

# Annual Impact Report

2020



Women's  Aid

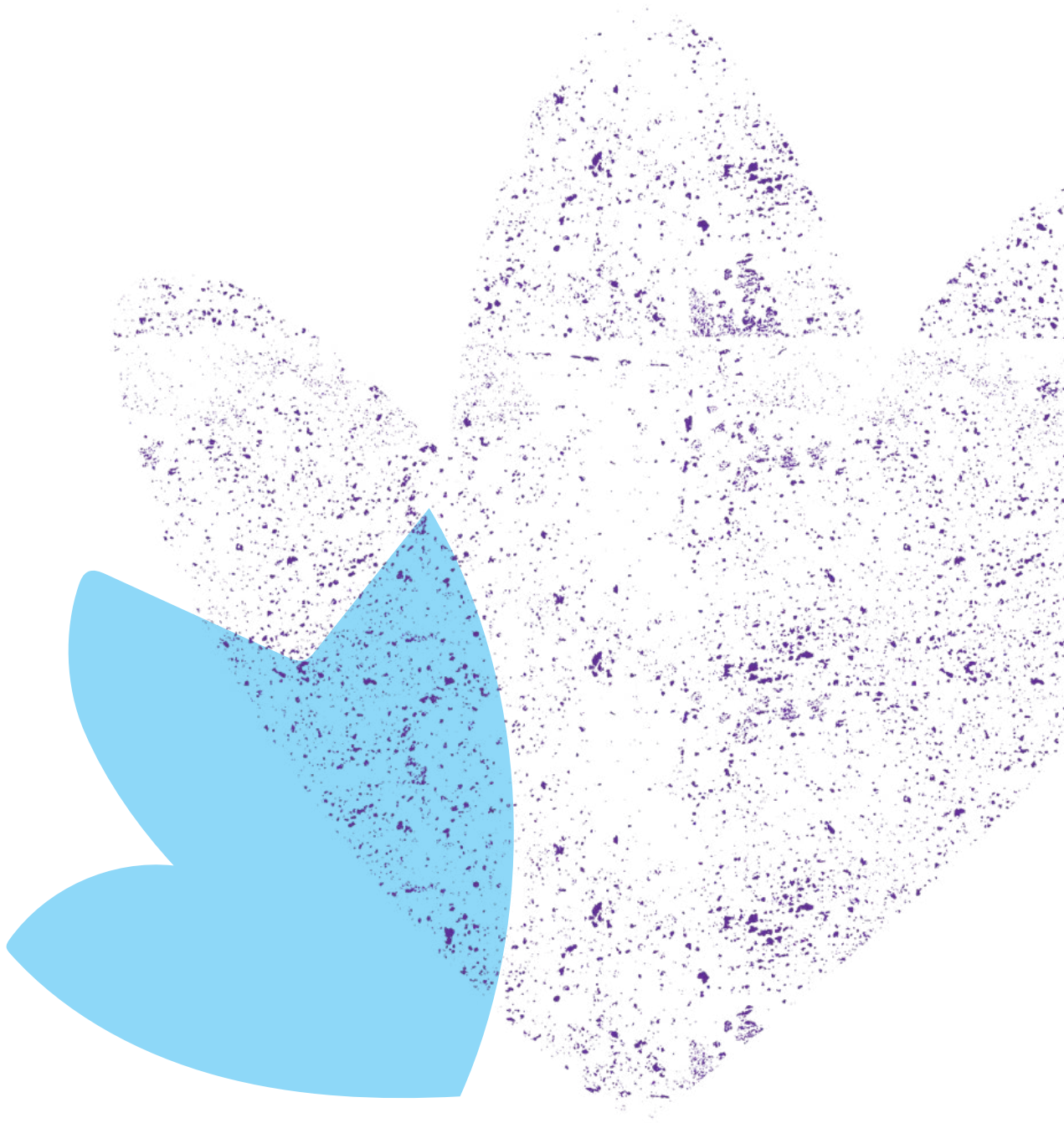


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# Chairperson's Welcome

After a year unlike any other in recent history, I am honoured to welcome readers to the Women's Aid 2020 Annual Impact Report. As members of a leading national domestic violence support and social change organisation, the Women's Aid team was challenged in 2020 and they rose to the occasion. Our immediate fears for women and children subjected to abuse in their homes or remotely using digital technology by current or former partners at the onset of the global Covid-19 pandemic galvanised the organisation to action.




I want to wholeheartedly thank our incredible staff, volunteers and my fellow highly dedicated Board members for their work. They truly went above and beyond. I also want to thank all our partners in the community and voluntary, private and statutory sector as **2020 required a concerted whole community response to domestic violence and abuse.**

Women's Aid was vocal in sounding the alarm as the first 'lock down' was announced; keeping public awareness focused on those subjected to the dangerous coercive controlling tactics of domestic violence abusers. We warmly **welcome the empathic and urgent public response to this call**, including that of the Government itself who made the scourge of domestic and sexual violence policy priorities at the formation of the new government. The need now, is to keep the issue of **domestic abuse including coercive control** and its devastating impacts high on the agenda for the foreseeable future.

I am delighted to acknowledge that **there are many tangible opportunities now to improve systems, policies and laws to better prevent domestic abuse, protect victims and survivors and hold perpetrators to account.** We embark in 2021 on the development of a new National Strategy to Prevent and Combat Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence. There are important initiatives to improve systems and support which came on stream as a response to Covid-19 which must be mainstreamed and developed to improve safety responses and reduce the risk of common hardships such as poverty and homelessness for victims and survivors of domestic abuse.

This is **urgent** because there truly is much to be done.



I also want to recognise here the **incredible outpouring of generosity** to Women's Aid by donors who reached out to us at a time of real uncertainty. As an organisation that needs to fundraise just under 50% of its operating costs every year, this groundswell of support was a lifeline in the early days of the pandemic. It ensured that all Women's Aid vital services could adapt and continue to be available 24/7. We have also been in a position to plan and develop a number of **new and innovative projects** to have greater positive impact on women at risk of or subjected to abuse. These include a three year collaborative project with **maternity hospitals**; expanding the reach of our unique **Too Into You** awareness work for 18 to 25-year-olds subjected to intimate relationship abuse; commissioning much needed **research**; ensuring we have **emergency funds** for women using our services, and we will also be launching a **direct support fund for women's and children's needs** that all of our colleagues in the domestic violence services will be able to access on behalf of their clients needing poverty relief, home security and other costs incurred due to their abuser's behaviour.

In the midst of adversity therefore, we in Women's Aid will continue to **advocate**, to seek opportunities, work in **partnership** and to **innovate** so that we can all as a society do better for the **one in four women** in Ireland who need our solidarity at some point in their lives.



**Ailbhe Smyth**

Chairperson, Women's Aid  
June 2021



## CEO Introduction

You are very welcome to the Women's Aid 2020 Annual Impact Report. I want to take this opportunity to share with you the **extremes of fear, desperation and isolation** disclosed to Women's Aid by thousands of women last year. We also want to inspire you with the **power of supportive and empowering interventions** to minimise harm, and maximise safety and recovery from the trauma of abuse, and; to remind readers of the **hope and resilience of women** who have been subjected to abuse but refuse to be defined by it. The Women's Aid 24hr National Freephone Helpline acts as a referral not only to our own range of specialist Face-to-Face Dublin-based Services but also to every domestic violence refuge and outreach service across the country. All services were stretched in 2020 and yet came through to **work together** for those most at risk.



I am personally so very proud of the work of the Women's Aid team, including our incredible staff, volunteers and Board members, for the organisation's achievements in 2020. When Covid-19 hit, we had to **immediately adapt our services** to balance a hybrid of telephone support and information while retaining face-to-face support for women at high-risk of serious harm. We **drove public awareness** from the outset, developed and delivered **campaigns and collaborated with other key stakeholders** to ensure the experience of those suffering domestic abuse were not forgotten. We pivoted our **specialist training to an online format** and also adapted to delivered our **Power to Change Programme** for survivors online. I want to thank each and every member of our wonderful team, and also sincerely thank our statutory funders, donors and every individual who gave or fundraised for us during this intense and demanding year to enable us to be fully operational and innovative.

During 2020 there were **29,717 contacts with Women's Aid, an incredible increase of 43%**. This included 26,400 responses by the 24hr National Helpline team (24,110 Helpline calls, 1,460 support conversations on our Instant Messaging Service and replies to 830 Helpline emails.)

Our Dublin based, face-to-face services which include a drop-in service in Dolphin House Family Law Court, one-to-one support and court accompaniment and High-Risk Support Project had **3,317 contacts** with women during 2020. During the 29,717 contacts with our support services, women made **30,841 disclosures of abuse** including 24,893 disclosures of emotional, physical, economic and sexual abuse against themselves and 5,948 disclosures against their children.



