

Domestic Violence & Justice

"Be a voice, not an echo"

When it comes to domestic violence, the justice seeking process can be a daunting minefield of text book jargon, lengthy procedures, complex decisions and costly outcomes. For survivors, the impact of abuse may also add to this a sense of hopelessness, exhaustion and fear. Fear she may not be believed, fear of the repercussions and safety for her and her children's lives, fear of reliving the trauma of abuse.

Our Women's Aid Support Workers and court support volunteers work with women throughout the court process offering practical and emotional support. We understand it can be difficult to seek legal advice without fear of being judged or not understood. We work in collaboration with a number of family solicitors who not only understand and are sensitive to domestic violence but who advocate for the rights of survivors with their best interests at the forefront of their legal practice. Our weekly One Stop Shop on Friday mornings offers women free, non-judgemental and confidential legal consultation along with other housing and benefits advice, with no appointment required or need to engage with our wider services.

These solicitors can advise on issues including protection orders, legal remedies, legal aid and possible outcomes to equip a woman to make informed decisions for her and her children.

Women's Aid also works jointly with the PSNI who have a designated domestic abuse team. We have two Women's Aid PSNI support workers who are based in police stations to provide that crucial, first-hand response and support for women.

We are still awaiting the passing of coercive control legislation in Northern Ireland which has been stalled by the political impasse at Stormont. This important piece of legislation will account for the ongoing and persistent reality of abuse and the seriousness of emotional abuse. We need our ministers in place and a functioning executive to move this forward and recognise the long-term impact of this form of abuse on women and children, giving the police and judiciary the power to hold perpetrators to account.

We are aware that perpetrators can often manipulate the court system to exert further power and control over a victim, whether financially, through intimidation or in relation to child contact. We still have a long way to go in influencing decision makers, ensuring that a spotlight is put on this behaviour and sending out a message that this will not be tolerated as a further mechanism to abuse, humiliate, torment and re-traumatise victims.

Domestic violence still goes underreported with women being assaulted an average of 35 times before seeking help. We need to eradicate the shame and stigma that is still prevalent in society, encouraging and empowering victims to come forward and know that it is not their fault, they are not alone and that there are support measures in place.

We can all play a role in making a difference. By challenging attitudes in relation to domestic violence, bringing the issue out into the open and by standing up for women's rights – equal rights, we have the power to influence and implement change in our own communities. We all have the power to be the voice of justice – it's up to us to decide whether we use that voice.

"Justice will not be served until those who are unaffected are as outraged as those who are."
Benjamin Franklin.

Sarah Bruce

Women's aid

Belfast and Lisburn