

## **‘the personal & public cost of domestic violence’ Conference**

**21st November 2013, Maritime Hotel, Bantry**

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What I want to do is look at the extent of domestic violence, briefly in Northern Ireland. It'll be similar to here. Look at the background to Women's Aid in N. Ireland which is somewhat different to here in the Republic, at the whole strategic partnership work in N. Ireland, from what you have told me that's what's really important to get started and embedded here and it's critical. To look then at some of the particular costs of domestic violence on a more personal level if you like, to women and their children and at one programme that we run that we run which is called 'The You and Me Mum' Programme.

The extent of domestic violence in N. Ireland –

- PSNI stats for 12/13 record over 27,000 incidents in Northern Ireland and we all know here that the research shows that women could be abused physically or otherwise maybe up to 35 times before she'll even ring the police.
- PSNI respond to domestic abuse incident every 19 minutes of every day, that's how it works out.
- We've had 5 murders in the last year with domestic abuse motivation which is about 30% of all murders.
- In terms of the public cost we estimate it is 2.5 times as many domestic related crimes as drug offences.
- 5 times as many domestic crimes as car thefts.

It's huge in terms of the internal cost and the actual financial cost to society.

Women's Aid cover all of N. Ireland. We have a very effective network across the whole region. We have 9 local groups and that covers everywhere with refuges in every area. I know that's an issue here, the distance that women here have to travel for refuge is outrageous and that's just not the case in N. Ireland. There are guidelines for that from the Home Office which are implemented. This year we had, and these figures are literally hot off the press, 880 women in refuge throughout the year, and 546 children. Year on year those fluctuate a wee bit but basically every year our refuges are still full. We also have a thriving outreach programme. We have links to core funders so these activities are actually funded with workers, they have a salary as they should have because this work should be respected. We had about 4,500 women and about the same number of children who were reached through our outreach programme and that's a great joy to us because those women are the women who actually have the legal protections in place who can stay in their own home, it's the perpetrator who has to move out and the police help us with those protections obviously. Maybe something to share with you, because some people may not think about refuge in this way, it can often be a very joyful place, although obviously women can come in extremely distressed, when they get that support and they're there, it really is a great pleasure to work with them. In the last year we had 53 women who we supported through pregnancies and there were 14 babies born in a refuge setting. Again, it is a

complete disgrace for the perpetrator, but it is also a very supportive place for that woman to come in, to have her new-born in a place where people understand her situation and be very caring, supportive and helpful, like having tons of good aunties about, which we all need.

We do a lot of other things, we have resource centres, group work programmes and a big area for us is preventative education. The only way is to actually reach the new generation and teach them about respectful relationships and also teach children that there is someone who will support them, someone whom they can go to if there's a problem.

The Women's Aid Federation that I am Director of, links all the local Women's Aid groups together. Our key role is policy and lobbying with Stormont, and training and awareness raising. We still have to go out and bust some of those myths around DV such as; alcohol is the cause of dv, or somehow it's something in the woman that's attracting it, or that perennial one, why doesn't the woman leave? As if it is that simple to get away from an abuser who has total control over you, and who you're also often still emotionally linked to.

The key thing for today's focus is the Strategic Partnerships with government and key agencies. Most of my job involves is meeting with officials, meeting with people in key agencies to work out how best to support victims, and how best to try to place the focus of blame on the perpetrator where it rightly belongs.

An example of strategic partnership work in Northern Ireland and the framework for it: back in 2005, we had a government strategy called 'tackling violence at home' and it effectively linked in all the Stormont departments. It is led by the Departments of Justice and Health. It also links in all the key agencies, the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the public prosecution service, the courts service, probation board, social services and key voluntaries. I really can't overestimate how important this is, because it has allowed us to build the relationships. I don't go in and demand the impossible to be delivered tomorrow, such as the end of domestic violence – we all want that, but we're in a process to get there. There can be frustrations and differences but we work hard to get a respectful dialogue going and some of the wins from that are quite enormous. Underpinning all of that, are our local domestic violence partnerships. So you have the strategic level and then you have in each area, each local trust area, a DV partnership. Again this replicates all the key people in that area, police, agencies such as the local Women's Aid group, probation board, social services. They are there to deal with the issue by devising action plans for their local area and then to find ways to implement them.

Here's some examples of what has come out of live partnerships; with our probation board, in NI they run perpetrator programmes, an Integrated Domestic Abuse Programme- IDAP. As an integral part of IDAP, Women's Aid provides women's support workers for the partner or ex-partner and often a lot of these men have more than one woman they've abused. In our view, a man who starts abusing a woman, will go on that trail for life, unless there are severe and immediate repercussions. Sometimes if they actually do some time in prison or they go on one of these programmes, I'm not saying it's a road to Damascus, but they can be stopped a little in their tracks and at least their victims can be protected from the effects, and that works very well.

An example of how the Regional Strategic Group works, is the agreement that where any perpetrator programmes operate, they must be run to a certain standard, the 'Respect' standard, who are an organisation in England who work with perpetrators. Also that there must be support alongside for the partners and ex-partners and there is consistency across NI.

