Annual Statistics Report 2011
Launch Presentation

Women’s Aid: Making Women and Children Safe from Domestic Violence

Margaret Martin, Director, Women’s Aid

My colleagues, Deirdre and Ursula, have given you a picture of the domestic abuse suffered by women and children on a daily basis in Ireland in 2011. With a history coming up to 40 years, Women’s Aid has heard countless stories like those of Elizabeth and Amy; and more recently of women like Xiu. Every woman’s experience is unique, but the patterns used by abusers are surprisingly similar. With over 115,000 calls reported on in the last decade, Women’s Aid has given voice to women who are silenced by the fear of speaking out; and by the stigma and shame that surrounds domestic violence. This year’s Annual Statistics Report gives a comprehensive picture of our work in Women’s Aid and includes for the first time detail on the social change work we do. We have been working in Ireland since 1974 to stop domestic violence against women and children by:

- Making women & children safer
- Supporting women
- Working for justice & social change
- And providing hope

And in the face of so much fear and abuse, hope is absolutely vital - so it is useful to remind ourselves that over this time we have also seen considerable progress, with a growth in the number of refuges and local specialist support services to protect and support women and children as well as a refinement of domestic violence legislation to be more inclusive. The most recent refinement was an extension to the domestic violence legislation which among other things included couples with a child in common who were previously excluded. Emma’s story would have been a typical case which inspired over a decade’s work by Women’s Aid so that she and women like her receive the protection they need:

Emma had left her partner and contacted Women’s Aid for support as she was continuing to experience physical and emotional abuse from him. Despite her attempts to sever all ties with her ex, he continued to threaten and stalk her.

Emma was not covered by the domestic violence legislation in place as she had not lived with him for over two years.

Her ex had been granted access by the family court to their 4 year old child which did not take into account the risk from him this posed to Emma. Despite her fears for herself and her child she was
compelled to have continued contact with him to facilitate access visits. Much of the abuse Emma experienced was during the hand-over for these visits. Until last August Emma was not entitled to seek a safety order against her abusive ex, as she is not married to him and had not lived with him for the required time period. That has now changed and women like Emma can access the legal protection of a safety order.

This change brought an almost immediate effect last year with many women saying they were so relieved to finally be able to access legal protection and also to have their experience of abuse recognized by the law. The courts also saw a sharp rise in domestic violence applications for the remainder of 2011 and it appears that many of these are from people previously excluded. It’s very heartening to see such an immediate impact of change and it reinvigorates us for our future social change work.

A related development during 2011 was undertaken by One Family & Barnardos with the piloting of a small number of child contact centres where both handover contact and supervised access are provided. Centres such as these will greatly assist women like Emma in keeping herself and her child safe.

Women’s Aid holds a deep commitment to achieving justice and social change and since 1974 has worked consistently to highlight cases like Emma’s where we raised the dangers experienced by her and her child in numerous submissions and election manifestos; and which we persistently presented at political briefings to TDs and Ministers and through presentations to the relevant government committees. This is just one example of how Women’s Aid uses the experiences of the thousands of women who share their stories with us to lobby for better protection for them and their children. We welcome the openness of the current Minister and administration to comprehensively reviewing the current domestic violence legislation in order to address the remaining gap for women in all types of intimate relationships, particularly for women in dating relationships like Amy whose story Deirdre told you about earlier.

Another on-going and growing concern is the increasing difficulties that migrant women who do not satisfy the Habitual Residency Condition experience in getting benefits (such as Supplementary welfare allowance or rent allowance.) Remember Xiu’s story, how she came from China and without English, and is completely dependent on her husband. How he treats her like a sex slave and has beaten her so badly that she was hospitalized and then having no options she had to go back to him.

The lack of access to welfare benefits puts women like Xiu in the impossible position of having to choose between destitution and violence. Even refuges would find it hard to accommodate her for prolonged periods, as they are under financial stress and therefore are unable to support women beyond a short period.

Now I want to move on to another issue and to draw your attention to page 24 of this year’s report - Chart No. 10 - Duration of Abuse - which shows that the majority of women (72%) have been living with abuse for more than 6 years. In fact a small number of women (4%) have been living with abuse for 30 years or more - nearly as long Women’s Aid has existed. Many women still do not know that help is available.
That only 3% of women had been living with abuse for less than 1 year when they contacted us is not at all surprising as we know from the 2005 National Crime Council research that nearly half of all women wait for more than one year before telling anyone - not even their close friends and family. The same research found that abuse tends to begin fairly early in relationships with almost 50% beginning in the first year rising to almost 70% within the first two years. It also shows the vulnerability of those under 25 with almost 60% of those who experienced severe abuse in intimate relationships doing so for the first time by this age. This data highlights the need to target young women at the earliest stages of their relationships.

So for the second year running, Women’s Aid launched our ground-breaking 2in2u National Public Awareness Campaign on Valentine’s Day, targeting younger women and supported by Cosc. It includes a ‘relationship health check’ on our dedicated 2in2u website (www.2in2u.ie). The website received almost 14,000 visits during its 4 week campaign, that’s nearly 500 visits each day, and we are happy to say the campaign is running again this week. Our main website received an increase in visits of 30% (almost 63,000 visits in 2011) and is available in a variety of key languages so we know we are reaching more and more women each year.

Before finishing I want to return to the issue of child abuse. As I said earlier most women have been living with domestic abuse for at least 6 years and the majority of them have children. 2011 saw a 25% increase in the disclosures from women about the abuse of their children. Women who were not allowed to care for their children and were forced to watch as their children were verbally and physically abused by their partner. Domestic violence continues to be the most common context in which children are abused. The launch of the Children’s First Guidelines and the plans to put them on a statutory basis is a welcome development. The protection of children is everybody’s business and Women’s Aid’s practice of protecting the child through protecting the non-abusive parent, usually the mother, is recognized international best practice. She is a natural ally in protecting her children and needs systems that keep her safe in order to do so. A good place to begin is in pregnancy and we welcome the growing recognition that pregnancy is a time of increased risk with 30% of domestic violence beginning or escalating during pregnancy. Women’s Aid’s work with the 4 Dublin maternity hospitals to develop safer outcomes for women and their infant children is a significant development in this regard.

We also deliver specialized training modules such as Responding to Domestic Violence against Women & Children for the Local & Community Development Programme; the Family & Community Services Resource Centre Programme; as well as health and social care professionals to support local and professional high calibre responses to women and their children at points where they can access support & safety. In addition we work directly with women to maximise their own and their children’s safety; to empower and enrich their understanding of the impact of abuse and to support them to address their own and their children’s needs.

As I’ve already said we have seen important developments in Ireland particularly in relation to the development of services over the years, but with a track record of highlighting the experience of women for 10 years, the Women’s Aid National Freephone Helpline continues to be a most significant one and we
will continue to be available to any woman:

- Whatever her age
- Where ever she lives in Ireland
- However long or short she has been in her relationship
- Whether she wants to stay or leave the relationship
- In whatever language she speaks

Every day of the week between 10 & 10 at 1800 341 900.

Finally thank you for taking the time to come here this morning and show your support for Women’s Aid as we launch our annual statistics for the 10th consecutive year.

Thanks also to our Board, Staff, Volunteers, Funders, and Donors.

ENDS.