think, 'You would be so proud of me.' And she would.*

From the Fermanagh expert who had to ask her son to leave the house after he threatened her:

*I'm just hoping that he'll come back 'round and learn that that's not how you treat people. But right now myself and my daughter are really, really happy. We've such a happy house: there's laughing and singing, and music every day. Dancing in the kitchen; we have great fun. My son comes in, he doesn't come in for long. He does treat me with respect now, because he knows I won't take it.*

## PROLOGUE TWO:



### J'S JOURNEY TO FREEDOM

Journey To Freedom is a support group I attended, run by my local Women's Aid.

*Two facilitators run the course with a group of around 12 women who have experienced abuse. The group learns about abuse and how abuse is underpinned by societal views on men and women, their perceived roles and how these are reinforced through our everyday experiences in the world in general, music, churches, schools, media, workplaces and patriarchy. Each week tackles a different type of abuse, physical, financial, sexual, emotional, abuse as a mother and also the effects on children, what healthy relationships look like and how to move forward.*

*It took me months of seeing my one-to-one support worker at Women's Aid before she felt I was ready to try Journey to Freedom.*

*I was due to start mine days after my fortieth birthday and almost eight months from my sudden separation from my husband, when he had physically attacked me for the first time by strangling me in my bed while my children were in the next room, pushed me down the stairs, smashed most of the downstairs to bits and set fire to our home.*

*Our neighbours called the police. Police notified Social Services and I signed an agreement that I wouldn't have contact with my husband or allow contact with my children.*

*Police pressed charges, I gave statements to police and solicitors and social workers. I had a non-molestation order. My marriage was over. And I was desperately sad and sorry. I was still terrified he was going to attack me again and kill me this time or worse kill my children. But I missed him and couldn't imagine my life without him. My world had fallen apart and I didn't really know why or how. I felt ashamed, guilty, afraid, responsible. I wanted him to be sorry. I wanted him to have shocked himself into changing. I wanted my life back. I wanted the man I'd fallen in love with to reappear and for me to get the happily ever after I'd thought I was getting. I wanted him to miss me and realise he was sorry and I wanted my children to have a father and a happy family. I wanted the pain and fear to stop. I wanted to not feel afraid. I wanted him to be sorry. I wanted him to stop. I couldn't get my head round everything that he'd done and he was still doing. I couldn't understand why he didn't love me enough. How he couldn't follow the court orders and the instructions from social workers. How he could still try and blame and humiliate me in between telling me through friends and family and social media how he'd changed and wanted to fix things and have his family back and at the same time break my heart with telling me of an affair the night after our first child was born, while I was still in the high dependency unit, not only stealing my future but now my past as well.*

*Some people wanted me to fix this, to forgive him to give him another chance. To not ruin his life, to not make him ill. I was so confused. Was he really ill?*

*How could I give evidence against the man I loved? Could I really go through with this? Was I just being cruel and getting revenge like they said?*

*I felt embarrassed about the thought of being in a room full of women who had been abused. What was it like AA for battered women? 'Hello my name is ... and I was in an abusive relationship.' Maybe it wasn't that bad. I know other people have been through much, much worse. He only physically hurt me that one time and he didn't really attack me. He didn't punch or kick me. I had no cuts or bruises on the outside I looked okay. No one could have told. He only strangled me; there were no marks in a day or two after the redness went away. No one could see the lump in my throat when I would swallow. You couldn't see the whiplash injuries and the pain when I moved my arm or neck and a week later it was gone so I'm not even sure if I should be here taking up space. I'm sorry for thinking I'm the same as you. I think I actually caused this and have made this worse and I've maybe blown it out of proportion with the court and police stuff and if I hadn't kept going with that it wouldn't still be going on and he wouldn't keep being re-arrested and doing the things he's doing. If I just stopped staying away and let him talk to me it might get better. Sure, we argue sometimes but that's it and everyone does.*

*Then I sat there week by week. Hearing these women, who looked just like normal people, who had jobs and children and friends and families who'd married kind men, who thought they'd found their soul mates, who hadn't knowingly married thugs, some who'd never been hit. Those who'd been hit every day, those who'd left their partners or still clung to hope that things would change. Who blamed themselves, who felt ashamed for what happened to them for staying and for leaving, for arrests and convictions and sad for what they had done to their children for staying and for leaving and I cried and I listened and I talked and I learned and I questioned, but where is the freedom? I've left and he's getting worse and I've lost everything and I can't make him stop and the police can't make himself stop and I'm still afraid and there is no freedom in this because I have no control over what he does.*

