

April 2015

Policy on Survivors of Domestic Abuse Talking Publicly

Background

Women's Aid is a leading national organisation that has been working in Ireland to stop domestic violence against women and children since 1974.

We work to make women and children safe from domestic violence, offer support, provide hope to women affected by abuse and work for justice and social change.

To this end, Women's Aid works to communicate the message that violence against women is a crime that must be stopped and to encourage women who are experiencing abuse to seek support.

Women's Aid uses a number of methods to achieve this aim. Included amongst these are:

- Advertising
- Media Coverage
- Public awareness campaigns
- Publications and leaflets
- Events
- Direct mail fundraising appeals
- Our website and social media

Women's Aid is and has always been very conscious that women's own experiences of abuse and survival must be represented and seeks to ensure that all the communication by the organisation is informed by women's direct experience of domestic abuse. To this end, all Women's Aid communication is informed by its direct services to women and is in line with the current Women's Aid Strategic Plan.

Women's Aid is very conscious of the power of the message when communicated directly by a woman survivor of domestic abuse. Case studies, exhibitions created by women survivors, poetry, and women telling their story to the public either through the media or public speaking are extremely powerful tools to both empower women currently experiencing abuse to seek support, and to persuade the public that violence against women is a crime that cannot be tolerated.

Through our experience of working directly with women affected by domestic abuse for 40 years, Women's Aid has been able to offer women survivors the opportunity to break their silence and to speak out about their experience.

For some women survivors of abuse this can be not only an empowering experience but also a political act, where the silence that was forced upon them for so long is broken and they feel their negative experience can be used to encourage other women to seek support.

However, Women's Aid is also extremely aware of the possible negative consequences for a survivor of identifying herself publicly as such. These include:

- **Safety:** Where a survivor can be identified by her ex-partner, her safety may be placed at risk. Of paramount concern is her physical and emotional safety as well as that of her children, if she is a mother. However, even if her physical safety may not be at risk, domestic violence is still very taboo socially, and being identified as a survivor of violence could also raise issues in relation to her children and the extended family on both her own and her ex-partners side. Most often it will be advisable that the woman tells her story anonymously.
- **Exploitation:** Media and other publics seizing on her story and requesting that she do things and talk about issues that she is not comfortable with. The media and other public events have their own agenda and will be unlikely to have the best interests of the woman at heart.
- **Distress:** It can be very disturbing to talk about past traumatic experiences and a woman may feel that she has re-lived the experience and feel upset, distressed or depressed afterwards.
- **Regret:** A survivor may also become distressed when she sees/hears the piece and regret having done it.

Because of the possible dangers and negative consequences of identifying herself publicly as a survivor of violence, the following procedures must be followed before Women's Aid will facilitate a woman to use her voice in this public way.

IMPORTANT NOTE: Women's Aid works only with women survivors of violence in this way, and not with women who are currently in a relationship where they are being abused, for safety reasons. Women's Aid strongly advises women who are in abusive relationships (i.e. women who have not left) not to identify themselves as such publicly for safety reasons.

Section 1: Procedure for Enabling Women to Speak Publicly

a. When the woman comes through the Direct Services:

Some women may make contact with their support worker after a period of time where they are now out of their abusive relationship and wishing to tell their story.

Although the following is not always possible due to time and distance constraints, Women's Aid will make every effort to ensure the following are in place before facilitating a survivor to speak publicly. Where possible these steps should be put in place well in advance of any press or public activity and not at the same time.

1. Where a woman identifies herself to a Women's Aid staff member as interested in talking publicly about her experience, and where the staff member has no concerns about her doing so, the staff member should advise the woman to talk to the Communications Department about her story and why she is interested in speaking publicly.

2. If the woman does not want to speak to Communications, she should not be facilitated to speak publicly.
3. If the woman wants to talk to Communications, her support worker should facilitate a meeting or telephone call between Communications and the woman.
4. The Communications Department will:
 - Listen to the woman's story and why she wants to speak publicly
 - Explain possible implications of speaking publicly or in the media
 - Explain media's perspective and how it works
 - Outline the woman's rights
 - Give the woman any support and/or help she may need in preparing for this work
 - Explain that it is her decision to speak publicly, and that Women's Aid does not require her to do it
 - The department will endeavour over time to establish a relationship with the woman.
 - Inform the woman that the National Freephone Helpline or her existing support worker are always available should she need support.
6. A member of the Communications Department with the woman, prior to, after, and if required, during any interview or event.

IMPORTANT NOTE: Where the woman's support worker believes that it is not safe or advisable for the woman to speak publicly, she should discuss her concerns with the woman. A staff member should NOT suggest that the woman speak to the Communications Department or that Communications speak to the woman, where the staff member has concerns.

b. When the woman responds to public calls or makes unsolicited contact with the organisation.

Usually the woman will have used Women's Aid to access support and will always be out of a crisis situation. The communications department will handle all communications with the woman. They will:

- Make contact with the woman by phone and follow up with a face to face meeting.
- Listen to the woman's story and why she wants to speak publicly
- Explain possible implications of speaking publicly or in the media
- Explain media's perspective and how it works
- Assess the woman's safety and make a judgement call on whether Women's Aid believes that it would be safe for her to speak.
- Outline the woman's rights
- Give the woman any support and/or help she may need in preparing for this work
- Explain that it is her decision to speak publicly, and that Women's Aid does not require her to do it
- The department will endeavour over time to establish a relationship with the woman.

- Inform the woman that the National Freephone Helpline or her existing support worker are always available should she need support.
- A member of the Communications Department with the woman, prior to, after, and if required, during any interview or event.

2. Minimum Conditions that Need to Be in Place

Women often identify themselves as interested in speaking publicly because of event or media activity by Women's Aid. When this happens, it is not possible for the above to happen prior to woman's public/media speaking.

While Women's Aid does not want to deny women the opportunity to speak publicly for bureaucratic reasons, the organisation is very conscious of the possible damaging consequences of such instinctive decisions.

It is Women's Aid policy to never facilitate a survivor to speak publicly unless the follow are in place:

- The woman has expressed a desire to do it.
- The Women's Aid staff member with whom she works (direct services or communications) is satisfied that she is aware of the possible consequences and impacts of her actions.
- She has told the Women's Aid staff member with whom she works her story and is comfortable communicating it.
- The woman is made aware that it is her decision to speak publicly, that Women's Aid do not require her to do it. She must only do it, if it is what she wants.
- Communications is available to provide media support before, after and if required during the interview/event. That the National Freephone Helpline is always offered for emotional support.

Women's Aid cannot STOP women speaking if the following are not in place, but will not facilitate it, by proposing her as a public or media speaker.

Ends