

national assembly of women domestic violence

introduction

Each year in the UK, three million women experience violence, and many more live with the legacies of abuse. Violence against women includes domestic violence, rape and sexual violence, sexual harassment, female genital mutilation, forced marriage, crimes in the name of honour, trafficking and sexual exploitation. While the NAW is concerned with combating all violence against women this policy document concentrates on domestic violence.

Statistics published in 2009 show that there has been little or no substantive change in rates of domestic violence against women since our policy document on domestic violence that used data from 1999.

Domestic violence (or abuse) is the physical, psychological, sexual or financial violence that takes place within an intimate or family-type relationship and forms a pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour. Most comes from women's partners, family members – including their sons – or someone with whom there is or has been a relationship. Although some domestic violence occurs in same gender relationships, far more prevalent is from men to women. This paper therefore focuses on that issue.

Domestic violence is the most common type of violence against women and accounts for around a quarter of all violent crime. It can happen to any woman irrespective of age, class, disability, ethnicity, HIV status, lifestyle, religion, sexuality or transgender status.

Since 1999 there has been no change in many domestic violence statistics: one in four women are still victims of domestic violence and two women a week are killed by a current or former partner. The reporting of domestic violence has reduced from one case every six seconds to one every minute but a woman still suffers an average of 35 assaults before

calling the police. The debilitating effect on women's health and self esteem is immeasurable and also the impact on children.

At least 750,000 children witness domestic violence every year. Some are physically hurt, as they try to defend themselves, their mother or other siblings. They may be traumatised and suffer mental health problems. Children who live in households in which abuse takes place often struggle with a range of psychological and emotional issues, feelings of insecurity, frustration and guilt. They can carry this into their adulthood and repeat the cycle of ongoing violence in their personal relationships.

The economic costs of domestic violence are massive including the costs of policing, emergency health care, ongoing health care, social services, housing, legal services, benefits, refuge and rape crisis. There are also high social and health costs to individuals and to society.

Figures from the British Crime Survey in 2004 report that approximately 80,000 women suffer rape or attempted rape every year, that more than one in five women has been raped by their partner or former partner and that in 2003 an estimated 1.2 million women were subjected to stalking by a man.

(All cited figures should be understood in the context that under-reporting is common. When the British Crime Survey has used a self-completion module, reported rates of abuse are up to five times higher.)

government responses

In 1998 the Government published a comprehensive strategy and action plan *Living without Fear*, a consultation process for the Domestic Violence Crime and Victims Act, that received Royal Assent in 2004.

In February 2008, the Home Office published its *Violent Crime Action Plan*, covering guns, gangs, knife

policy
document

crime, binge drinking, rape and domestic violence. One welcome proposal is that the number of Sexual Assault Referral Centres for victims of sexual violence will be increased from 19 to 48. However, the Plan overall is principally concerned with criminal justice system responses; we need to see how health services, children's services and local strategic partnerships can be properly engaged.

The NAW believes that a fundamental shift in cultural attitudes and financial resources is essential to move beyond the current worthwhile but piecemeal and uneven developments.

NAW policy

NAW reasserts its commitment to ending domestic violence. We have had a clear policy on this issue for many years and want to see holistic and multidisciplinary approaches to the challenging task of promoting families, communities and countries free of domestic violence. We need the promotion of concepts that violence against women is unacceptable and the Citizenship curriculum and Youth Services should carry this unambiguous message. Community-based education and training campaigns are vital. Violence against women must be unequivocally condemned and there should be a clear plan of action, to which local authorities, health authorities and others can sign up, and which they are then bound to follow through.

refuges and shelters

The provision of safe accommodation for women fleeing violence and their children is worsening rather than improving to the point where the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) is threatening legal action against up to 100 local authorities for failure to ensure the safety and security of vulnerable adults and children. A comprehensive network is essential, including linguistically and culturally accessible provision which meets the needs of women with disabilities and learning difficulties, women with large families and women with drug and alcohol issues. The recent *Map of Gaps* published by the EHRC shows how far the situation has deteriorated

rather than improved over the past decade.

perpetrators

We recognise that there is a role for counseling and rehabilitation programmes, but also that domestic abuse is about choice – and perpetrators can choose to stop.

We want to see effective sanctions against violence with punishments that reflect the seriousness of the crime. Perpetrators' programmes often have little effect, with men continuing to harass their partners or former partners whilst on them. They seem to be a 'cheap' option with little evidence that the perpetrators are rehabilitated. If such programmes are carried out whilst the perpetrators are serving a custodial sentence, there is a period of relative safety for their partner or former partner.

support for survivors

Comprehensive counseling and support programmes for the survivors of domestic violence are essential. The physical and emotional effects of domestic abuse can be profound and need a community and collective response.

media

We want to see an end to commercial media products and advertisements that foster the idea that women are sexual property. The impact of negative imagery permeates the lives of both women and men and contributes to the erosion of women and children's human rights. We need the media to explode some of the myths and stereotypes around domestic

abuse such as:

- Domestic violence is a working class problem
- Domestic violence is more severe in some ethnic groups than others
- Alcohol is the main cause of domestic violence
- Women who are abused must be masochistic and enjoy it
- Abused women can always leave
- Violent men cannot control their violence

working with others

The NAW supports the development of campaigning coalitions and multi-agency solutions to deliver positive, local support to all those who are living with domestic abuse and its consequences. To this end we will work with other like minded organisations that also campaign for proper resourcing to address the range of needs around this issue, including those of children and the elderly.

We want to see cycles of abuse ended and families enabled to regain control over their lives. Physical, emotional, educational, economic and civil action is necessary. A comprehensive infrastructure of support is vital. This demands a reappraisal of existing responses and a massive increase in resources. The message we need to get over is that the time for domestic violence to stop is NOW.

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