*I heard this group of strong women describe my life for the last eight years and describe my husband like they knew him only it was theirs, their husband, their life, their experiences, their partners and they were saying all of this was abuse. The love bombing, the whirlwind, the perfection, the commitment I felt was everything I'd ever wanted, punched walls, the broken ornaments, the locked doors and smashed plates, the name calling, the silent treatment, the purple face, the spitting, the crazy driving, the shouting, the confusion, the humiliation, you've changed, you used to be funny, exciting, sexy. The sleep deprivation, the changing goals, the make ups, the honeymoon phase, the rows, the secrets, the questions you weren't allowed to ask, the handing over of money, bank cards, passwords, the losing friends, confidence, questioning your sanity and judgment, questioning yourself for seeing flirting and inappropriate messages and touching and you're just a psycho and paranoid. Stop nagging. Let down last minute having to turn up at birthdays and family dinners, nights out on your own and the excuses and cover stories and shame.*

*Self-doubt, no self-worth. What did I do wrong, why can't I fix this? No sex, sex when you're sore, Sex when you've been called fat and ugly just ten minutes before. Sex when you've just had a baby, when you're sleeping and have had to be wakened or your parents are next door. Intimate details being shared in casual conversations, with parents and siblings and friends. Why am I uncomfortable. I love him and he's so kind and this time it will be better and we will change and I'll change and I'll lose weight or I'll put weight on and I'll go out more or I'll stay in more and I'll spend less and I'll not nag and I'll learn about football. I'll get babysitters, be more and be more fun. I'll not ask for help around the house. And things are so, so good but wait how are we back here again. Why, what have I done? What have I missed, I thought I was doing all the right things and you were sorry and you loved me? I'd cut those carrots the right way and deleted all those male friends and colleagues. I'd stopped dieting and thinking I was better than you. I'd stopped prioritising the children and putting their needs first and I was holding dinner so we could all eat together even if they were hungry and it was almost bedtime and I'd got that new credit card and we bought the new car and booked the holiday and I was doing less hours at work.*

*And when I started the 'Journey To Freedom' I saw the cycle of abuse and how it's not bad all the time and the good times are why I stayed and why I hoped.*

*And I could see how it was drip, drip, drip, drip and how I could never fix it because it wasn't me. No matter what I'd fix, the goal posts would change. I learned I wasn't to blame for staying or leaving and I didn't have to feel the shame. It wasn't mine. I learned it was okay to put me and my children first. In fact, I had to. Every week I cried and as I cried another layer peeled away and I understood all the ways I'd endured abuse without having to be hit because actually the hitting for me came when all the other forms of control had been exhausted.*

*I learned the freedom came from inside me. He would always be him and do the things he was going to do but my freedom came from letting go of the relationship and responsibility, the blame, the shame. Other people's expectations, from letting go of all the things I'd been told were down to me.*

*My reaction to his actions were my freedom. I could ask people not to tell me anything he was doing or saying or posting. I could take my power back by not reading the evil he wrote. I could stop him ruining my day by not engaging in his games. No contact. Grey rock. I didn't need to feel guilty for not allowing myself to be abused. For reporting a crime and expecting justice, for keeping my children safe. For speaking the truth. For having needs and hopes and dreams. My freedom came from the friendships I made in that group and from realising I wasn't alone. By finding my voice. By sharing my story by speaking out. By demanding justice. By being seen. By being proud.*

## Part Two: Listening to Women's Voices

### 'We Don't Treat Patients in Isolation': The Need for Holistic and Tailored Approaches

In listening to the women who participated in this project, it is important to remember that they are not just 'experts-by-experience'. They occupy other roles which give them additional expertise and insight. As a North Down participant who is also a nurse, reminds us, medical professionals would never adopt the piecemeal approach that is currently applied to survivors of domestic abuse:

*In my job as a nurse, if we're putting the patient first, we have regular multidisciplinary meetings where we all contribute to the care, and make sure that the patient's the focus. The whole group is sitting together, and there's a system where we all can access the information. If there's a system in place where everyone can read up and everything's reported, then everyone's getting the bigger picture, and I think that's going to provide the best care in the long-run.*

Even where teams do come together for domestic abuse survivors, services aren't always joined-up, nor is information necessarily shared. As our experts explain:

*Community Mental Health is supposed to be all around support, but they're referring me out to various charitable agencies.*

*Even with MARAC, it takes so much effort to link two and two together. If there would be a way where literally everything could be brought up and linked, just so I don't have to go to people and prove that I'm in danger or that my son is in danger.*

Within the ABCLN focus groups, participants explored the dangers of only paying lip service to a 'joined-up' approach. To be effective, services must be genuinely holistic:

**Participant 1:** *That new health centre in Ballymena. There's umpteen services in that health centre. Why couldn't there be a domestic violence team?*

**Participant 2:** *Even within that, I immediately think, 'That's going to be someone who's going to go 'Right, how do we get this person out of the situation?'. Even now, it's like that; 'we have to get the person out of the situation.' But then, who do you go to for help with a divorce? Who do you go to for help with finances, do you know what I mean?*

**Participant 1:** *To me, that should be all under the one [domestic violence team].*

This exchange gets to the heart of superficially 'joined-up' approaches. While locating services under one roof would be an improvement, it doesn't necessarily guarantee better communication, and better outcomes.