We worked very hard to raise awareness about the signs of domestic violence and abuse and to promote and share information on supports available to victims and survivors. Our **Womensaid.ie** website **received 290,586 visits\*** during 2020, while our dedicated **TooIntoYou.ie** website received **19,742 visits\***. During 2020 we commissioned important **new research** to give information about the prevalence of **intimate relationship abuse between 18-25 year olds** and published a report giving details of young adult's experiences of abuse, including the increasing tactic of digital abuse.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the information, we share about the experiences of the many thousands of women who contacted Women's Aid for support during 2020, this report shines a spotlight on one area which it is crucial we improve in Ireland: **a family law system which is failing women and children subjected to domestic violence and abuse**. We detail our abiding concerns which are based on Women's Aid direct knowledge from the women and their children impacted, and make recommendations which we hope will be fully implemented. During 2020 Women's Aid heard **3,007 reports** of women abused by a **former male partner or spouse**. There remains an extremely concerning gap between the family law and criminal justice system which is particularly acute for those subjected to criminal abuse by someone with whom they share children. During 2020 we **received 515 disclosures of women being abused when facilitating a child access visit** and **114 reports of children being abused during a child access visit**. Women's Aid plans in 2021 to commission independent research focused on the functioning of the family law system, and particularly where matters of custody and access are adjudicated, to better inform and assist in the bridging of these gaps.

As our chairperson has already indicated in her welcome address, we in Women's Aid are determined to keep delivering for women and children subjected to the coercive control of domestic violence and abuse. We face ever increasing demands not just on our vital frontline services but also for specialist training, public awareness work and expert policy consultation. We will finalise our strategic plan during 2021 and hope to continue to grow, develop and deliver in a sustainable way until we have an egalitarian Irish society with a zero tolerance for all forms of domestic violence.



**Sarah Benson**  
CEO, Women's Aid  
June 2021

<sup>1</sup> Women's Aid, One in Five Women Report, 2020, available at [https://www.womensaid.ie/assets/files/pdf/one\\_in\\_five\\_women\\_report\\_womens\\_aid\\_2020.pdf](https://www.womensaid.ie/assets/files/pdf/one_in_five_women_report_womens_aid_2020.pdf)

\* The actual number of visits likely significantly higher as obligatory cookies policies, implemented in 2020, reduced our capacity to measure these.

# About Women's Aid

Women's Aid is a leading national organisation that has been working to stop domestic violence in Ireland since 1974. We operate the 24hr National Freephone Helpline and a number of Dublin based face-face services. We also act for justice and social change through our specialised training, public awareness campaigns and policy work.

Women's Aid provides a range of inclusive frontline services, detailed below, which are available to all women, including transgender women. The services are available to women of any sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, age or ability. We assist men who contact the Women's Aid 24hr National Freephone Helpline and also signpost to partner organisations offering dedicated services to male victims and survivors of domestic violence and abuse.

## 24hr National Freephone Helpline 1800 341 900

Our 24hr National Freephone Helpline provides a listening ear, emotional support and practical information to women subjected to violence and abuse from their current or former partners. It is the only free, national, domestic violence and abuse helpline with specialised trained Support Workers, fully accredited and quality assured by The Helplines Partnership.

### — The Language Line – Women's Aid Telephone Interpretation Service

The 24hr National Freephone Helpline has a Telephone Interpretation Service facility covering 170 languages for callers needing support in their own language. Interpreters are available on the Language Line from 8am–8pm, 7 days a week.

### — Instant Messaging Support Service (IMSS)

The Women's Aid IMSS is a free, confidential and secure service where women can seek support and advice from fully trained Helpline Support Workers through instant messaging. The service is open daily and can be accessed through [womensaid.ie](http://womensaid.ie) or [toointoyou.ie](http://toointoyou.ie). The service is more easily accessible to women who feel they are at risk of being overheard by their abuser.

### — Text Service for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Women

The Women's Aid 24hr National Freephone Helpline offers support to deaf or hard of hearing women through our text service. The service is available on 087 959 7980 from 8am–8pm, 7 days a week.

All of the services operated by the Helpline Team are a gateway into our Dublin based face-to-face and services and to all other local, independent domestic violence and abuse support services and refuges around the country.



## Face-to-Face Services in the Greater Dublin Area

### — One-to-One Support Service

The Women's Aid One-to-One Support Service provides in-depth information and support to women who have been subjected to domestic violence and abuse throughout Dublin City and County. This ongoing face-to-face and phone support can include court, accompaniment, safety planning, advocacy and referral support to external organisations. Our advocacy and referral work includes accompaniment to the local Gardaí to make statements; assistance with legal aid applications; support with immigration status within the context of domestic violence and abuse; advocating to Housing Authorities for women who are no longer safe in their homes or support in accessing local refuges. Court accompaniment includes emotional support, both before, during and after the court proceedings, clarify legal terminology and explore further options. We support women with applications and hearings in the context of domestic violence orders as well as access, custody, maintenance, divorce and separation cases where domestic violence and abuse is present.

### — Domestic Abuse Information and Support (D.A.I.S.) - A Drop-In Service for Women in Dolphin House Family Law Court<sup>2</sup>

Based in the Dolphin House Family Law Court in Dublin, the Domestic Abuse Information and Support Service (D.A.I.S.) is a free and confidential drop-in service for women who are subjected to domestic violence and abuse. The service is available Monday to Friday 9.30am–4.30pm and provides support and information on legal options, safety planning and links women in with domestic violence and abuse services for ongoing support. Women's Aid runs this service in partnership with the Inchicore Outreach Centre.

### — High-Risk Support Project

The High-Risk Support Project provides a multi-agency response to women at a high-risk of ongoing violence, abuse and homicide from their ex-partners and ex-spouses. Women's Aid works with An Garda Síochána and local domestic violence services to deliver a coordinated, rapid response system for women and their families, which is generously supported by the Vodafone Foundation and the Department of Justice.

### — Women's Aid Law Clinic

Our confidential and free legal information and assistance clinic supports women subjected to domestic violence and abuse who are representing themselves in domestic violence and family law proceedings. The clinic is run by volunteer lawyers from McCann Fitzgerald whose services are provided free of charge.

## Working for Social Change

### — Specialised Training

Women's Aid Training and Development Department has a proven track record of designing and delivering specialist domestic violence and abuse training to local and national organisations throughout Ireland. We support organisations in the statutory sector, the community and voluntary sector and corporate bodies to enhance and improve responses to women who are subjected to domestic violence and abuse. All Women's Aid training is informed and guided by our decades of experience of direct work supporting women and by models of best practice.

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<sup>2</sup> Formerly known as the Dolphin House Family Law Court Support and Referral Service.



### — Public Awareness and Campaigns

Women's Aid leads the way in raising awareness and providing information on domestic violence and abuse to victims and survivors, their families and friends, their communities and wider society. Our annual public awareness campaigns and communications activities are a vital way to highlight the prevalence, nature and impact of domestic violence and abuse, intimate relationship abuse and Femicide. We also engage with the media to promote the 24hr National Freephone Helpline and our other support services. The Women's Voices Testimony Project encourages and facilitates victims and survivors to tell their stories in a safe way to create better awareness and promote change for women in similar situations.

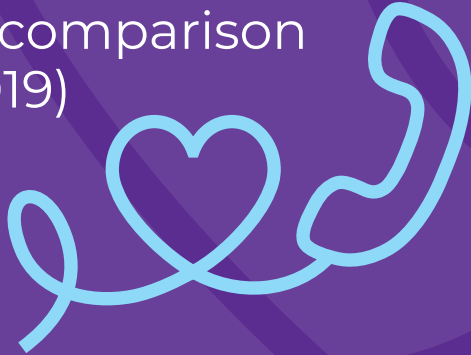
### — Influencing Government and Policy

Women's Aid provides solution-based recommendations on improving preventions, legal responses, policies and protections to support women and children subjected to domestic violence and abuse and we bring their concerns to a number of national and local fora. We make submissions and meet with Government ministers, policymakers and members of the Oireachtas to discuss a range of issues and collaborate with other agencies and organisations to bring about social and political change.



