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Starting from Scratch

Exploration of Housing and
Financial Services to Women
who Experience Domestic Violence

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CREDITS

This is a summary of research carried out by Mary Mc Grath on behalf of ADAPT. Funding for the study was provided by the Combat Poverty Agency. For further details on this research contact ADAPT using the information above. Quotes are taken from women who have experienced abuse and participated in the study. The research and this summary is Copyright (C) 2001 ADAPT (Limerick) Ltd.

Research Parameters

Research commissioned by ADAPT clearly showed that the act of leaving their partner was extremely difficult for women experiencing abuse. Responsibilities to their family and marriage, home ties, abuse and the associated effects, safety, and an uncertain future were all issues to be faced when women considered leaving home.

What was the research about?

The aim of the research was to examine the effectiveness of services provided by Community Welfare and Local Authority Housing in responding to the needs of abused women, from the perspective of both abused women¹ and service providers. The objectives were:

- To explore the experiences of women who have suffered abuse in terms of using housing and community welfare services.
- To examine the extent to which services provided by housing and community welfare departments are appropriate to abused women and their children.
- To establish what these service providers see as their specific role, if any, in dealing with abused women.
- To highlight issues of practice and policy, which need to be addressed.

Who took part?

Two groups of individuals took part: Women who had experienced domestic abuse and staff involved in the delivery of community welfare and local authority housing services.

Seventeen (17) abused women took part. These women had been involved with either ADAPT or Clarendon services. Thirteen (13)

"When I had to start off, I had to start from scratch"

women took part in focus groups, which lasted 1-2 hours. Fourteen (14) took part in an in-depth interview of about 1-2 hours.

Eighteen (18) staff involved in housing or community welfare services took part in a telephone survey, lasting about 45 minutes. Of these 18, eleven (11) were Community Welfare Officers from the Mid-Western Health Board.

The remaining seven (7) were housing personnel with Limerick County Council and Limerick Corporation.

What is domestic abuse?

Domestic abuse includes physical, sexual and emotional abuse. The physical abuse can include slapping, thumping, kicking, burning, electrocuting, pushing, throwing, stabbing, cutting, beating and choking. Assaults generally

"I would do anything I could to save our marriage, for us to be a family and all that... for all the badness to go away... and I was being blamed in the meantime for everything... everything was my fault you know"

become more prolonged and brutal as time goes on.² Abused women are also often subjected to a range of sexual abuse.

Acts of violence repeated again and again can leave a woman in a constant state of fear and isolation. The impact of the emotional abuse itself should not be disregarded. Research clearly shows that the emotional abuse and the constant threat of violence can be more terrifying than the actual physical violence itself.

Extent of domestic violence nationally and locally

Both the Task Force Report (1997) and Women's Aid (1995) have emphasised the extent and seriousness of domestic violence. More recently in Limerick, 75% of women attending workshops for those on a low income said they knew someone in a violent relationship, and nearly 50% had experienced abuse themselves.³

¹ While the term 'Women who have experienced abuse' is the preferred one when referring to women survivors of domestic abuse, for ease of reading and to protect against repetition, the term 'abused women' will be used.

² Kirlwood, C (1993): Leaving Abusive Partners.

³ PAUL Partnership (1998) Life on Low Income

Significance of Housing and Community Welfare Services

It is impossible to overestimate the importance of community welfare and housing services for an abused woman, as she considers the options open to her in relation to leaving a partner who has been violent to her. The response of the staff in these services is hugely significant in her decision, and her safety in carrying through that decision. In reality the response of staff is mediated by policy, codes of practice & priorities, knowledge of issues and attitudes of agency workers.

Finance needs

Control of finances represented a fundamental element in the domestic abuse experienced by women and 75% of women described financial deprivation while with their partners.

On leaving home, women were subjected to further financial strain as they coped with a multitude of economic demands on a very tight budget. Similar to the findings of Mulvey (1992) and Power (1998), reliance on community welfare officers was a direct outcome of leaving, for women in this research.

Housing needs

Women in this research felt they had nowhere to go upon leaving their partners. Fear and the desire to build a new life for themselves and their children meant that none of the women wanted to stay in their family home.

Safety and location were crucially important to women. Refuges were an interim emergency measure and the insecure nature of private rented accommodation, and limitations of legal remedies meant that they often saw local authority housing as the only safe, long-term accommodation option.

Housing and Financial Support

Housing and financial support were therefore fundamental needs of women leaving home because of domestic abuse. These needs left them very dependant on the services of community welfare and housing departments to assist them in securing a viable and safe future for themselves and their children.