In listening to what women were trying to convey, it emerged that a 'joined-up' or, holistic, approach would acknowledge how domestic abuse and its trauma affects every aspect of a woman's life: her interactions with authorities; her parenting; her mental and physical well-being; her finances; her work-life — in short, everything. Such an approach would recognise that while domestic abuse — or the 'systematic dismantling of a woman' — creates similar fault lines, each woman will need support which is tailored to her own, specific experience. This approach goes beyond mere information sharing; it forces authorities to work together to address the whole woman, and not just 'bits' of her.

Our experts-by-experience have several recommendations as to what a holistic approach would look like. In terms of Social Services and child contact, it would start with a recognition of the impact of domestic abuse, and how it affects women's approaches to parenting. As a Belfast survivor explained:

*Everything is geared towards the welfare of the child, and rightly so, but they don't look at it holistically; how we are also part of that, how our welfare also counts towards that. I always felt that was almost an afterthought. I had social workers in my house telling me that, 'If you don't sign this right now, we're going to take your kids'. And once I trained [as a social worker I found out] that's not the case; you cannot take my kids. I can refuse to sign whatever you give me; I don't have to.*

*Within the ABCLN focus groups, participants proposed the idea of a dedicated social worker for women when Social Services are involved. To avoid having to retell her story, a woman's social worker would be authorised to do so. In order to avoid inconsistency, this social worker would also have legal standing. As an Antrim survivor argued:*

*A woman should have her own social worker in these cases. Who is, properly qualified, properly trained, and experienced in domestic abuse to be an advocate for the woman. Because, in my experience, Women's Aid coming to meetings, quite often they get silenced, and it depends on the Chair that's on. Some chairs will really take on board what a Women's Aid representative is saying, and other Chairs refuse to let them speak, or just silence them, or don't even invite them along. Sometimes, a Women's Aid representative has a vote on whether a child comes off the at-risk register, but that's dependent on the Chair.*

*To have somebody there, even from Social Services as well to be that advocate they would be, for want of a better word, forced to have to be there, and to have that voice heard. I think that's where a lot of the conflict comes from. When you have a social worker there that is effectively your children's social worker, but you have as a woman and as a victim you have a lot of unmet needs, and you're trying to get your voice across, there doesn't seem to be the ability to recognise that that is your voice to the professional, and not your voice to your children.*

*So maybe to have that one person separate to your children, and to have that one defined role, separate to your children.*

The participants then went on to flesh out this role, arguing that it is a role which could potentially be fulfilled by survivors. While this social worker/advocate would require specific training, a North Antrim expert felt that the most important qualification would for advocates to spend a year 'living in Women's Aid', shadowing workers and meeting women. As this expert contended, 'It's okay to do training, *but you need to do that other step of knowing*'.

Belfast and Fermanagh experts applied the concept of 'training v. knowing' to healthcare. As a Belfast survivor stated, most GPs' approaches are '[t]ablets, tablets, all the time. They either say tablets or join a gym. A depressed person can't get out of bed in the morning. I know gym does help with a lot of people's depression, but not for me'. While antidepressants and/or physical activity could be helpful, both approaches are reflective of the pressure the NHS faces in an age of austerity. Leaving aside the question of how a woman in refuge — declared homeless, and without proof of address — would join a gym, what survivors most need is a 'knowing' that comes from healthcare providers' capacity and willingness to listen. As a Fermanagh survivor who also works in healthcare explained:

*Even in hospitals, because I work in a hospital and I'd see people coming into A&E with overdoses or injuries ... And me, myself being in a bad situation with someone who was being bad to me, there's girls there [in the hospital] who'd be like, 'there's obviously something wrong with her'. They'd never actually think like what could be going on at home. And I could see myself in people when they'd come in, and there'd be nurses there that wouldn't give a hoot. But then, I don't what it is, but I'd feel like I'd had this connection with them.*

*And I feel like no one even knows about that in healthcare. It's so badly ... women come in and they're terrified, and they're like, 'Sure, give her something there for her nerves', basically. No one is actually like 'How are you?' And I know at the minute like there are masks and all that craic, but none of them's educated, the nurses. If you went and did nursing, I cannot imagine that domestic abuse would come into it even once. The doctors as well.*

What would 'training v. knowing' look like for the criminal justice system and the family courts? Starting with the police, 'knowing' does start with training. This training would begin with recognising that a domestic abuse isn't 'just a run-of-the mill occurrence, and that they're dealing with someone who really is traumatised'. This would also include an understanding of domestic abuse's 'invisible bruises', and how to evidence these 'bruises' (i.e., coercive control).

