

Covid 19: A Year in Unprecedented Times



2020 - 2021 Annual Report



530 Women

Stayed in refuges
throughout NI



319 Children

Stayed in a refuge with
their mum



6,005 Women & 6,450 Children

Received floating support in their homes



10 Babies

Were born to women
staying in refuge



293 Women

Who were pregnant
received support from
Women's Aid.

Forward by Sarah Mason - CEO

We cannot start to review last year without acknowledging the Covid-19 pandemic and the impact it had on us all during 2020-21, which has been the most challenging period of time for Women's Aid in our 40 year history. Women's Aid had to put in emergency contingency plans to keep the services running and managed to provide specialist support throughout this reporting period. Women's Aid workers were acknowledged as key workers as our Refuges continued to operate with families living there during lockdown.

Women's Aid worked closely with the PSNI during the pandemic and the police statistics clearly show that domestic abuse was a major issue during this time. The impact of Covid-19 and the lockdown was felt across WAFNI and all the local groups, but we rose to the challenge to ensure the women, children & young people who are experiencing domestic abuse got the support they needed, and we will continue to do so in the next year regardless of the pandemic and its effect in Northern Ireland.



**PSNI responded to a domestic abuse incident every 17 minutes of every day.
PSNI recorded 31,196 domestic abuse incidents & 19,036 domestic abuse crimes.**

Breaking Free: Support For All Women



236 BME Women
Stayed in our refuges
in the year 20/21.



2,411 Women
with complex needs
received floating support.



34 Women & 38 Children
With no recourse to public funds
were supported in refuge.

Empowering Women, Rebuilding Lives



This project, which was successfully funded in February 2020, was due to start in March but as the main element of the project was direct focus groups with women across all 8 local Women's Aid groups it had to be delayed due to lockdown.

Contingency plans were put in place to allow for remote focus group provision, and this work started in November 2020. The 'Hear Her Voice' project seeks to capture the lived experience of survivors of domestic abuse. The goal of 'Hear Her Voice' is not just about hearing, but about the creation of meaningful change.

Lockdown: Domestic Abuse in a Pandemic

When the first national lockdown was announced on 23rd March 2020, the situation for our direct services was very difficult as the majority of our work was carried out on a face to face basis. The Government key message "Stay home, stay safe", did not resonate with the women and children we support, as for these women, home is often where the harm is. We were greatly concerned for families that we worked with out in the community through out Floating Support programme.



Our communication systems had to be updated to allow remote access to systems and to enable support calls to women, children & young people. Two groups established a web chat service for women who didn't feel safe to talk on the phone, enabling them to be able to chat to a Women's Aid Support Worker safely and confidentially. All local groups linked in with their geographical areas resources, and with the generous support of community - food banks, corporate sponsors, community organisations - the groups were able to do 'gate check-ins' bringing families parcels of food, books, toys etc, which enabled Women's Aid key workers to deliver to homes, and also check on the women & their children at a safe distance.

During lockdown, Women's Aid began a partnership with Jago Communications who kindly offered pro-bono communications support. Together with Jago, and the creative team at Krow Design, the 'Unlock Your Lockdown' concept was developed. Launching on the 25th November 2020, the 'Unlock Your Lockdown' campaign ran physical and digital ads throughout Northern Ireland to let women know they are not alone and Women's Aid are still here to support them to unlock their domestic abuse lockdown regardless of the global pandemic.

Children: Growing up with Covid

During these challenging times, Women's Aid continued to support children & young people who are often the hidden victims of domestic abuse. Not only are children dealing with the confusion and distress of leaving their home and being somewhere unfamiliar, they are also having to cope with world circumstances that are very new to all of us.

We continued to support children in the community by adapting our communication platforms. Our Helping Hands programme was used on digital platforms to support children with added trauma of lockdown, no school and potential escalating violence within the home.



During the year 20/21, 319 children & young people stayed with their mums in our refuges, and 6,450 children were supported through floating support services offered to their mums within their home.

Policy, Lobbying & Campaigning

This year has seen a seismic shift within policy and legislation, greatly welcomed by Women's Aid especially after 3 years of no functioning local government. In particular, the engagement with the Justice Committee which was very positive and gave the opportunity for the voice of women to be heard by MLAs.