# 29,717

**contacts with Women's Aid**  
(+43 in comparison with 2019)



# 26,400

contacts with the 24hr National Helpline team (calls, instant messages, emails)

# 3,317

contacts with Women's Aid Face-to-Face Services in the Greater Dublin area

# 19,742

Visits to [ToolIntoYou.ie](http://ToolIntoYou.ie)

# 290,586

visits to [womensaid.ie](http://womensaid.ie)

# 30,841

disclosures of abuse against women and children were made

# 5,948

disclosures of child abuse

# 24,893

disclosures of abuse against women

# Who we Supported on the 24hr National Freephone Helpline in 2020

95%

Women



5%

Men



Location:

41%

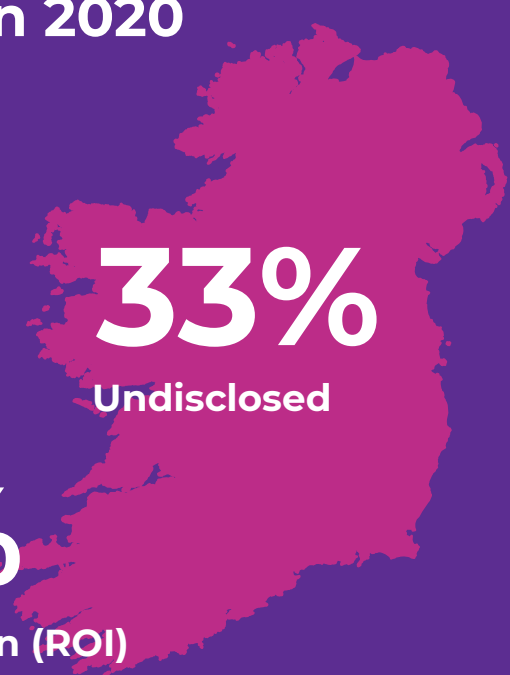
Dublin

33%

Undisclosed

26%

Other location (ROI)



93%

of calls to the 24hr National Freephone Helpline were support calls

7%

were hang-up, administration and indirect support calls



81%

of callers were first-time users of the Helpline in 2020

19%

had called the Helpline before

435

calls facilitated in a language other than English through our Language Line service

An 90% increase in calls using the Language Line



# Comparitive Statistics

	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>Comparison</b>
Contacts with Women's Aid	<b>20,763</b>	<b>29,717</b>	<b>+43%</b>
24hr National Freephone Helpline (includes calls responded to, Instant messages & Helpline emails)	<b>18,446</b>	<b>26,400</b>	<b>+43%</b>
Face-to-Face Services (one to one, court accompaniment & Dolphin House drop ins)	<b>2,933</b>	<b>3,317</b>	<b>+13%</b>
Visits to womensaid.ie	<b>256,871</b>	<b>290,586</b>	<b>+13%</b>
Disclosures of Abuse against Women and children	<b>24,049</b>	<b>30,841</b>	<b>+28%</b>
Against Women	<b>19,258</b>	<b>24,893</b>	<b>+29%</b>
— Emotional Abuse	<b>12,742</b>	<b>17,321</b>	<b>+36%</b>
— Physical Abuse	<b>3,873</b>	<b>4,792</b>	<b>+24%</b>
— Economic Abuse	<b>2,034</b>	<b>1,925</b>	<b>-5%</b>
— Sexual Abuse	<b>606</b>	<b>855</b>	<b>+41%</b>
Against Children	<b>4,791</b>	<b>5,948</b>	<b>+24%</b>
Impact of Covid on Helpline Calls responded 12th March – 30th December	<b>4,791</b>	<b>20,782</b>	<b>+38%</b>

# The Covid-19 Emergency

From March to December 2020 we saw a 38% increase in calls responded to by the 24hr National Freephone Helpline in comparison to the same period in 2019, as the Covid-19 pandemic took hold. We heard from many women that the abuse they had been experiencing had been exacerbated because of Covid-19 lockdown restrictions.

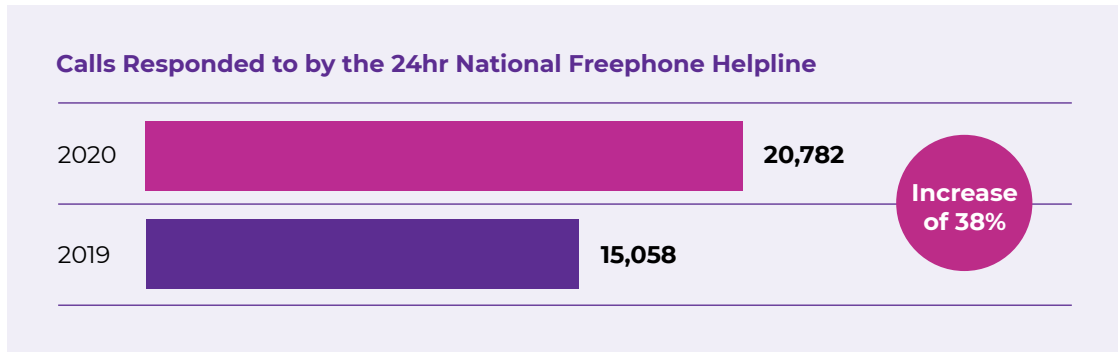


Figure 1: Calls Responded to by the 24hr National Freephone Helpline 12th March to 31st December 2020 compared to the same period in 2019

Some women told us that they were so suffocated by their abuser that they could not get enough time away from them to seek a domestic violence order to protect themselves and their children. Women living with abusive partners also reported the added distress of working from home, with an abusive partner who is there all day. More older women became service-users in 2020 as the toll of living with an abusive partner for many years became too much when forced to spend all their time at home away from friends, family and any activities.

The Covid-19 emergency also affected service-users in their ability to engage with Women's Aid Face-to-Face Services and to seek assistance for themselves and their children. With outreach domestic violence clinics closed, some women were not able to seek face-to-face support locally. The pandemic has led to more frequent adjournments of hearings related to orders under the Domestic Violence Act 2018 as well as maintenance, custody and access which has led to increased hardship and financial distress for victims and survivors.



## Sharon's Story

42-year-old Sharon\* is mum to 12-year-old Sam and 6-year-old Ava. She was working from home during the Covid-19 pandemic. During the first lockdown she found the situation increasingly more difficult and desperate as she was locked into the house with her abusive husband all day and night and had been unable to hide or escape, even for short amounts of time. Prior to the lockdown, her husband was aggressive and controlling but since the lockdown, he was becoming more volatile. She says:

“I feel like I’m being monitored by my husband 24/7. He takes every opportunity he can to undermine and control me. He constantly intrudes on my work calls and conversations and I feel like I’ve no choice but to put up with his unacceptable behaviour all day, every day, because I’m literally locked inside the house with him. It’s unbearable and I constantly feel frightened and vulnerable. One evening, I was preparing dinner, cooking the children’s favourite meal, when he suddenly attacked me and started to choke me. I was so afraid; I didn’t know what to do. I was too scared to ring the Guards because I didn’t want the children to get upset and I was worried about what my husband might do when released by the Guards. But, I decided to ring Women’s Aid for support and they helped me in securing emergency refuge for both myself and the children. I’m so thankful for their support.”



\*Name has been changed to protect this person's identity.

During contacts with our 24hr National Freephone Helpline, women disclosed high levels of emotional, physical, sexual and economic abuse from their partners, in some cases as a direct result of the lockdown introduced to stop the spread of the virus.

Women told us that they had been strangled, raped and beaten by abusive partners as well as feeling constantly monitored in their homes. Women told us that their partners were using the lockdown restrictions as an excuse not to leave after they had been violent. When abusers couldn't get access to their families, they shifted to digitally abusing women through messages, phone calls and video calls. The mental health impacts of domestic abuse for women have also been heightened due to restrictions, with some women reporting suicidal thoughts.

For women who had experienced abuse in the past, the restrictions that the Government placed on movement prompted painful memories of being abused and controlled. Women with underlying health issues reported that their partners were not adhering to Covid-19 restrictions deliberately, and some were effectively weaponising the virus by coughing or spitting on women. Women's Aid adapted quickly to the changing situation in order to keep staff safe and meet the demand of increased contacts from women experiencing domestic abuse. We worked hard to ensure not only that our services met the growing demand brought on by the pandemic but that domestic violence was recognised as a key issue that effects thousands of women and children across Ireland every day. The Covid-19 pandemic brought the issue to the fore. However, the levels of violence exposed are an everyday reality for so many women and children.







**Section 1**

**Listening.  
Believing.  
Supporting.**

## 1.1 The 24hr National Freephone Helpline

In 2020, the Women's Aid 24hr National Freephone Helpline team responded to 26,400 contacts.



24,110

Helpline Calls

1,460

Instant Message  
Support Sessions

830

Helpline  
Emails

### 1.1.1 Disclosures of Domestic Violence including Coercive Control Against Women<sup>3</sup>

In 2020, the 24hr National Freephone Helpline team heard **22,685 disclosures of abuse against women**. There were 16,278 disclosures of emotional abuse, 4,071 disclosures of physical abuse, 1,559 disclosures of economic abuse and 777 disclosures of sexual abuse.

Domestic violence affects one in four women in Ireland and can include emotional, physical, economic and sexual abuse.<sup>4</sup> Coercive control is at the core of all domestic violence and abuse and it is a key component of the disclosures that we hear every day at Women's Aid. Coercive control is a persistent pattern of controlling, coercive and threatening behaviour by a partner, husband or ex. It traps women in relationships and damages her physical and emotional wellbeing.

<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that as the 24hr National Freephone Helpline is primarily a support service, any data collected is secondary to the provision of that support. For this reason, we do not actively seek to gather information from callers, it is only if it is disclosed to us that we record the information. Therefore, we do not have information on all aspects of the experiences of those who call us.