As we have seen, all police need a sensitivity to the trauma engendered by domestic abuse, particularly sexual abuse. While this sensitivity is required across the PSNI, institutionally, this sensitivity could be expressed by having at least one domestic abuse officer on every shift. While the creation of the ASSIST NI<sup>55</sup> project acknowledges this need in some way, it doesn't obviate the need to have officers educated in the nuance of domestic abuse, as all officers will encounter many domestic abuse incidents over the course of their careers.

Moving on to the courts, if we return to the notion that the criminal courts' ignorance of survivors' lived experience is reflected in both its language (e.g., 'disposal of cases) and its very architecture (e.g., provision of only a victim's room), then a change of the courts' very foundations is needed. Rather than pursuing the most likely conviction, therefore 'disposing' of a case quickly, prosecutors need to, as a North Down expert argued, 'engage with victims in an empowered way', where women have a voice in what conviction is pursued. While it is important to acknowledge that public prosecutors have a fundamentally different duty than defence barristers who are paid by the perpetrator, this does not avoid the need for change. As our experts-by-experience remind us, however, all of this will be for naught if the judiciary does not recognise that it too requires a greater understanding of the dynamics of domestic abuse.

For women whose perpetrators were facing, or received, a custodial sentence, not all felt that jail was actually the appropriate means of redress. As a North Down expert-by-experience explained:

*I never thought that being in jail was the right thing for my husband. And that's why I am so glad to see in that new [Domestic Abuse legislation] consultation that's out there, they're talking about other powers to direct other treatments. With the caveat that, sending someone for a three-month thing is not going to cut it. It needs to be based on proper research and looking at other countries, and what works and what doesn't.*

In response, another North Down expert stated:

*I completely agree. Some type of intervention to stop it happening, to stop the cycle. The cycle of abuse, and that coercive control. I've done a lot of studying myself there on it, and it's just beyond me, like, that there's not something there to help these men out. But then, they're too narcissistic to reach out to help themselves.*

<sup>55</sup> ASSIST NI Advocacy Service was created in the aftermath of the Gillen Report (2019), which examined the handling of serious sexual offences in Northern Ireland. Funded by the Department of Justice and the PSNI, ASSIST NI aims to reduce victim attrition in the criminal justice system by providing joined-up, victim-led early intervention, so that victims: remain engaged in the criminal justice process; are not retraumatised; and are aware of the many services available to them.

Both experts raise important points. Properly researched and designed interventions have the potential to be more effective than carceral approaches, but there remains the problem of finding robust evidence of the efficacy of such interventions.<sup>56</sup> In the absence of such evidence, there is a danger that such interventions could increase a survivor's risk of further abuse and/or femicide, as a perpetrator's intervention could be interpreted as a willingness to change, leading a woman to feel that she is safer than she actually is. As our experts note, perpetrators also have to truly want to engage in such interventions. Although not all perpetrators would receive a clinical diagnosis of narcissism, the expert above raises a key problem: how do you design an effective intervention for a narcissist? A survivor whose husband is on the violent offenders list elaborated on this point:

*As part of his probation, [my husband] was made to go to domestic abuse courses. There was one that lasted for nearly a year [...] I'm sure that was probably his nightmare, sitting with a group of people, thinking, 'I'm not like them'. But he is like them. Do they help? They don't help, because I believe he's somewhere on the spectrum of being a sociopath, because he has no empathy for anybody.*

What both carceral and non-carceral approaches appear to lack is proper focus on the survivor, rather than just the perpetrator. While perpetrators have needs, what women have communicated throughout this project is that they need to feel safe. It is telling that, for many women in this project who were subject to brutal assaults, they viewed their perpetrators' custodial sentences and/or restraining orders as nothing more than temporary reprieves, with the full expectation that abuse and in-person harassment would resume once jail terms and orders ended. So, the question for the criminal justice system is: how do we make, and keep, survivors safe? As a survivor explained:

*I tried to say to them [the barristers], 'It doesn't matter if you put him in jail for ten months or ten years; it's not going to make him a better person'. My worry was when he got out of jail what was he going to do to me. So they worked on [getting a Violent Offender Protection Order], which is very, very hard to get in Northern Ireland, they got that. And he's not allowed in my town for five years [...] so, even though he didn't get as long in jail, the things they were able to put in place when he got out of jail, which were the things I wanted more [...] The most peace me and my kids had was that ten months he was in Maghaberry [Prison], and that's as true as God, because we knew where he was, we knew we could move about freely.*

In terms of the family courts, our experts have shown the ways in which institutions can be manipulated by perpetrators to continue and expand their abuse. Therefore, a full review of the family courts that acknowledges the ways in which its current practices make it complicit in post-separation abuse, is required.

<sup>56</sup> Gondolf, E.W. (2002), *The Future of Batterer Programs*, (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press).

