



Federation Northern Ireland

## TRN Seminar – 13 October 2010 Aggression Related Trauma Connections, Prevention, Impact and Recovery

I realised in trying to plan what I would say here today that I had at one and the same time too much to say and too little. I'm not at all sure I have the balance right but what I am sure of is that these conversations are necessary and that this is hopefully just a start.

There is no peace whilst women are unsafe in their own homes and in their own streets.

We are here to talk about trauma and trauma recovery and the first point I'd like to make is that the war isn't over. At least not the one against women, not only is it not over, but it was never even declared. It is covert, ongoing and relentless. And so we are speaking from a live battlefield so to speak.

PSNI statistics for 09-10 show that the police are called out to a domestic violence incidence every 21 minutes of every day of the year in Northern Ireland – 24,482 in this year. Yet that is nothing to the back catalogue, because behind that it is all still submerged in fear and silence.

Women still suffer an average of 35 assaults before they ring the police.

One in 4 women will be the victim of domestic violence in her lifetime.

Throughout last year an average of 5 women and children took refuge every day with Women's Aid because their home was no longer a safe place for them to be.

Added to that are the many thousands more who we give support to through our outreach and other services and the 32,349 calls the 24-Hour Domestic Violence Helpline managed last year.

These increases in statistics are in some way a success story because the story of domestic and sexual violence in the home is becoming less and less silent.

Over-arching this we have a powerful line up of inter-agency partnerships through the *Tackling Violence At Home* government strategy. Led by DHSS&PS and DOJ and including PSNI, PPS, CSNI, PBNI, Health Boards, voluntary agencies including ourselves and others.

Women's Aid is an active participant in that arena and we work in engaged partnership with a wide range of criminal justice agencies and government departments.

Yet we struggle to be heard for who we are at times.

Women's Aid starting point on women victims comes from over 30 years experience of working with and for them.

The background to Women's Aid was not an armchair, arms length respectable good causes one. It grew out of 1970's international refuge movement and Feminist direct political action – refuges were squatted / women and children 'rescued' in borrowed vans.

For the first four years in NI Women's Aid could have been prosecuting for harbouring a wife against her husband's wishes.

Back then domestic violence was viewed as 'just a domestic' and Women's Aid had no funding or support, indeed we encountered outright hostility – we were viewed as the family wreckers...the police were not interested, neither were any other government agencies.

There is a different story now but when we remind our partners of our genesis we often get the uncomfortable looking away, the '*she'll stop soon*' pause.

No-one at that level engages with us to discuss our analysis that domestic and sexual violence is an abuse of women's human rights and that the roots of the abuse of power and control by men of women in domestic violence lie in the unequal position of women in society.

When we state that our work is rooted in CEDAW (the international women's human rights convention to which the UK is a signatory) there is a distinct lack of response.

Across the world Violence Against Women is a global social epidemic with abuses against women relentless, systematic, and widely tolerated.

Citing this and the CEDAW treaty monitoring body's gender based violence definition as *'violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman, or that affects women disproportionately'* doesn't help.

What emerges then is a *'what about the men?'*, an insistence that somehow our Section 75 gender equality duties are best served by offering all services equally to everyone regardless of need and with no thought of examining the root causes. Sometimes the real life 'sad tales' of perpetrators follow. No-one ever addresses the core questions:

*'Why are so many men violent to women and children?'*

*'What sort of society produces these men?'*

- 1,000's of women each year are attending A&E and doctor's surgeries and will carry physical injuries and emotional scars for life.
- The extent of the domestic terror perpetrated upon these women leave many suffering from PTSD, and dealing with mental health issues and addictions.
- This is particularly exacerbated by the post-conflict effects in many communities which were traumatised.

Yes, the architecture of the law has changed to support the victim, and this was lobbied for long and hard and is very welcome.

However the reality is that acts of domestic violence still produce insultingly small sentences, breaches of protection orders are overlooked, and Women's Aid bear witness to ongoing stories of fundamental denials of the stories of the victims.

*Can it really be that bad? What did she do to provoke it?*

Worst of all is the blanket of silence and denial that falls when a woman is murdered by her husband or partner. Four women have lost their lives since the beginning of the summer and yet you will search in vain for a raging headline declaring 'Domestic sadist murders innocent wife.'

The public barometer of sympathy is pushed towards the perpetrator; the home tyrant is suddenly a 'doting dad.' Perpetrators of domestic violence are getting away with it; serial perpetrators thrive in this environment.

Despite all this women who come to Women's Aid are shining examples of bravery and resilience. In the past we would have resisted labelling any of them with the term traumatised believing in the old political saying: *Do not adjust your mind the fault lies in reality.*

We still believe that but through experience of working with and for women we know that some victims need more specialised help. We also know that therapeutic recovery does not invalid political action. But where are the specialised trauma and counselling services for victims of sexual and domestic violence? By and large they aren't there, or only available to those who can pay.

### **Political conflict**

Throughout the last 30 years Women's Aid worked through the conflict years supporting women from all communities. There are many harrowing tales from these 'armed patriarchy' days, with women seeking help from Women's Aid whose abusers crossed the spectrum of police, politician and paramilitary. The use of guns to threaten and inflict hurt was a real and vivid one.

With policing itself a contested political issue women from some communities would not or could not seek help from the police.

In other communities any allegation of abuse against a security force member would be treated as treachery.

The political conflict is resolved, and I mean resolved with all the bitter-sweet loss and joy that has brought. I believe in respect of the impact to the trauma suffered by so many individuals and communities we are frozen, little has been done, little achieved, and I mean that with no disrespect to the enormous efforts of victims groups and healers.

The energising power of a collective release has been denied us and it is all getting bottled up again – into silence.

*‘Was it really that bad?’ and ‘What did they do to deserve it?’*

The connection points between the experience and trauma of political conflict and that of domestic and sexual violence have been long made.

**We would argue that VAW is both a cause and a consequence of our unequal position as women in society here and globally. A society that produces so many men who are tyrants, bullies and torturers in their private spheres is ripe to engage in a repeating cycle of wars, to urge international confrontation not collaboration; it is based on power and control, mercilessly hierarchical.**

And yet in reality here in NI there are few thriving connections between these different areas of work. We are operating in parallel worlds, talking at times, different languages to different audiences. We need to do the connecting, to ask the difficult questions, to challenge the assumptions.

- For example restorative justice? Can be an excellent tool for community healing; definitely a dangerous idea for domestic and sexual violence cases.
- Ditto mediation. Any enforced contact between perpetrator and victim is ripe for further abuse. We urgently need to learn each other’s language.

- In political conflict resolution theories validating all stories, deeply understanding all sides to the conflict helps move the whole of society forward. Not true for individual cases of domestic and sexual violence. Again all you are doing is denying the validity of the victim's story and setting the stage for further abuse and re-traumatisation.

So today's seminar is innovative, essential and long overdue.

A final thought:

Don't let the work of trauma recovery become an academic exercise.

If we want it to help communities and victims recover and reconnect get it out into communities/ stand with the victims;

the days of the 'innocent' bystander are over.

Annie Campbell  
Women's Aid Federation NI