<sup>4</sup> European Union Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA), Violence against women: An EU-wide survey', 2014.

## Disclosures of Domestic Violence including Coercive Control against women

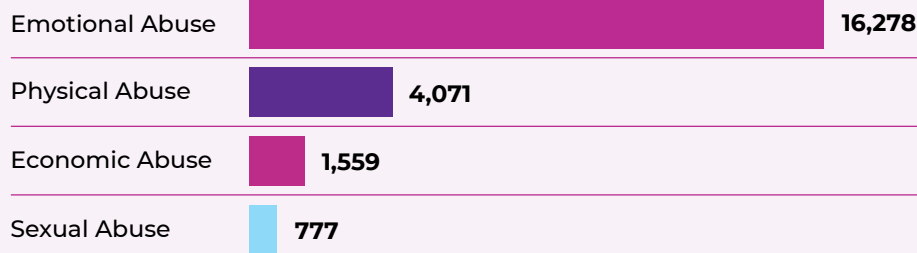


Figure 2: Disclosures of domestic abuse including coercive control against women to the Women's Aid 24hr National Freephone Helpline in 2020

### 16,278 disclosures of emotional abuse including:

- being isolated from friends and family
- being stalked and monitored both physically and online
- having the abuser threaten to hurt or kill her, themselves, their children or her family or her friends
- sleep deprivation as a tactic of abuse
- stolen and/or destroyed property and belongings
- forbidden from having any social media accounts
- forbidden from leaving the home without the abuser
- having car keys or access to a car taken away
- abusers damaging the mother-child bond by manipulating and encouraging children to join in on abuse of their mother
- abusers refusing to admit or acknowledge abuse shortly after it has happened (gaslighting)
- threatened with having their residency and visa status revealed to authorities if they were not legally living in Ireland
- prevented from seeking family planning advice and access to medical treatment

### 4,071 disclosures of physical abuse including:

- being beaten/beaten with an object
- being strangled
- being pushed
- being shoved
- being cut
- being punched
- having teeth knocked out
- being head-butted or having their head smashed off floors or other hard surfaces as well as having their hair pulled

**709**  
women were  
threatened  
with murder

**148**  
women were  
abused while  
pregnant and  
28 women  
suffered a  
miscarriage  
because of  
the abuse

- having to live with the constant threat of physical violence that keeps them living in fear with devastating long-term effects on their health and wellbeing

### 1,559 disclosures of economic abuse including:

- being kept financially dependent on the abuser as a tool of coercive control
- being denied access to finances to pay for food for themselves and their children as well as being denied money for medication
- having abusers put pressure on them to give them large sums of money/the abusers getting them into debt
- being told when and how often they could work, with any income going straight to the abuser

Women calling the Helpline also told us about the financial pressure that they were under due to **abusers refusing to pay maintenance for any children they have in common** or only paying sporadically.

### 777 disclosures of sexual abuse including:

- being coerced into sexual activity
- being subjected to unwanted sexual advancements
- being sexually harassed
- being spoken to or about in a sexually derogative way

### Within the above disclosures of abuse, there were 510 disclosures of digital abuse and cyber-stalking including:

- being abused by text, email, phone call and social media
- being sent explicit and violent images and videos
- having their internet history monitored
- being subject to **image-based sexual abuse** by:
  - > being secretly recorded by the abuser
  - > having or being threatened with having intimate images posted of them online without their consent
  - > being blackmailed into sending intimate images of themselves to the abuser

**340**  
women told  
us that they  
had been  
raped

The Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020 (also known as Coco's Law) commenced on the 9th of February 2021 making online harassment, abuse and image-based sexual abuse a criminal offence.

## 1.1.2 The Impact of Domestic Violence including Coercive Control Against Women

The mental and physical impacts of domestic violence and abuse on a woman's health and wellbeing are significant and can be long-lasting and wide-ranging. The ultimate cost, in some extreme cases, can be fatal.

The impacts of abuse against women as disclosed to Women's Aid in 2020 includes physical impacts such as:

- broken bones
- severe bruising
- nerve damage
- miscarriage

The mental and emotional impacts include:

- Depression, anxiety and panic attacks
- constantly living in fear
- isolation from friends and family
- suicidal ideation and attempted suicide
- nausea
- hyper-vigilance

Other impacts include:

- fear of being homeless and homelessness
- living in fear of deportation or visa not being renewed

## 1.1.3 Responding to Disabled Women, Migrant Women and Traveller Women

In 2020, 941 women who called us said that they were members of a minority group.

Of those who provided this information:

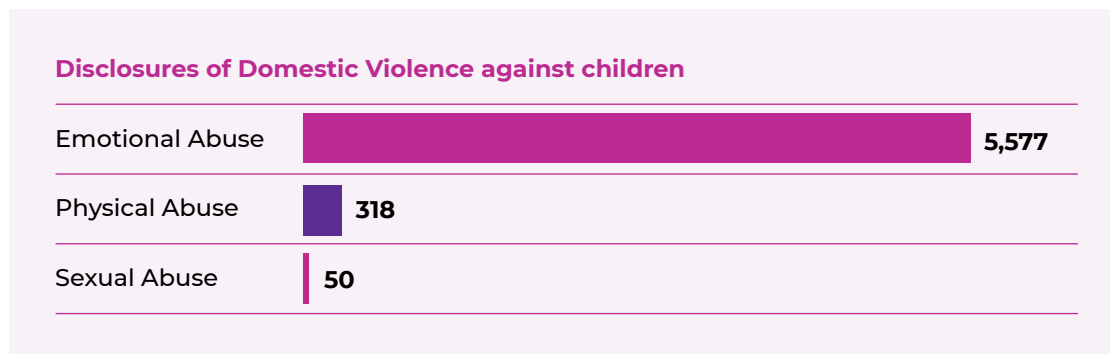
- 93% were migrant women
- 5% were Traveller women
- 2% were disabled women

### The Language Line – Women's Aid Telephone Interpretation Service

The 24hr National Freephone Helpline offers a Telephone Interpretation Service to ensure that women can access the service in their own language. In 2020, **we saw an 90% increase in calls facilitated through a language other than English in comparison to 2019**. In total, there were **435 calls facilitated in 26 languages**, 69% of the calls were facilitated in an EU language with the remainder facilitated through a non-EU language. **121 calls were facilitated through Polish**, making it the second most common language used on the Helpline after English, followed by Portuguese and Arabic.

## 1.1.4 Disclosures of Domestic Violence Against Children

In 2020, there were **5,948 disclosures of abuse against children** to the 24hr National Freephone Helpline. **The majority of the abuse against children disclosed was emotional abuse with 5,577 accounts of such abuse disclosed.** Additionally, there were **318 reports of physical abuse** and **50 reports of sexual abuse against children.**



*Figure 3: Disclosures of domestic violence against children to the Women's Aid 24hr National Freephone Helpline in 2020*

### The abuse included:

- Children being emotionally abused including being verbally abused, being called names, threatened with violence.
- Children being physically abused including being slapped, hair pulled and beaten with weapons.
- Children being sexually molested.
- Children witnessing abuse against their mothers.
- Children forced into going on access visits with an abusive father.
- Abusers targeting and damaging the mother-child bond.
- Older children being abused by their fathers through digital technology.
- Children, including infants, being hurt by the abuser as they tried to attack their mother.

There were **629 disclosures to the Helpline team where access were being used by the abuser to further abuse his ex-partner** (515 disclosures) and where children were being directly abused while on access visits (114 disclosures).

Where women indicated that they felt their children were at risk of emotional, physical and/or sexual abuse during access visits, the 24hr National Freephone Helpline recorded **511 calls where there was a social worker involved in the case.**

## 1.1.5 Impact of Domestic Violence on Children

Children can experience both short-term and long-term effects as a result of witnessing domestic violence. These can include:

- Feeling guilty, angry, insecure and anxious.
- Having difficulty sleeping and/or experiencing nightmares or flashbacks.
- Bed wetting.
- Having a lowered sense of self worth.

- Experiencing difficulties in school.
- However, it is important to remember that some children may not exhibit any negative effects.

### 1.1.5 The Abuser

In 2020, **58% of callers to the 24hr National Freephone Helpline were abused by a current male intimate partner with 23% having been abused by an ex-male intimate partner.** An additional 11% of women were abused by another male who was not a partner or an ex. A total of 1% of women were abused by a current female intimate partner and another 1% were abused by an ex-female partner with 6% of women disclosing that they had been abused by another female that was not a partner or ex-partner.