There were similarities between the roles

played by both housing and community welfare services in responding to these needs. Both provided information and advice. Both were responding to a basic human need - housing on the one hand and basic financial support on the other. Meeting these needs was fundamental to securing a safe future for women who had experienced abuse and their children.



Research Findings

One of the most significant findings from the research was the crucial importance of community welfare & housing services to abused women. They address two of the most basic needs of all humans - the need for shelter and the need for basic necessities such as food and clothes. These needs are common to all of us but are particularly crucial for abused women so that they can have the realistic possibility of a life away from their abuser.

The impact of the abuse and the importance of the services

Another important finding from the research, which cannot be underestimated, is the range and level of abuse to which the women involved had been subjected. This is not new information but the danger is that, as such information becomes commonplace, it is not viewed with the seriousness it requires. Domestic abuse is a crime but it remains one of the most under-reported crimes in our society.

The complexity of domestic abuse and its impact on the women and children involved was also highlighted in this research. The women were, on the one hand, very reluctant to leave their homes. Yet, on the other hand, they could not envisage a safe future in a home that had become synonymous with fear, abuse and intimidation.

The women interviewed struggled with these issues in making their decisions about whether to leave or stay. Hence women coming to the community welfare or housing services were coming in the midst of a crisis, fearful of the implications of their actions for themselves and their families.

The capacity of the services to respond

Domestic abuse and its effect on the women involved had a direct impact on the capacity of the women to use the services and the capacity of the services to respond to their needs. On the one hand, the women were attempting to deal with a major crisis in their lives, a crisis underpinned by fear and intimidation. The impact of this also presented issues for service providers attempting to respond to their needs in safety.

In this context, the research highlighted the

value of establishing a specialist service where staff have the opportunity to build up a level of expertise in relation to the issues involved. Many of the women interviewed had used the services of the

"It'd be just like starting... like a child crawling, walking... it's not going to be easy, and still a fear there for the children too... I'll be looking over my shoulder... that's the fear I have... will I be safe, will my children be safe."

Homeless Unit and found that to be a very positive experience. They spoke positively of the understanding of staff of their concerns, the application process and the outcome of that application.

One of the issues raised by many of those interviewed - women and staff - was the need for clear

information that is targeted at abused women and is widely available within the community so that everyone concerned can be clear as to the services on offer and the application process involved.

Both sets of respondents also highlighted the need for clear procedures and good practice guidelines in relation to dealing specifically with victims of domestic abuse. Present guidelines are more generic. Reference was made to the Homeless Strategy¹ and how it specifically names victims of domestic abuse within its definition of homelessness.

Linked to this issue of guidelines and procedures, the research highlighted different views on the need for documentary proof or evidence of domestic abuse in processing applications from

abused women. Where documentary evidence was required it often caused difficulties for women who, because of the emergency nature of their departure from home, had not been able to take such documentation with them. They could not return, for safety reasons nor was it safe for them if a home visit was made.

Staff also highlighted the potential role that training could play in enabling them to build up their understanding of domestic abuse and respond in the most effective and supportive manner, given the complexity of the situation and the safety issues involved.

The research highlights the fundamental importance of both the housing and community welfare services, not only as separate services but also as

services that address complementary needs and must therefore work closely together if the needs of

"I just didn't move because I didn't think I'd have anywhere else to go, and I didn't want to be moving the children unless I was sure there was somewhere else to go..."

abused women are to be effectively met. The Homeless Unit has provided opportunities for these two services to work closely. However, as indicated in this research, there is also a need to develop complementary ways of working, specifically in relation to how the needs of victims of domestic abuse are addressed.

¹Dept. of the Environment and Local Govt. (2000) Homelessness - An Integrated Strategy

Recommendations

The recommendations put forward in this report draw on the experience and suggestions of the women and the service providers. There was significant overlap in the ideas and recommendations coming from the women and those the service providers either recommended or put forward as existing practice.

Housing & Accommodation

The Letting Priorities of Local Authorities need to be reviewed to include abused women as a priority target group for housing or re-housing. The level of risk to abused women should be a key factor in assessing their application.

There is a need to develop a range of housing & accommodation options for abused women. This should include short-term "transitional" housing and, equally important, long-term permanent housing.

Where an abused woman is being offered long-term housing, priority should be given to offering her housing in a location where she will have maximum support and will not be at risk of further abuse from her partner.

Ultimately we need to ask ourselves what kind of society have we created where violence against women is tolerated and where abused women, rather than their abusers are blamed for the abuse

There is a need to expand the existing housing programme if Local Authorities are to respond effectively to the range of housing and accommodation needs in their areas, including the needs of abused women. This expansion needs to focus on the development of small integrated housing schemes.

