

Gaps in Services and Provision

1) Unmet needs

Interviews with service providers who deal with domestic violence were carried out in order to explore recent developments and changes to how domestic violence is being handled and to help identify current gaps where women's needs are not being met. The service providers included statutory and voluntary services and additionally, one community-based group.

Despite efforts to prioritise Domestic Violence and to streamline responses to it, community-care and social work staff pointed to three factors that are still contributing to the lack of take-up of official services:

- * The lack of publicity in Ireland about Violence in the Home;
- * The stigma that is attached to the women who discloses;
- * The still too common belief that violence is acceptable and believed.

Initial support work for women, often of a practical kind, like information on legal services, or even the provision of a supportive atmosphere where women could gain back some confidence in themselves was an important element that voluntary and community groups could contribute. This kind of work links in the reported need by women in Aoibhneas refuge to be listened to, accepted and believed.

Service providers identified as a welcome development the broader awareness of what constitutes Domestic Violence as measured by the increased number of referrals from, and involvement by the Gardai, including responses to emotional abuse.

Providers urged the following as priorities:

- * Greater public awareness;
- * Standardised guidelines and protocols for agencies dealing with Domestic Violence;
- * Further development and funding of multi-agency initiatives;
- * Co-ordination of specialised services women and children require;
- * A more broadly-based Domestic Violence Act and far better court services;
- * Tougher sanctions against offenders;

- * Immediate attention to gaps in policy responses;
- * Immediate attention to the acute shortage of suitable alternative accommodation for women forced to flee their homes;
- * Greater capital investment into ongoing support services for children;
- * Full implementation of guidelines on child protection;
- * Locally accessible outreach centre for women.

2) Other Issues Identified by Women in Aoibhneas

Three case studies were carried out with women resident in Aoibhneas at the time of the research. Two more were carried out with women who had tried to resolve their circumstances without professional help. These latter two were important because the women who eventually come to Aoibhneas represent such a small number of those who are actually suffering from domestic violence.

Women in the case studies may 'choose' not to leave their homes when they first experience domestic violence because they have;

- * Fears for their children being traumatised by their removal from home;
- * No financial resources;
- * No alternative housing;
- * Fears about a refuge setting;
- * Fears about what comes after the refuge.

Equally, women are acutely aware that in coming to a refuge, they have finally had to 'make a choice' with which they have never been confronted in the first place. So, although their individual circumstances differ, there are themes, which emerge from the case studies that are common to women experiencing domestic violence.

These themes help identify what the community at all levels needs to do better to support women who suffer the crime of domestic violence. More worrying still - given the increasing restrictions on access to alternative housing - would be if women actually delay seeking help at all because they perceive entering a refuge as a one-way ticket to a longer-term homelessness.



Gaps, unmet needs and urgent priorities that need to be addressed include:

- * Lack of rapid access to competent free legal aid for all victims of domestic violence;
- * Lack of confidence that the range of statutory services grasp the realities of domestic violence;
- * Lack of access to trained professionals in the statutory services who are specially qualified to deal with domestic violence;
- * Lack on the part of statutory services of co-ordinated responses to support the needs of women and the needs of children;
- * Lack of explicit directives for the Garda Siochana and the social work and community care services about the co-ordination and enforcement of barring orders;
- * Severe problems of lack of appropriate housing.

For the women who have come through Aoibhneas, there is a need for:

- * Strengthening the follow-on support coming from Aoibhneas including informal support and development work such as the provision of course off-site;
- * Quicker and better solutions to the problem of alternative housing;
- * More co-ordinated support from the statutory services for women;
- * More co-ordinated support from the statutory services for children.

Additional issues, which require community-wide attention from individuals, statutory and voluntary services alike include:

- * The determination community of family and friends failing to respond



to a situation of domestic violence;

- * The down playing or rejection of a women's plea for help from G.P's, priests, social workers, Gardai and other professionals;
- * Women not knowing where else to go for help and information on social welfare, legal aid, and other practical measures;
- * Rebuilding self belief, self-value and self-esteem in the wake of domestic violence;
- * Having access in schools to truly comprehensive work at a young age on self-esteem and relationships.