As some of Women's Aid's minoritised experts have argued, it is not just training, but 'knowing' which is required to better meet their needs. As one survivor contended, both training and knowing could be brought about through representation — in both statutory and voluntary agencies — and by leading with their own voices in training:

*I think that training could come from women themselves. If you are the trainee, and you saw any of us women there, telling you about our experiences, telling you about the impact that this has on us before, during and after, that would leave you with a major impact as well. But it's also about valuing these women's experiences ... it needs to be valued that we are also experts within our own experiences, valuing our own time and effort and the emotional energy that we bring to the table every time we re-tell our stories.*

This survivor went on to argue that this training could focus on spiritual abuse, and the very blurred lines between honour-based violence in domestic abuse. As argued earlier, however, this training shouldn't devolve into a tick-box exercise where women are forced into being representatives for their communities, let alone all minoritised populations in Northern Ireland. Rather, training needs to lead to an attentiveness to difference which leads agency staff to ask what a particular survivor, be she minoritised or not, might require. As one expert relayed:

*I needed someone from the community to tell me that what I did was okay and that it was in line — that it wasn't a sin, that I wasn't going to hell ... So, I ended up getting counselling from a Muslim organisation in England, SOLACE, which was all by phone, and I found that that was helpful ... [The counsellor] was able to use scriptures and use the religion itself to validate my story, and give a purpose in my life, that this is not how he was meant to be in this relationship. There is nothing in the religion that validates any of his behaviour.*

Although there are important differences and nuances, the support described above isn't so different from the support some non-minoritised women require. As a Foyle survivor stated:

*And it was through faith I got great consolation down the line from my priest, a great priest that I spoke to, and he said, 'God loves you, and God does not want you to be in an environment like that' Or, 'God's a loving God and that's not what he wants for you; don't be holding onto that guilt.'*

Again, what is important here is an attentiveness to difference. Recognition that domestic abuse affects every aspect of a woman's life requires a holistic approach, while retaining an attentiveness to each woman's individual needs.

Women across the focus groups mentioned the need for different therapies/ counselling to be available to them. In addition to the religious counselling described above, women described being unable to access their trauma for a significant period of time, making talk therapy premature and ineffective. For instance, a Fermanagh survivor noted how helpful Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy had been for her, and felt that it should be offered to other survivors of domestic abuse. What is important as well, is to recognise that trauma's effects are non-linear, and can affect a woman at any time, be she one year, five years, or forty years in her journey of survival. As this same Fermanagh expert described:

**Participant 1:** *But you're just learning everyday. And I can be doing 100% for a year and next thing*

**Participant 2:** *A wee trigger*

**Participant 1:** *Just one trigger and you'd be gone. I had to go back to counselling there in January, it was actually New Year's Eve. I had to go to counselling there because I just, literally, plateaued. I had to go talk to someone. And it was very small, what it was, but that's what triggered me, and it brought me way back.*

**Participant 2:** *Do you find though, when you go back, you're a bit more on top of it?*

**Participant 1:** *You're on top of it a lot quicker*

**Participant 2:** *At least you went to counselling and didn't try to cope on your own.*

**Participant 1:** *But it is so scary when it happens, because you don't know what to do. And you think you're wrong, but it's just that your head's on overdrive. You're overwhelmed.*

But as another Fermanagh expert contended, many women do feel that they have to cope on their own, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic:

*And Women's Aid, youse are amazing, but I know youse are pushed financially, youse are pushed personally. I was with youse for about a year and a half, and I was in a good place, and I stepped back then and I said, 'You know, I don't need your support right now'. But there's times now when I think, 'Gosh, I really do need a bit of support'. But because of lockdown – and I do know all of youse lift the phone – but you feel so guilty, you know, 'There's people worse off than me. And unless I was at breaking point I wouldn't phone youse. But it shouldn't be that way.*

## 'Educate Everybody, Everybody, in Every Walk of Life': Learning Inside and Beyond the Classroom

A theme in each focus group and interview was the importance of education. Earlier sections described the importance of training individuals such as GPs, the police, the judiciary, etc., but survivors felt this was only the first step. As a Fermanagh expert argued:

*Educate schoolteachers to spot children,<sup>57</sup> you know, everything. Educate everybody, everybody, in every walk of life: Managers, businesses, everyone ... get it out everywhere. Into every workplace. Use it to educate people and get it out on the social media platforms, and 'like' and 'share'. People need to know that this is still happening in this world, and people need to know that you don't have to accept it. And you shouldn't be doing this if you are the perpetrator, you know? It's just a matter of getting so many people to know that this is going on.*

Every group emphasised the importance of holistic relationship and sex education which included how to identify non-physical forms abuse. As the youngest participant, a 22-year-old Belfast expert, explained:

*I didn't think the abuse in my relationship began until three years [ago], but actually it was always there ... I just think if we all knew what types of abuse there were, that maybe we would know earlier on, and it might change our decisions.*

As an ABCLN expert who is also a teacher argued, however, teachers aren't necessarily equipped to deliver holistic and nuanced training about the various forms of domestic abuse:

*I am a teacher, I teach in a grammar school. For something like domestic abuse to be taught – it would have to be from an outsider; I don't think you can train teachers in this stuff ... I think kids do need to be educated in it, it would have to be coming from the likes of Women's Aid ... If I were to be trained in it and come back and teach it, I would be totally grand with that. But I know that there are other teachers who wouldn't want to, or wouldn't have the time, or wouldn't see it as necessary... It does need to be done, how it needs to be done, I don't know.*

<sup>57</sup> It should be noted here that WAFNI has developed the 'Helping Hands' programme for primary schools. To date, 1,613 teachers from 575 primary schools in Northern Ireland have been trained to deliver this programme to pupils. Women's Aid Federation of Northern Ireland (2020), 'Annual Report 2019/20'. Available at: < <https://www.womensaidni.org/assets/uploads/2020/12/Final-Womens-Aid-Annual-Report-2019-20.pdf>> Last accessed 30 October 2021.

How it needs to be done, and where, are key questions. Children and young people learn in so many places, and not just in the classroom. For instance, popular culture educates in its own ways, and it often sends contradictory messages as to what constitutes 'love'. As Rachel Snyder has argued:

**We cannot simply dump this on schools that are already under-resourced with teachers who are overworked. Systemic change cannot be ad hoc. And how are young people to learn what morbid jealousy looks like when our popular media frames stalking as romantic? When the Twilight movies, for example, portray romance as a man watching over a woman as she sleeps?**<sup>58</sup>

When this point was put to an ABCLN focus group, a survivor responded with the following:

*If we got [children and young people] involved in a project, rather than saying to them, you know, 'This music video is wrong because X, Y, Z', getting them to make something that promotes healthy relationships, and getting them involved in that way, is a good educational tool. Because it achieves our goal of educating them, but it achieves [children and young people's] goal of being involved in something that their interested in. It's not being given to them like a normal school lesson, where we give them the information, they're actually finding the information for themselves through an active, creative process.*

Another ABCLN expert added that education could take the form of:

*Guided role plays, rather than long-protracted lessons or plans they would be, like the likes of Tik Toks, those wee short snippets, and those are attention-grabbing and maybe thought provoking afterwards. Maybe those on a repetitive level without a whole overload of information in one go might actually, something might actually stick along the way, and it would stick at different points for different people.*

As another ABCLN expert-by-experience argued, younger women's voices should probably lead this educational effort:

*There are lots of young girls who are probably attending Women's Aid that are on the likes of Tik Tok and Facebook that could give you more of an input as to how they would listen, how it would get to them. I see posts that Women's Aid do and it's written and it says, 'This is not right; this is abuse' But sometimes you need to see it – like the other ladies were saying – my daughter watched the storyline on Coronation Street [about domestic abuse], and it opened her eyes because she could actually see it ... a younger input might direct it as well, as well as our input you know; sort of mix it between the two.*

<sup>58</sup> Snyder, R.L. (2020), *No Visible Bruises* (London: Scribe), p. 290.

## 'I'm Going to Make it My Life's Work to Shout About It': Facilitating Survivor-Led Advocacy and Support

*I have a voice, but I don't know how many people actually want to hear.*

*I'm going to make it my life's work to shout about it. And stuff the consequences, stuff the consequences. I need to channel this anger productively. I need to feel useful because we can have these conversations, but there needs to be a next step, a next stage. We could talk about every week, but who is going to listen?*

Do people want to hear women's voices? There is no easy answer to this question. Time and time again, statutory agency staff have said that they want to hear women's voices, only to become defensive when those voices raise challenging but fair questions about how institutions fail survivors of domestic abuse.

What should the next step be, then? Across Women's Aid, there is a growing recognition for survivor engagement in all aspects of its work: from the running of refuges, to the development of training, to advocacy for legislative and societal change. In other words, a recognition that from the moment a woman walks in the door of Women's Aid, through to whatever point she determines she no longer requires support, a woman has a voice that is heard.

In terms of advocacy, this means going beyond consulting survivors regarding legislative change. Rather, it entails empowering survivors to recognise their own expertise, and to bolster their confidence in sharing this expertise in a way which feels comfortable and appropriate. As a Foyle expert-by-experience has argued, however, there is a danger that, in trying to recognise survivors' expertise, we may just end up changing labels (i.e., from 'victim' to 'survivor/expert-by-experience') rather than fundamentally changing the conversation. So, rather than simply acknowledging a survivor's expertise, we need to acknowledge her full humanity: that her value does not derive solely from her experience of domestic abuse, and that her expertise must be in dialogue with other forms of expertise (e.g., Women's Aid workers, statutory agency staff, etc.).

