

WOMEN'S AID

Presentation to the Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs

Margaret Martin and Ursula Regan

8th May 2019

Thank you for inviting me to present on our Impact report 2018 and particularly on how children impacted by domestic violence are let down by the system.

Domestic violence and child abuse are often interlinked.

Firstly domestic violence and child abuse may co-occur, with the perpetrator abusing his partner and also directly abusing the children.

Secondly, it has been recognised that **exposing** children to intimate partner abuse is in itself a **form of emotional child abuse**, with detrimental effects on the child's development and well-being.

Last year there were **19,089** contacts made with our direct services during which **16,994** disclosures of domestic violence against **women** were made, including physical, emotional, financial and sexual abuse.

The kind of abuse women experienced includes being stalked; women and children being locked out of their homes overnight; being isolated from friends and family; and being in fear of their lives because abusers threatened them with guns, knives and injury due to speeding in car – including **898** threats by the abusive partner to kill the woman, the children, her family, or to harm himself.

We heard **3,816** disclosures of physical abuse including women having their hair pulled, being beaten, being smothered, strangled and hospitalised. We also heard **141** disclosures of abuse while the woman was pregnant with a number of women experiencing miscarriage as a result.

We heard **526** disclosures of women being coerced into sexual activity, having intimate videos and photos taken and shared without their consent; including **226** disclosures of women being raped by their intimate partners, including during pregnancy or after childbirth.

We heard **1,540** disclosures of financial abuse: women being denied access to the family income, having their own salaries or social welfare payments stolen or controlled by their abuser; being made to account for every penny spent and often being left without money for basic family needs.



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Making Women and Children Safe

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Women were left with broken bones and teeth, bruising, head injuries and internal injuries as a result of rape. Some women experienced miscarriage because of an assault while others were experiencing post-traumatic stress, anxiety, depression and exhaustion.

Many of the women who disclosed the above tactics of abuse to us have children: in fact **72% of the women who used our one to one services for the first time last year had children**. We know from the FRA report that children are often aware of the violence experienced by their mothers¹ and therefore we can confidently assume **that a number of children in Ireland are aware of their mothers being abused as described above** either because they see the abuse happening or they see the aftermath. They may be fearful for themselves, may want or try to intervene, may feel their mum cannot protect them, may fear she may be hurt or killed. We know that seeing or hearing or otherwise knowing about this abuse has a negative and profound impact on children.

In addition, we heard of 3,728 disclosures of abuse of children in the context of domestic violence, including children being physically, sexually and emotionally abused as well as witnessing the abuse against their mothers. In 432 cases disclosed to our helpline a social worker was involved.

Despite the range and severity of the impact of domestic violence on children, they are often the forgotten victims, with limited services and protection available.

Services:

Children are impacted by the lack of vital Services such as refuges: in 2018 the 24 hour National Freephone Helpline made a total of **244** calls to refuges for women who were unable to make the call themselves. On **126** occasions (52%) the refuges said they were full. In many of these calls, women would have children with them, and safe accommodation for them was simply not available. Women and children may have had to return to the abuser or become homeless. Another huge gap is the lack of counselling services for children who have experienced domestic violence, either by being a witness to the violence against their mothers or by being directly targeted.

1 The FRA report on violence against women found that in Europe 73% of women who have experienced physical or sexual violence by a current or a previous partner indicate that their children have become aware of the violence



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There are very few **affordable** and **specialised** services to assist children in their recovery journey. Moreover, the consent of the abuser is needed for the children to attend counselling, and it is often denied.

We have made a number of detailed recommendations in our submission, looking at research, guidelines, training, Legal Aid and provision of supervised contact centres.

The key principle binding these recommendations together is that there needs to be a recognition in law and in practice that **the best interest of the child is to live free from domestic violence**, including from witnessing abuse against their mothers and that any Custody and Access arrangement needs to ensure this as first priority.

END



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