Finance & Community Welfare

The proactive, responsive approach developed by the Homeless Unit's Community Welfare Service needs to be expanded to the community based service so that there is consistency of approach and responsiveness regardless of location.

Safety is a major issue for abused women. Community welfare officers can help enhance safety by financing such items as mobile phones, house alarms, Court Order applications etc., where appropriate.

Financial abuse is often an ongoing part of domestic abuse and lack of access to a reasonable weekly income can severely limit the options available to abused women. Community Welfare Officers need to be aware of this ongoing dynamic and the potential role they can play responding to the financial needs of abused women - whether or not they leave the relationship.

The practice of asking abused women to apply for a Maintenance Order as part of the process of assessing their eligibility for social welfare can undermine their safety and give their partners further opportunities to intimidate them and exert control and power.

Good Practice Guidelines

There is a need to put in place Good Practice Guidelines that service providers will follow in their daily practice. An example of basic guidelines is presented on page 4. Guidelines should be based on a number of core principles, including:

- Prioritizing the woman's safety and the safety of her children in any decisions made and in how information is recorded;
- Taking time to listen to her in a non-judgmental manner;
- Not seeking "evidence" or documentation that may require her to put herself at further risk;
- Supporting her in making decisions that seem right and safe to her rather than imposing solutions;
- Informing her about services and supports available and linking her with these if that is what she wants.

Information

Clear information needs to be publicly available on the eligibility criteria and the process involved in applying for both financial support and accommodation/housing. This information should make it clear what applicants in general can expect and specifically what abused women can expect.

Information should also be available in community welfare offices or housing departments on the services and supports available locally to abused women and these should be brought to the attention of applicants who identify themselves as abused women.

Staffing

Frontline and other relevant staff should complete appropriate training in relation to domestic abuse. This training should include: understanding the dynamics and effects of domestic abuse; carrying out a risk assessment sensitively; developing an appropriate response and safe recording methods.

Additional staff is required to allow individual

staff to give the necessary time needed to listen to abused women and assess their needs in a comprehensive manner.

The option of assigning specialist staff, (similar to the present assignment of specialist staff to the area of homelessness) to work in this area should be explored. This would allow them to develop a higher level of expertise in dealing with this sensitive issue.

Resources should be allocated to refuges and support services to enable them to employ outreach staff to provide ongoing support and aftercare to abused women.

Interagency work

Better interagency co-operation is needed to maximize the support available to abused women and their children. The establishment of Local Area Networks, as recommended in the Task Force Report (1997) could provide the vehicle to make this happen and lead to improved practice on many levels, including:

- Establishment of common good practice guidelines across agencies;
- Staff being more aware of domestic abuse and hence more likely to recognize signs of abuse in women using their service;
- Staff in different organizations being better informed on the services each offers. This should lead to more effective referrals;
- Staff being more conscious of holding the perpetrator, and not the victim, responsible for his behaviour and the consequent disruption to family life.

Public Awareness

Underpinning the findings from the research was the need to increase public awareness of domestic abuse and to challenge the widespread tolerance, which allows violence against women to continue. Ultimately we need to ask ourselves what kind of society have we created where violence against women is tolerated and where abused women, rather than their abusers are blamed for the abuse.

Recommendations to challenge this tolerance included education programmes for young people to help promote positive relationships based on equality and respect; and public awareness campaigns to challenge tolerance of domestic abuse and hold perpetrators accountable for their actions.

Good Practice Guidelines

When working with women affected by domestic abuse.

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| If you have suspicions about violence and abuse raise your concerns sensitively at an appropriate and safe time. | Recognise that disclosure is much more likely where a positive, trusting relationship exists. |
| Regard all women as individuals with unique reactions and coping mechanisms. | Encourage communication as a two way process acknowledging how difficult that can be for women. |
| Remember in the midst of practicalities to listen for disclosures of abuse. | Listen, believe, reassure, affirm and support in a non-judgemental way. |
| Give priority to immediate safety of the women and her children. | Assure them they are not responsible and not alone in their experience. |
| Let the woman know she can seek help without leaving home. | Be honest about the bounds of confidentiality and your professional role. |
| Recognise how difficult it is for women to leave their family home and the mixture of feelings they may have about the situation and the perpetrator. | Support the mother in her role as the primary care giver and protector of her children, recognising that in times of crisis she may need additional support. |
| Identify support networks and work with appropriate personnel to help draw up a safety plan. | Remember you are in a prime position to assert to the man that his abuse is not acceptable. |
| Have information on services and supports readily available and consult with others working with the issue. | Recognise the frustration you will sometimes experience when a woman feels unable to leave and how this affects your response. |

Guidelines adapted from Hammersmith & Fulham Borough of London Local Authority good practice guidelines.

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