



Presentation to the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality

Women's Aid, February 2021.





Domestic Abuse and Gender Equality

Domestic abuse is a common form of gender-based violence. It has a huge impact on gender equality, including the following focus areas of the Citizens' Assembly:

Focus 1: Impact on Care

Many women parent in the context of domestic abuse. Notwithstanding women's efforts to provide a safe and nurturing environment for their children, the abuse impacts on women's care work in many ways. For example:

- Children may be directly abused by the perpetrator or may witness the abuse of their mother, which is in itself a form of emotional abuse of children.
- Abusive fathers often undermine both the mother's bond with the children and her authority¹.
- The abuser becomes the focus of the family, to the detriment of children's needs. The mother is unable to provide the children with the security and attention they need.
- The impact on her physical and mental health may impinge on her parenting.
- Children may be removed by social services.
- Women are unable to provide appropriately for the children's material needs due to financial abuse.
- Women and children may have to leave the home for their safety and become homeless.
- Family law courts often do not provide for safe custody and access arrangements even where there is clear evidence of risk. After separation, abuse of the woman and her children may therefore continue.

Focus 2: Impact on Economic Equality

Domestic abuse has a huge impact on women's equal access to economic resources, as it reduces women's ability to acquire and maintain

economic resources, both during the relationship and after separation. For example:

- Women may be prevented from working, or their wages or social welfare payments may be taken by the perpetrator, leaving her with no independent income.
- Women may have no access to household money/resources, which are controlled by the abuser.
- Women may be held responsible for debts incurred by the abuser (including bills, mortgage payments, rent arrears, credit card debts) and her credit rating may be destroyed due to his actions.
- Belongings and property may be destroyed or damaged.
- When separating, women may accept an unfair division of property and assets due to fear of the perpetrator or lack of accurate knowledge about the family's financial assets.
- Separation itself can be very costly, with prolonged, repeated and expensive court proceedings.
- Abusers often do not pay Maintenance or pay it partially and erratically, leaving women and children at risk of, or in, poverty.
- Women and children may become homeless either because they have to leave the home for safety reasons or because they may become unable to continue paying the mortgage or rent after separation.

Lack of independent income or savings is a huge barrier to leaving an abusive relationship. When women do leave, they often face great financial difficulties that can lead to long-term economic disadvantages. Measures to address the economic impact of domestic violence need to be developed, including housing and income support, fair property settlements, enforcement of Maintenance, and management/debt support services.



Focus 3: Impact on Leadership

Domestic abuse hinders women from leading and participating equally in the workplace, the community and public life. It also impacts on a woman's leadership including employment and career prospects. For example:

- Women are prevented from working or if in employment, the physical, sexual and psychological abuse they experience impact negatively on their work.
- The perpetrator may carry out abusive tactics in or around the workplace (e.g. phone calls, emails, or in person) and may sabotage the woman's employment by hindering her regular attendance.
- Domestic abuse impacts on victims' health and wellbeing, attendance at work, productivity and security. It can cause disrupted work histories, high rates of absenteeism, lower personal income, frequent changes in jobs and more employment in casual and part-time workⁱⁱ.

This has long-term consequences for women's careers, employment and financial prospects and impacts on women's equal participation in the workforce and attaining positions of leadership.

Addressing Gender-based Violence and its Impacts on Gender Equality

Prioritisation and Responsibility

Given the high prevalence of domestic violence, the consequences of abuse not only affect the individual woman, but represents a barrier to gender equality at societal level.

In order for gender-based violence to be consistently prioritised and properly resourced, clear lines of accountability need to be established through an independent mechanism reporting regularly to Government on progress achieved. This could take the form of a Special Rapporteur, Ombudsman or a Commissioner with adequate resources and powers to develop

recommendations and monitor their implementation.

Recommendation 1: A clear comprehensive line of responsibility to government for domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, with appropriate resources and independent powers should be established

Support and Recovery

The impacts of domestic abuse are long-term, affecting the woman's health, employment prospects, housing and financial security, even after separation. It is therefore imperative that survivors are supported in their recovery so that they are able to engage equally in public and civic life. This should include pathways to financial and housing security, employment support as well as physical and mental wellbeing.

The current level of funding for specialist emergency and short term services responding to gender-based violence in Ireland is inadequate. Funding to address **long-term impacts** is even scarcer and there are few, if any, comprehensive programs to assist women and children in their long-term recovery.

Recommendation 2: The Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence sector be fully resourced to prevent and respond to all forms of sexual, intimate partner and domestic violence adequately.

Safety

There can be no recovery and participation in community and civil life if the safety needs of survivors of domestic abuse are not addressed first. The Justice System should play a critical role in this respect. However, a 2019 Women's Aid studyⁱⁱⁱ on this topic found that women did not think the Criminal Justice System made them safer nor provided them with justice. It also found that in the Family Court the safety of women and children was disregarded, resulting in outcomes which exposed them to further abuse.

When safety needs are not met, it is very difficult for women to rebuild their lives. Improving how



the Justice System deals with domestic abuse would result in better short and long-term economic, housing and employment outcomes, which would allow women to participate more equally in society.

Recommendation 3: That the government carry out a review of how the family and criminal courts deal with domestic abuse cases, and initiate urgently needed improvements to protect and support women and children experiencing violence and abuse as a matter of priority.

Role of Employers

A 2017 multinational survey, found that, on average, one third of workers reported that they had experienced domestic violence at some point in their lives. Around half of the victims felt that their job performance was negatively affected and three out of four had a hard time concentrating while at work^{iv}.

Employers have a critical role in addressing the impact of domestic abuse among their workforce and should bring in policies to support their staff, including paid Domestic Violence Leave and other measures such as safety planning, referrals, flexibility, relocation and awareness raising in the workplace. Such measures already exist in other countries and are recommended by the International Labour Organisation (ILO)^v.

Recommendation 4: That Ireland introduces 10 days paid statutory domestic violence leave as well as other workplace protection measures to support workers who experience domestic violence.

Prevention

There are many ways in which we can try to rebalance key social messages for both girls and boys to support this critical objective. One of the singularly most impactful ways the government can support this is through the national education system. Interventions at the earliest ages are required in order to achieve gender equality and truly eradicate all forms of gender-based violence. These interventions should combat negative sexist stereotypes and encourage fully equal engagement in public and private life between boys and girls and women and men.

Recommendation 5: The National Education Curriculum, at both primary and post-primary level, should develop and deliver a comprehensive, continuous, age-appropriate relationships and sex education program, that is fully informed by a gender (in)equality lens.

- i The Batterer as Parent: Addressing the Impact of Domestic Violence on Family Dynamics, by L. Bancroft and J. Silverman (2002), Sage Publications.
- ii Violence and Harassment against Women and Men in the World of Work: Trade unions Perspectives and Actions, International Labour Organisation, J. Pillinger (2017). Available at https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_dialogue/--actrav/documents/publication/wcms_546645.pdf (Accessed 3.3.20).
- iii Unheard and Uncounted - Women, Domestic Abuse and the Irish Criminal Justice System Full

- Report, Women's Aid, (2019), available at: https://www.womensaid.ie/assets/files/pdf/unheard_and_uncounted_-_women_domestic_abuse_and_the_irish_criminal_justice_system_full_report.pdf (Accessed 3.3.20).
- iv Pillinger (2017), Op cit.
- v Eliminating Violence and Harassment in the World of Work, ILO Convention No. 190 and Recommendation No. 206. Available at <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/violence-harassment/lang-en/index.htm> (Accessed 3.3.20)