While it is important to empower survivors to 'step into' their expertise, inasmuch as Women's Aid courses such as 'Journey to Freedom' encourage women to 'step into their power', this book has shown that many women have already embraced this expertise. Returning to the woman in ABCLN who had lobbied the Minister for Health to review her complaints against Social Services, another ABCLN expert offered a suggestion as to how Women's Aid could empower other survivors to take similar action:

*Maybe that's something that Women's Aid could set up. Some sort of a system for when we do become stronger, even during it or towards the end and we're stronger, maybe they could start up some sort of thing where we could make it known as [the woman who lobbied the Health Minister] has done, to make a complaint against them, to say how they're operating [...] Some sort of redress where we can fight the corner as well to get them to change so that it eventually gets to the top. One of the things that terrifies me is the barrister at the minute. She has openly told me on several occasions that she can't wait to be a judge. I am terrified, because she has been so bad to me alone, and telling me things are okay when they're not, and abusive. So Women's Aid, a wee Department of Redress, Complaints, I don't know what I want to call it (laughs).*

As part of the 'Hear Her Voice' project, participants were invited to contribute to the Women's Aid Federation of Northern Ireland's survivor engagement strategy, and to indicate whether they were interested in forming a survivor engagement group. Women across Northern Ireland indicated their willingness to participate, and respondents were clear about what issues the group should prioritise: reform of the courts, lobbying local politicians, and education.

### Conclusion: 'Does Anyone Else Like Me Find It Hard to Believe That in 2021, We're Still Sitting Here and Having This Conversation?'

If we are committed to hearing survivors' voices, what have the conversations in this text told us? They have told us that that our incident-led understandings of domestic abuse, where physical violence is the only 'real' or 'serious' form of domestic abuse, is fundamentally flawed. Physical violence may never occur at all, and if it does, it is often the final step in the 'systematic dismantling of a woman' –the 'chipping away' of a woman through verbal, psychological, financial, and sexual abuse until 'she', even though she is physically present, is no more. This systematic dismantling is not a single incident, like a punch; it takes the form of overlapping and reinforcing patterns of behaviour that aim towards complete control, and often render physical assaults unnecessary.

Incident-led understandings of domestic abuse tell us that abuse ends when the perpetrator leaves or is removed. Our survivors know better. They have told us that the abuse often continues after they leave, and the unpredictability of this abuse can make it worse. Our experts-by-experience have also shown how the institutions which are supposed to support them often aid and abet post-separation abuse. When we listen to survivors' voices, we realise that the question, 'Why doesn't she just leave?' isn't so much an expression of concern, as it is a taunt.

If we are committed to listening to survivors, what have they asked us to do? They have asked us to recognise 'the systematic dismantling' or 'coercive control' of a woman as a genuine, and devastating, form of domestic abuse. They have asked to recognise that they 'can't just leave', as this is yet another instance of our society asking women to be the arbiters of their own safety. They have asked for everyone to be educated about this type of abuse, so that other survivors and their children won't have to suffer in silence.

Survivors have asked us to understand that the trauma they and their children experience is real, and its effects are long-lasting and unpredictable. They have asked our institutions to recognise this trauma, and to understand how it shapes their responses to the staff and agencies which are charged with supporting them and their children. Survivors want statutory and voluntary agencies to recognise that domestic abuse is a gendered crime, and a crime that will affect women differently based on their position within a society, and the multiple forms of marginalisation that they may face. Recognising this, and listening to survivors in this way, not only demands a 'joined-up' approach to supporting domestic abuse survivors and their children; it also demands that each survivor's unique circumstances and agency are acknowledged by the staff of statutory and voluntary agencies. This acknowledgement begins by asking each woman, 'How can I, along with my colleagues, best support you?'

In terms of the courts, survivors demand a complete and full review, where the law is viewed as a product of its time, rather than somehow aloof from political, cultural, and historical exigencies. Viewing the law in this way should allow for an examination of which parts of the law reflect a genuine regard for due process, and those which merely reflect the misogynistic society in which it was drafted.

While the above roughly summarises what survivors have said, 'Hear Her Voice' is also committed to listening to what is unsaid. When it comes to what has been unsaid, or only alluded to, in this project, it seems fitting to close with the words of an ABCLN survivor who, suffering from a terminal illness, participated in the project because she wanted her voice heard:

**Participant 1:** *Sorry to butt in, but does anyone else, like me, find it hard to believe that in 2021 we are sitting here and still having this discussion? And having to fight, fight so hard for our rights?*

**Participant 2:** *I keep joking about Emmeline Pankhurst. And going back to that: tying ourselves to the railings! (laughs)*

**Participant 1:** *Absolutely. It's just incredulous.*

In many ways, it is incredulous that we were still having this conversation. Twenty-eight years have passed since the publication of Monica McWilliams and Joan McKiernan's landmark domestic abuse study, *Bringing It Out In The Open*.<sup>59</sup> Much has changed since then: progress has been made vis-à-vis domestic abuse, and the peace process and inward migration have made Northern Ireland a different, and better, place. Nonetheless, it is telling that, in terms of women's issues and frustrations, the conversation has in many ways remained the same. This is because the conversation is still structured by misogyny. Put another way, the speakers have changed, but misogyny continues to provide the conversation's grammar. Twenty-eight years later, women remain responsible for their own safety. Twenty-eight years later, women remain unequal within 'the family and within wider society'.<sup>60</sup> Twenty-eight years later, 'government policies in relation housing, welfare, and childcare' continue to 'impact upon women's ability to leave violent homes and lead independent lives'.<sup>61</sup>