Another example is that over the last couple of years, something that we're really excited about, is we now have some Women's Aid support workers working alongside the PSNI, in the police station. There are only about 5 of them, and we'd like to see them in all areas. It's a great win. The police are very supportive of it and so are we. It means the PSNI can be focusing on the investigative side and Women's Aid can be right there to give the immediate support to the women at a time when there is most pressure on them. We are hoping that we'll get better criminal justice outcomes from that.

Then we're working on a lot of protocols with different key agencies, and again that can be about the relationship building and its development. We do training, it's not as consistent or as rolled out as we'd like, but we get into places like the public prosecution service and the court service to do our training. Recently we've got in to one of the key gateway teams in Belfast, which is the Social Services gateway team who risk assess all cases coming to them. That is recognising the professionalism on all sides and making sure that you're working in synergy and for us that is working really well.

Underpinning all this is the support that's given to the 24 hour domestic and sexual violence helpline. That is run by Women's Aid Federation, it is what is says on the can, it's 24/7, around the clock. But it is fully funded, by Health, by Justice, and by our Housing Executive, as part of their homelessness strategy to prevent women becoming homeless. Anyone can call the Helpline, professionals for support, concerned fathers, the police, and obviously victims. It is open for all victims, for women who are our primary callers, for men, and we reach out to other groups who haven't got the same level of services. So we've a good engagement with all of the LGBT communities and we get callers in same sex relationships ringing in. We work very hard to reach out to the BME community and have a language line so there's an automatic translation service we can lock into as well. This year we had 44,664 calls answered by the helpline, so it is extensive and it's going incredibly well.

I'm going to very briefly zip through costs to women and children with my remaining time. Just to say for us as Women's Aid, from experience and from our analysis it is fundamental that the issue about protecting children is linked to protecting their mothers. Again we must put the blame for the abuse and for the effects of the abuse back on the perpetrator, not on the woman who's struggling to deal with that and still rear her children. A UNICEF quote which we like very much: 'some of the biggest figures of domestic violence are the smallest'.

We have a Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference in NI. There are 4,530 children reported in those households (where there is known to be DV). Now our view is that even if those children are not being hurt, as in physically directly hurt, they are victims of DV and they should be getting proper support, and most of the proper support should be supporting the women.

We never want to give out the message that children cannot recover, they're resilient and with the right support they absolutely do. And we're also very careful not to fall into that 'oh, it's all in certain families'. Yes, it's true if you come from a domestic abuse background you may become an abuser, but you may not. We have a lot of men in Northern Ireland, and women, who are champions on domestic violence because they have come through that abusive background.

So, the cost to mothers: professionals need to recognise, because they also are prone to the myths, the impact that domestic violence can have on a woman's physical and mental health, and therefore on her parenting skills. What she needs is help with that, not the finger pointed. They're often undermined in their role as a parent, even when they have done heroic jobs to protect their children, they suffer from guilt for what their children have experienced; total self-blame, they will have had their self-esteem crushed by the abuse anyway; lack of confidence; a lot of fear about children being taken into care and sometimes those decisions are not taken carefully enough, even now with our partnership work that is the case. So, mothers are left with no confidence, self-blaming and real fear for the future.

Our response was to devise the programme, 'You and Me Mum' - a 10 week self- help programme. It was the women in refuges and support services who really wanted this. We do a lot of programmes around rebuilding self-esteem, but a specific one in relation to mothering and children was needed. It is a programme for women to understand the effects of DV on their children, understanding their own role and then how they can move forward. Women and the children have all said that it has really helped them. I would like to read you a couple of before and after comments because they're very striking. Some 'before' quotes from the women: "our house was like, quite a sad house and we all walked around on eggshells"; "my kids didn't know how to approach me and I didn't know how to communicate with them"; "I never went out of the house"; "no communications on using violence, kids having a bad relationship with me and each other and taking roles as adults"; "me frozen, holding tight, stuck, guilt ridden, feeling like a failure, caught between the weight of making the right decisions for everyone in the family and worried that my decisions had destroyed everyone"; "depressed, very unhappy, emotional, alone, didn't want to talk about what I was going through" - pretty grim stuff.

After the programme we had these comments: "it all changed, my kids were happier, I am happier, we can talk to each other instead of shouting and there's wider respect in the household"; "there's less stress and tension, we're calmer and happier, more open and honest"; "I discovered that it was not just me living like this, I came to learn more about the roles the children take on, I'm now working to support my children away from those roles and working on boundaries"; "my son at 8 likes that people are supporting me". And I like this one: "able to smile again, things seem clearer, the light at the end of the tunnel slowly starting to appear and I feel that life is worth living". It really is very powerful stuff. We designed that programme in the last 3 or 4 years. More quotes; "helped me to stand up and be the mummy I wanted to be", which I think is nice. And the benefits to children "the kids are laughing more, children got released from knowing that I was getting support, helped the children to see that's it's okay to deal with emotions".

If children and mothers don't have these opportunities, the cost is enormous. Dr John Devaney, Queen's University, Belfast says that it leads to: "poor outcomes in [late] childhood and also into adulthood." In my view, we're talking about lost lives, and lost childhoods. The cost to society is way too high to carry on a human rights level, but it's also way too high for society to carry financially, because it results in people suffering addiction, difficulties, dysfunctional relationships, poor outcomes in work. So we need to deal with it together.