After many years of campaigning for coercive control legislation in Northern Ireland, we finally saw the passage of the Domestic Abuse & Civil Proceedings Act, which received Royal Assent in March 2021. WAFNI prioritised the consultation process for this Bill, and extensive work was put in place with the eight local Women's Aid groups to gather evidence and capture the lived experiences of women, children & young people, ensuring their voices were heard by the Justice Committee. Women's Aid lobbied for many additional aspects to be included, not all achieved, but we were very pleased to see a child aggravator included, unique to Northern Ireland's legislation. This landmark Act, which will criminalise a course of abusive behavior, both physical and non-physical abuse (controlling and coercive behavior) will be operational from February 2022.

WAFNI continued to work on the roll out of Domestic Homicide Reviews, led by the Department of Justice. Over 20 Women's Aid staff participated in DHR training, together with additional training funded and organised by Women's Aid to ensure all local groups were prepared and ready to sit on these vital panels.

**BREAKING
NEWS**

8th March 2021: WAFNI Launches Public Petition Calling for a Violence Against Women & Girls Strategy in NI

Unlike the rest of the UK, Northern Ireland has no dedicated strategy to tackle violence against women & girls. The current Strategy, Stopping Domestic & Sexual Violence (2013 - 2020), is stubbornly gender neutral and fails to recognise the disproportionate impact of domestic and sexual violence on women & girls.

WAFNI had included a call for a VAWG Strategy within the Domestic Abuse Bill consultation which was not granted, and had no other option but to call on public opinion to encourage government to address this major gap.

On 8th March 2021, International Women's Day, WAFNI launched a Public Petition calling for the implementation of a Violence Against Women & Girls Strategy in NI. At the end of March 2021, our petition received a phenomenal response of public support and the introduction of a Strategy will be a top priority for us in the coming year.



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Antrim, Ballymena, Carrickfergus, Larne & Newtownabbey Women's Aid

T: 028 2563 2136

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Armagh Down Women's Aid

T: 028 3025 0765

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Belfast & Lisburn Women's Aid

T: 028 9066 6049

4A

Causeway & Mid Ulster Women's Aid - Causeway Office

T: 028 7035 6573

4B

Causeway & Mid Ulster Women's Aid - Mid Ulster Office

T: 028 8676 9300

5

Fermanagh Women's Aid

T: 028 6632 8898

6

Foyle Women's Aid

T: 028 7141 6800

7

North Down & Ards Women's Aid

T: 028 9127 3196

8

Omagh Women's Aid

T: 028 8224 1414

9

Women's Aid Federation

T: 028 9024 9041

With thanks to our stakeholders:



Our Reach is Vast : From Belcoo to Portavogie

Women's Aid



Women's Aid groups throughout Northern Ireland are the vital front line service providing specialist support to women, children and young people in their communities, especially throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Here are some of their highlights of their important work this year.

ABCLN Women's Aid

Their Older But No Safer project has secured funding from The National Lottery Community Fund for NI to work with older women & communities to increase awareness about domestic abuse.

Belfast & Lisburn Women's Aid

Won a Chartered Institute of Housing Award under the category 'Communications in a Crisis' for our 'At Home Should Not Mean At Risk' campaign in February 2021.

Armagh Down Women's Aid

The Wellbeing Buddies project became The Building Resilience and Hope in the New Normal, which engages with traumatised women in non-crisis support to build their confidence & resilience.

Causeway & Mid Ulster Women's Aid

In August 2020, Causeway Women's Aid & Mid Ulster Women's Aid merged as one group, offering vital services throughout both council areas.

Fermanagh Women's Aid

Utilised online platforms to facilitate their first online focus groups with Young People, funded by Comic Relief, for their Stronger Together Project.

Foyle Women's Aid

Are delighted that work started this year on new purpose built Family Justice Centre. It will be the first Family Justice Centre in Ireland and the UK. The centre will open in September 2022.

North Down & Ards Women's Aid

Developed Helping Hands as an online communication tool for children & young people during lockdown, when they were isolated from school and external support.

Omagh Women's Aid

Partnered with Family Action and the NI Safeguarding Board to provide additional practical and emotional support to over 60 families experiencing Domestic abuse in the Omagh area.