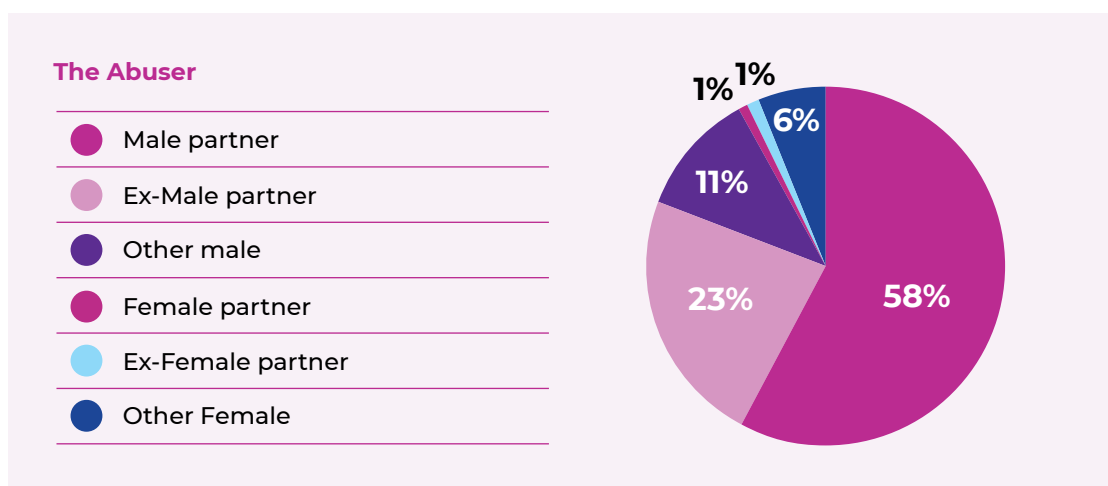


Figure 4: Relationship status of the abuser as disclosed by women who disclosed abuse to the Women's Aid 24hr National Freephone Helpline in 2020

### 1.1.6 Information, Referral and Advocacy

In addition to being a listening and support service, the Women's Aid 24hr National Freephone Helpline, is a valuable source of information, onward referral and advocacy for women experiencing domestic violence and abuse. There were **17,753 referrals, provision of information and/or advocacy made during contacts with the Helpline in 2020.** The areas covered are outlined in figure 4 below. We also support women through safety planning and risk assessment to support them in their efforts to keep themselves and their children as safe as possible.



## Information, Referral and Advocacy

Legal (inc. Gardaí)	6,539
Refuge/Local Domestic Violence Services/Housing	2,672
Social Protection	89
Women's Aid Face-to-Face Services	1,674
Health and Medical	1,270
Counselling	707
Social Worker	158
Other	4,644

Figure 5: Information, referrals and advocacy provided by National Helpline Support

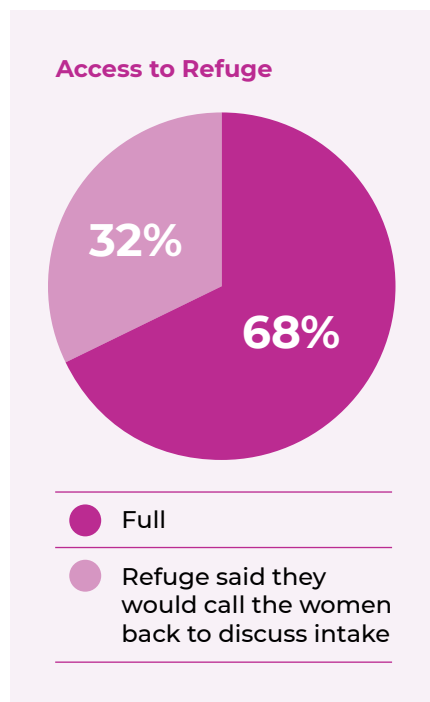


Figure 6: Number of times domestic violence refuges said they were full when Women's Aid Support Workers called on behalf of women calling the 24hr National Freephone Helpline

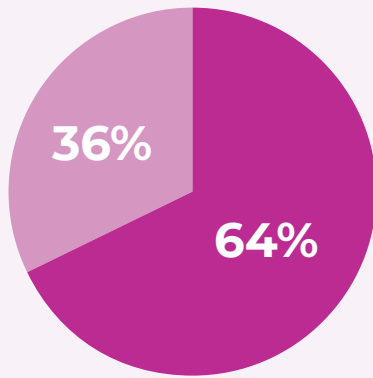
## 1.1.7 Access to Refuge

In 2020, the 24hr National Freephone Helpline made a total of **463 calls to refuges on behalf of 288 women**. For the calls to refuges that we have data on, we know that 68% of the time when we called the refuge said that they were full and 32% of the time, the refuges said that they would be in touch with the woman to discuss intake.

The Istanbul Convention requires states to provide for specialist support services and refuges, in sufficient numbers and in an adequate geographical distribution (Articles 22 and 23). Ireland falls short of the required numbers of refuge spaces to meet this requirement and to meet the needs of women and children escaping domestic violence and abuse. Moreover, refuges are not available in every county.

Ireland needs not only additional refuge spaces but a **wider range of dedicated and resourced accommodation responses** to meet women and children's varying needs.

### Response from An Garda Síochána



- Callers who found the Gardaí's response helpful
- Callers who found the Gardaí's response unhelpful

Figure 7: Women's experience with the Gardaí

## 1.1.8 Response from An Garda Síochána

Many of the women we work with tell us they have had to call on the Gardaí for protection from their abuser. These women have often been subjected to a number of crimes including: attempted murder (often by strangulation or suffocating), assaults of varying degrees with or without weapons, rape, stalking, theft, fraud, arson, threats (to kill, burn down the house, to harm the woman, the children or her family) and breaches of orders under the Domestic Violence Act 2018. At times children are also the target of many of these crimes. Women tell us that the crimes against them take many forms as well as being repeated many times.

The Gardaí play a unique and vital role in protecting victims of domestic violence both while in the relationship and after they leave, as well as in holding the perpetrators to account. However, the Garda response to victims of domestic violence can vary from negative to excellent, among and even within Garda stations. **On 830 occasions last year callers to the 24hr National Freephone Helpline disclosed that they had rang the Gardaí** and 68 women were noted as having rang the Gardaí more than once. When women rang the Gardaí, 64% found their response was helpful and 36% found them unhelpful.

## 1.1.9 Power to Change

The 'Power to Change' Programme, operated by Women's Aid, is a free formal psycho-educational group process for survivors of domestic abuse. The sessions ran weekly for 2 hours over a period of 12 weeks.

The National Helpline Department ran two PTC programmes during 2020, with the first group comprising of five participants in our support group space in Wilton Place, and finished the week before Covid19 (March 2020). Our second programme was facilitated virtually through weekly 'zoom' sessions, also with 5 participants. This was equally successful despite us being in different locations, and it gave great opportunity for women who lived outside Dublin to attend virtually each week.

Both of these programmes were evaluated and the outcomes for all women indicated that their experience of participating in the programme was 'excellent' and that they were feeling 'significantly better' by the end of the programme.

Here are some testimonials as to why participants felt significantly better:

'The support I received changed my life – Women's Aid listened and understood me, helped me to see everything so clearly. Helped build my strength, my self-esteem and self-confidence back up. With this amazing group including the facilitators, I don't know where I would be. They helped save my life.'

'Was very useful to discuss experiences etc. in an environment devoid of judgement. Empowering to share stories/experiences with other survivors. Great affirmation of strength and ability – confidence boosting.'

All the participants found the course very helpful, and when asked what aspects of the course they found particularly helpful, some comments were:

'Everything, understanding how and why I was in abusive relationships, being shown I am not alone. Sharing our stories and supporting each other. Every subject we covered and learning so much, and learning how to recognise when people are trying to abuse, manipulate me. I see it so clear now.'



‘Being able to share my experiences with other survivors and the facilitators, who made me feel very confident and strong and to recognise my achievements in surviving an abusive relationship.’

When participants were asked did they think that attending the course had changed their outlook in any way, some of the responses were:

‘100% - it has changed everything for the better for me, since this course I have established healthy boundaries with every relationship in my life and I feel so much stronger and better. Because of Women’s Aid – I will never be abused again.’

‘Yes, I am going to continue working on my confidence and being proud of who I am. I am going to try and continue to be unapologetic for my story as it isn’t my doing, so I don’t want to feel shameful or confused about what it was anymore.’

The participants were asked would they recommend this course to someone else if they had experienced domestic abuse:

‘Yes, if they have left the relationship as I feel it’s important for the journey. Women’s Aid are an amazing organisation and I feel this course was made for me and helped me become a better person and helped me heal so much.’

‘Absolutely, as long as they are ready to embark on a journey of discovery and to compassionately embrace the new person emerging from the healing process.’

## Juliana's Story

At 19, Juliana had been in an abusive relationship for four years before she sought help. Years of being manipulated and brainwashed by her ex-partner took their toll on her confidence, leaving her feeling insecure about speaking up in case people didn't believe her or judged her. At her lowest point, feeling alone and hopeless, she somehow found the courage and opportune moment to call the Women's Aid Helpline. She says:

“I was kind of cut off from my friends and family at the time because of this relationship. The darkest thought I had was that I was going to marry this person and that this is how I was going to die, and yet I still stayed. So, that's how brainwashed you become.