### A full stop immediately turns into an ellipsis ...

— Svetlana Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War*

This book is not finished; it simply had to come to an end. It was humbling how many women came forward to share their stories. Women came to focus groups: they came after working 80-hour weeks, after arranging childcare, after the school run. One focus group session often turned into two. As our Fermanagh experts argued, even that wasn't enough:

**Participant 1:** *You could do it a whole day.*

**Participant 2:** *You could do a whole day where you get different parts of stories, whereas I feel like this you didn't really get much ... It's not that you didn't get much; you still got loads. But there's so much more.*

There was so much more. Women requested individual interviews and sent in poems and stories. There was enough material, ultimately, for several additional books. Even with those additional books, however, there would still be so much more, so much left unsaid.

<sup>59</sup> McWilliams, M. and McKiernan, J. (1993), *Bringing It Out In the Open: Domestic Violence in Northern Ireland*, (Belfast, HMSO).

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

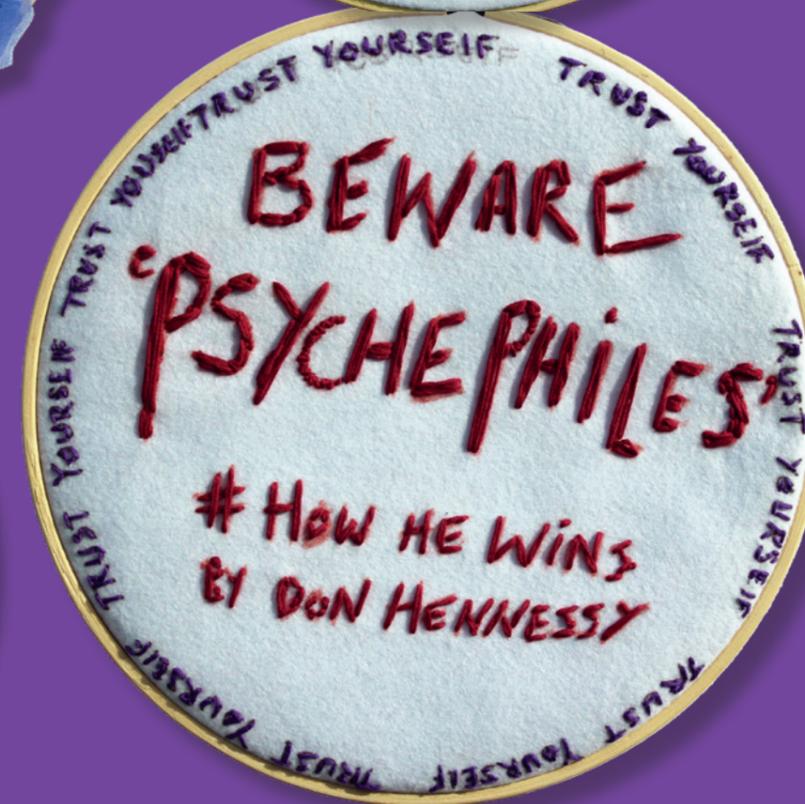
This isn't so much the end of this book as it is an ellipsis; a short pause until the conversation begins again. The conversation will change in some ways: the silences that currently surround other forms of domestic abuse will break — for instance, those types of abuse, like FGM, that many assume 'don't really happen here' in Northern Ireland — and our statistics will 'discover' or 'invent' these abuses, making them a cause for public concern. Whether the conversation will no longer be structured by misogyny, however, remains to be seen. Much like trauma, progress appears to be non-linear: every victory within feminism seems to be met with a setback, and it seems, unfortunately, that it is often the most shocking violence which allows for piecemeal progress against ending violence against women and girls.

So, the conversation ends here, albeit temporarily. Let us hope, however, that the conversation will not simply resume. Let us hope that it will fundamentally change.

In terms of the end, or ellipsis, it seems fitting to go back to the beginning, and to close with the words of a Foyle survivor who participated in the project's first focus group:

**I would like to think that if there's somebody else in that situation, they could hear something in my story, they could say, 'Aye, well that's me'.**

Beyond the words in this book, women have expressed themselves through song, photography, creative writing, painting, poetry, and embroidery. Some of the embroidery pieces, where women mapped their journeys away from abuse and towards hope, appear here.



To view the various ways in which women expressed themselves throughout the project, please visit the 'Hear Her Voice' pages at <https://www.womensaidni.org/>

Love doesn't hurt.