I had a five-minute phone call with Women's Aid and it was the first time I felt like someone really took me seriously, and understood what I was feeling and the damage that had been done to me. Women's Aid was able to help me, as well as give me legal information and emotional support.”

After calling the Women's Aid 24hr National Freephone Helpline, Juliana got the support she needed to leave her relationship and escape the cycle of domestic violence and abuse. Now, she is embracing life and finding her independence again.

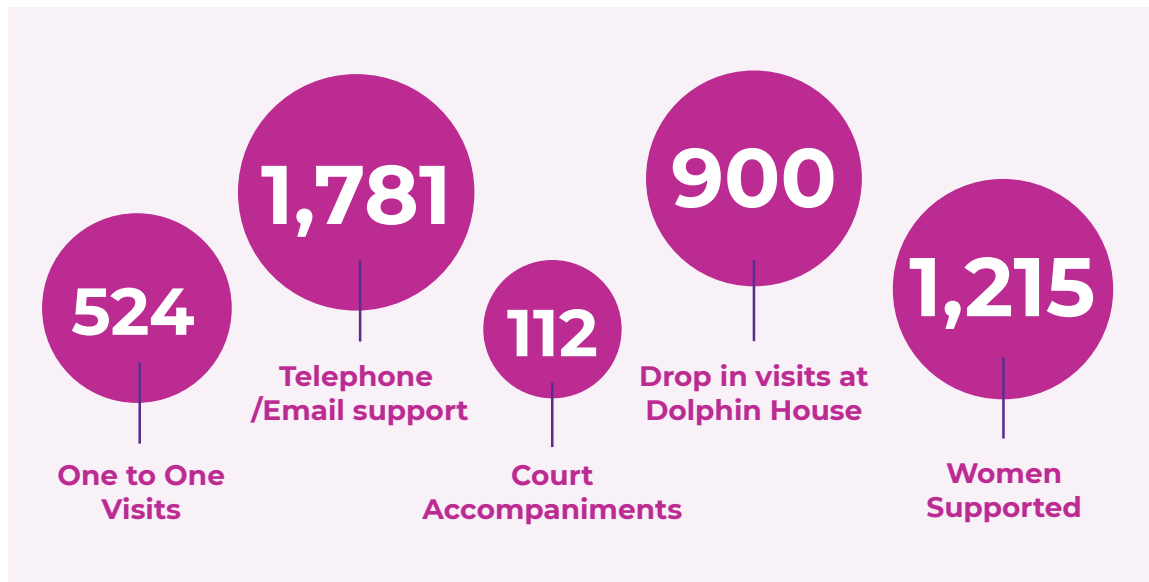


## 1.2 Women's Aid Face-to-Face Services in the Greater Dublin Area

In addition to operating the 24hr National Freephone Helpline, Women's Aid offers a number of Face-to-Face Support services based in the Greater Dublin Area. These specialist services offer **in-depth support, court accompaniment, advocacy and safety planning to women subjected to domestic violence and abuse.** The services include:

- One-to-One Support Service in five locations across Dublin
- Domestic Abuse Information and Support (D.A.I.S) – A Drop-In Service for Women at Dolphin House Family Law Court<sup>5</sup>
- The High-Risk Support Project

In 2020, there were a total of **3,317 contacts with 1,215 women** through our Women's Aid Face-to-Face services in the Greater Dublin Area<sup>1</sup>.



### 1.2.1 One-to-One Support Service

During 2,305 contacts with our One-to-One support workers, we supported **364 women** through one to one sessions, by telephone and emails and on court accompaniments. We also supported **273** women engaged with our High Risk Support Project. We usually see many more women on a face-to-face basis, however restrictions related to the Covid-19 pandemic meant that the one-to-one support was provided primarily via phone and email.

**A total of 223 women using the service in 2020, were using it for the first time.**

**22% of women who used this service were from migrant communities.** 78% of women were Irish.

<sup>5</sup> Run in partnership with the Inchicore Outreach Centre. This service was formerly known as the Dolphin House Family Law Court Support and Referral Service.

Most of the new service-users had children, as outlined in figure 8 below.

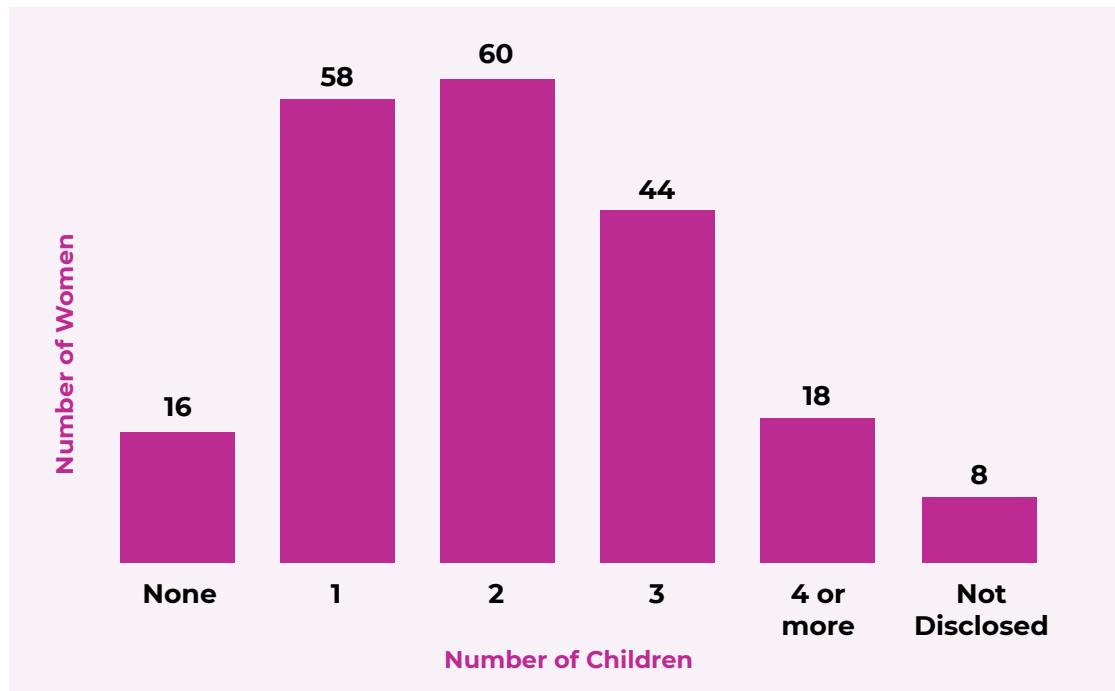


Figure 8: number of new service-users with children

In 2020, our One-to-One Support Workers accompanied 71 women to court 112 times. We supported women in the Family Law Courts and the Criminal Law Courts. Most of the women we supported at court in 2020 were attending hearing related to orders under the Domestic Violence Act 2018. **In total, 62% of women we supported were attending court in relation to an order under the Domestic Violence Act 2018. 35% of women were attending hearing on child-related cases within the context of domestic violence such as custody, access and child maintenance payments.** 3% were in court for other matters such as divorce and separation in the context of domestic abuse.

### 1.2.2 Domestic Abuse Information and Support (D.A.I.S) – A Drop-In Service for Women at Dolphin House Family Law Court

At our Domestic Abuse Information and Support (D.A.I.S) service **we supported 641 women during 900 drop-ins and telephone support sessions.** Due to Covid-19 restrictions, 641 of these contacts were carried out via telephone with the remainder carried out face-to-face. Of the women we supported, 82% were at court relating to Orders under the Domestic Violence Act. An additional 18% engaged with the service for child related matters.

Most of the women that we supported through this service were Irish (63%). **27% of women who used this service were from migrant communities.** 16% of the women we supported were from outside of Ireland but within Europe, 10% were from Asian countries and 6% were from African countries. Other nationalities identified included North American, 2%, South American 2% and 1% did not disclose their nationality.



## 1.2.3 Disclosures of Domestic Violence including Coercive Control

There were 2,208 disclosures of domestic violence including coercive control to our Face-to-Face Support Workers in 2020. Most of the disclosures were related to emotional abuse with 1,043 disclosures. Physical abuse was the second most common kind of abuse reported with 721 disclosures, followed by economic abuse with 366 disclosures and sexual abuse with 78 disclosures.

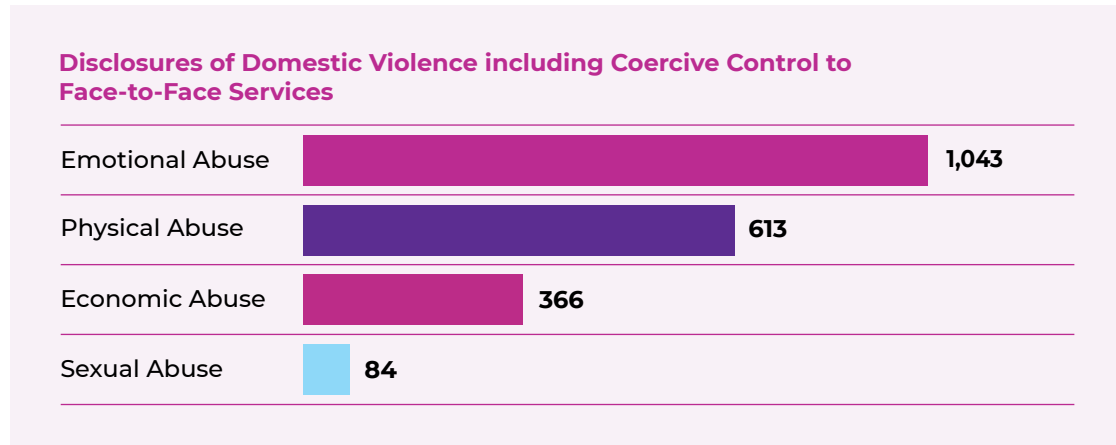


Figure 9: Disclosures of Domestic Violence including Coercive Control to our Face-to-Face Support Workers in 2020

There were 171 disclosures of abuse against children made to our support workers in 2020.

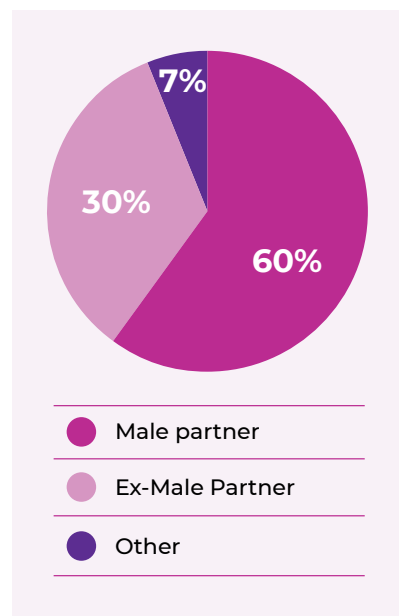


Figure 10: Relationship with Abuser

## 1.2.4 The Abuser

Across our Face-to-Face Services, women were primarily abused by current or former male intimate partners. **Of the women who disclosed to us who the person perpetrating the abuse was, 60% said they were abused by a current male partner** - 49% disclosed that they had been abused by their husband with 11% having been abused by a male intimate partner. **A total of 33% of service users disclosed that they had been abused by an ex-partner** – 4% had been abused by an ex-husband and 30% had been abused by an ex-male partner. In addition, 7% of women were subjected to domestic violence and abuse by a male or female family member or another person whose identity they did not disclose.

## 1.2.5 Information, Referral and Advocacy

In 2020, there were 1,548 provisions of information, referrals and advocacy made during contacts with Women's Aid Face-to-Face services. The majority of this work was carried out within the context of the legal system including liaising with the Gardaí, this occurred 1,054 times. Service-users were provided with information on or referred to other Women's Aid services such as the One-to-One Service or the D.A.I.S services at Dolphin House 170 times. This work was carried out 16 times in relation to domestic violence refuges or housing, 135 times in relation to local domestic violence services, 23 times in relation to counselling services and 20 times in relations to Social Workers or Social Protection. There were 123 instances of information, referral and advocacy made in relation to other support.

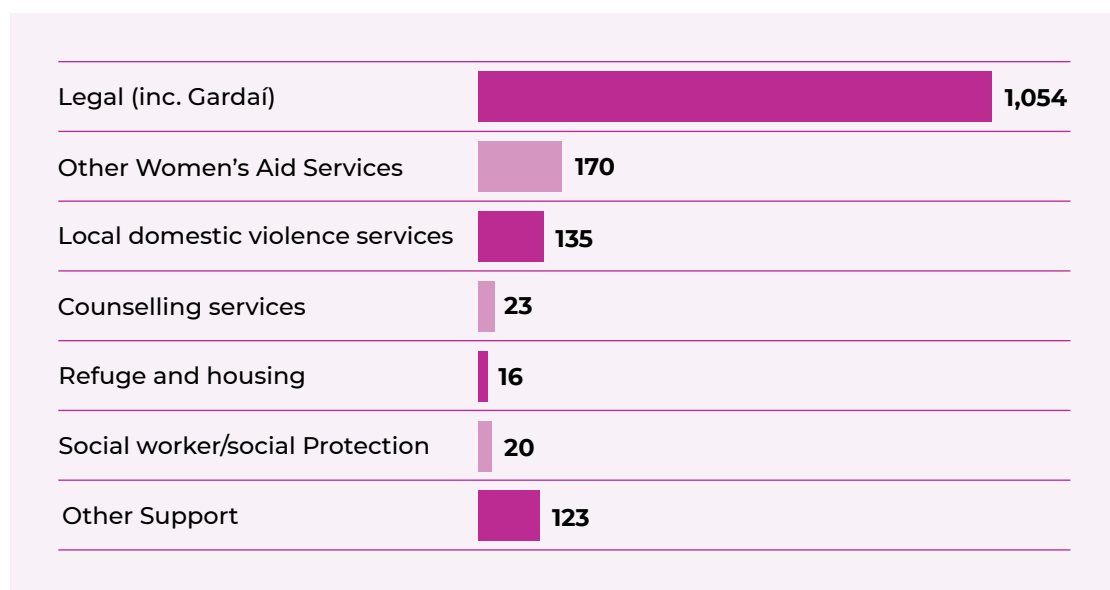


Figure 11: Information, advocacy and referrals by the Women's Aid Face-to-Face Support Services

## Maria's Story\*

Maria from South County Dublin was married to her husband who was abusive to her for two years before she separated from him in late 2019 taking their two young children with her. However, she struggled financially because her husband only paid child maintenance sporadically. Despite obtaining a safety order against her husband, Maria continued to experience ongoing threats of violence and psychological abuse from him.

Maria started engaging with the Women's Aid Domestic Abuse Information and Support Service in the summer of 2020. She received financial assistance through the service in the form of vouchers for food and clothes for both her children and for herself. However, the ongoing threats from her husband were taking their toll on her. Maria's Support Worker felt that she would benefit from some additional support and she was referred to the Women's Aid One-to-One Support Service.

Maria continued engaging with the Women's Aid Face-to-Face Services. With the help of her Support Worker, she applied for legal aid and was able to proceed with legal action against her husband for non-payment of child maintenance. Maria's Support Worker also referred her to other specialized services in her community, so that her specific additional support needs could be addressed locally. Maria is now looking forward to a brighter safer future for her and her children with more security and stability.



\*Name has been changed to protect this person's identity.

## 1.2.6 High-Risk Support Project 2020

The High-Risk Support Project provides a multi-agency response to women at a high-risk of ongoing severe violence and homicide from their ex-partners. Women's Aid partners with An Garda Síochána and local domestic violence services to deliver a coordinated, rapid response system for these women and children. The High-Risk Support Project is generously supported by the Vodafone Foundation Ireland and the Department of Justice.

In 2020, the High-Risk Support Project supported 273 women.

In the course of delivering the High-Risk Support Project, Women's Aid identified a need for women who are at a high-risk of domestic violence and abuse by an ex-partner to have **enhanced security in their homes**. Some women on the High-Risk Support Project reported that:

- they were too afraid to leave the house, but felt completely unsafe and at risk in their own homes.
- they were living in homes where they had been subjected to severe domestic violence and abuse and the perpetrators were still threatening them, even though the relationship had ended.
- they would sit in their homes with the lights off and the curtains drawn, afraid that their abuser was watching them.
- Others reported sleeping with a knife under their pillow or not sleeping at all as they kept watch to make sure they and their children were safe.



As part of the High-Risk Support Project risk assessment process, new service-users are now offered a **home security assessment in which recommendations for safety improvements are made by a Garda Crime Prevention Officer**. Funding to make the recommended improvements is provided by Women's Aid through the Vodafone Emergency Fund. In 2020 a number of safety improvements to service-users' homes were made including the **installation of monitored alarm systems, video doorbells, enhanced locks on doors and windows, security film on windows, new front doors and provision of CCTV cameras**.

## Emma's Story\*

After years of enduring domestic violence and abuse, Emma left the relationship with her children. She continued to be in fear of ongoing threats from her ex-partner despite moving to a location he was unaware of. She became a service-user on the High-Risk Support Project in 2017. Later that year her ex-partner found out where she was staying and approached her. He would arrive at her home and shout outside, threatening to kill her. As part of the High-Risk Support Project, the Gardaí assisted her immediately and arrested the perpetrator. Her ex-partner was found to have a dangerous weapon in his possession. He was charged with multiple breaches of a domestic violence order and with possession of a weapon and was sentenced to prison. Emma was extremely relieved and felt that she could finally breathe a little easier as she and her children were safe.

The Garda National Protective Services Bureau monitor all High-Risk Support Project service users closely. They were aware that Emma's ex-partner could possibly appeal the sentence he had been given and that he could be released before his scheduled release date. For this reason, the Gardaí stayed in close contact with Emma and she stayed at the secure, supported accommodation. Emma was updated regularly about her ex-partner's situation and when his release date arrived, the Gardaí promptly informed Emma so that she could put a safety plan in place.

Emma and the Gardaí had a strong line of communication and because of this Emma felt confident enough to make a full statement to the Gardaí on the history of her relationship with her ex-partner. Charges were brought against Emma's ex-partner on a number of serious offences that had happened over the course of their relationship, including serious assaults. While the perpetrator awaits trial, Emma continues to be supported by the Gardaí and specialist domestic violence services and they will work with her throughout the upcoming court cases.

Emma says:

**“I would never have gotten away from him without the help I received. I am forever grateful for the service.”**







The background is a vibrant, abstract composition of various shapes and patterns. It features large, overlapping shapes in shades of purple, blue, and teal. Some shapes are solid colors, while others contain patterns like white speckles or horizontal stripes. The overall effect is dynamic and modern.

## Section 2

# Spotlight:

A Family Law System  
that is Failing Women  
and Children Subjected  
to Domestic Violence  
and Abuse

## 2.1 Introduction

Women's Aid is deeply concerned by the failings of the Irish Family Law system when it comes to protecting women and children from domestic abuse. The issues we raise in this spotlight section are based on Women's Aid's direct knowledge from women and children impacted. Change is urgently needed and our recommendations should be fully implemented.

### 2.1.1 Domestic Abuse and Children

Children are often the unseen victims of domestic abuse both during the relationship and after separation. Child can be direct targets. Child abuse often co-occurs with domestic abuse including coercive control of the mother. Moreover, domestic abuse is in itself a form of emotional abuse of the child, even if not directly targeted<sup>6</sup>, as recognised by Tusla guidelines.<sup>7</sup>

It is essential to understand that children are impacted even when they are not directly targeted. Children know their mother is abused, are in constant fear she may be hurt or killed, and feel the violence in many ways.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, her parenting capacity and availability to the children may be impacted by the abuse.

Separation often does not end the abuse and it may in fact increase it for both women and children. After separation:

- Children may be directly abused (physically, sexually and emotionally) or neglected by the perpetrator during the time spent with them.
- Children are emotionally abused when forced to witness the abuse of their mother, for example, during change over and by having to live in ongoing fear and anxiety due to the actions of the abuser.
- Children are emotionally abused by the undermining of the relationship and bond with their mother (for example through lies and manipulation), which is critical to their healing.<sup>9</sup>
- Non-payment (or erratic payment) of Maintenance is used as a form of financial abuse and control, resulting in many children having to live in poverty and deprivation
- Children may become homeless when having to flee the home, with significant disruption to their lives, education, social contacts and sense of stability.
- Perpetrators continue to control children's lives by denying consent to activities and therapies, including denying consent to therapeutic counselling to deal with the effects of domestic violence.

6 Barnardos, 2016, What's the harm? A child centered response to domestic abuse. <https://www.barnardos.ie/media/1186/whats-the-harm-2016.pdf>

7 Tusla, 2018, Child Protection and Welfare Practice Handbook 2, available at [https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Tusla\\_Child\\_Protection\\_Handbook2.pdf](https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Tusla_Child_Protection_Handbook2.pdf)

8 See Barnardos conference Empowering Children: the Impact of Domestic Violence on Children, 3rd June 2021, <https://www.barnardos.ie/resources/childhood-domestic-violence-abuse>

9 See in particular Bancroft and Silverman, The Batterer as Parent: Addressing the Impact of Domestic Violence on Family Dynamics, 2002, Sage Publications

“I know the differences when the car door closes. Sometimes he can’t even be on his best behavior for five minutes in a car park. I know the kids feel on edge in his presence. Even if my four-year-old begs me not to go, I can’t help him as it’s the law”

—**Samantha\*, 36**

“For me it’s the uncertainty and the anxiety that it brings. There is always aggression. It can be looks, mutters, throwing children’s bags or rage. He used to roughly handle our youngest as a baby and would rev the car when I bent down to pick the bags up that he dumped. The silent treatment was a relief most of the time however, it was also used to create fear. Turning his back when I ask a question or to give information about a child who is ill. Rage and loss of control is terrifying. I’ve learned to stay emotionless and engage only when I must.”

—**Ciara\*, 29**

## 2.1.2 What we know

In 2020, there were:

- 5,948 disclosures of abuse against children to the 24hr National Freephone Helpline and Face-to-Face support services.
- 114 reports of a child being abused during access visits.
- 515 disclosures of women being abused while facilitating access visits.
- 35% of our court support accompaniments were with women attending the court in relation to Custody, Access and Maintenance. This percentage is lower than usual due to the limited services the courts were able to provide during the Covid-19 emergency.
- 24% of women contacting Women’s Aid were abused by a former partner or spouse. Many of these women have children with their abuser and need to access the Courts in relation to children’s matters.

## 2.1.3 Domestic Abuse as Core Business of the Family court

While there is no data in Ireland on the prevalence of domestic abuse in Family Law cases, evidence from research conducted in other countries suggests a high prevalence of domestic abuse in such cases. For example:

- A recent UK study found that allegations or findings of domestic abuse in samples of child arrangements/contact cases range from 49% to 62% indicating a much higher prevalence of domestic abuse than in the general population.<sup>10</sup>
- A recent Australian report states that the majority of parents using the courts to resolve parenting arrangements experienced emotional and/or physical violence, with **46% reporting safety concerns for themselves or their children (or both)** as a result of ongoing contact with the other parent.<sup>11</sup>
- The Rape Crisis Network Ireland (RCNI) suggested that a significant proportion of family separation and child custody cases going through our family courts, involve the rape and sexual abuse of children by family members in the absence of a parallel criminal conviction.<sup>12</sup>

## 2.2 Main Issues with Family Law System Process and Outcomes

Both our on the ground experience and national research<sup>13</sup> show that the Family Law system fails many women and children who are separating from a domestic abuser. The process is prolonged, costly and dis-empowering. It often results in unsafe custody and access arrangements which **disregard the impact of domestic abuse including coercive control on children and overlook the risk of their direct abuse and/or exposure to domestic violence**. The safety of the mother is rarely, if ever, considered in custody and access hearings.

In particular, women have repeatedly informed Women's Aid of the following issues for decades:<sup>14</sup>

- A pro-contact culture that prioritises the right of access of the abuser over the safety and welfare of the child and mother.
- The history of domestic abuse is not identified, or when identified, it is minimised and dismissed, leaving women unable to protect their children and themselves.
- The women's well founded fears about the physical safety and the psychological well-being of their children, are often not heard.
- There is a lack of communication between, and inconsistency around what is considered a crime in, the Family and Criminal Courts. This means that criminal behavior is not taken into account in the Family Law Court even when the abuser has been convicted

10 Minister of Justice, 2020, Assessing Risk of Harm to Children and Parents in Private Law Children Cases

11 Australian Law Reform Commission, March 2019, Family Law for the Future — An Inquiry into the Family Law System Final report

12 RCNI, Submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Justice and Equality, February 20th 2019

13 Holt "A Case of Laying Down the Law: Post-Separation Child Contact and Domestic Abuse" Irish Journal of Family Law Vol. 14 No.4 Winter 2011. Holt, Post-separation Fathering and Domestic Abuse: Challenges and Contradictions, Child Abuse Review Vol. 24: 210–222 (2015)

14 Women's Aid, Child Custody and Access in the context of Domestic Violence: Women's Experiences and the Response \ of the Legal System", 2003.

Women's Aid, Unheard and Uncounted: Women, Domestic Abuse and the Irish Criminal Justice System, 2019. Available here: [https://www.womensaid.ie/assets/files/pdf/unheard\\_and\\_uncounted\\_-\\_women\\_domestic\\_abuse\\_and\\_the\\_irish\\_criminal\\_justice\\_system\\_full\\_report.pdf](https://www.womensaid.ie/assets/files/pdf/unheard_and_uncounted_-_women_domestic_abuse_and_the_irish_criminal_justice_system_full_report.pdf)

Note that women were not specifically asked about Family Law, however, issues relating to family law spontaneously and consistently came up during the consultation, demonstrating this is a very critical issues

of serious offences (such as assault or sexual assault), against the mother or a sibling of the child, if the offence was not against the child for whom access is sought. This fails to acknowledge the impact of witnessing abuse against family members and the risk of further abuse. Similarly, orders issued under the Domestic Violence Act 2018 are not taken into account as domestic violence is considered a “separate issue”.

- The voice the child is not heard, particularly when the child does not want contact.
- A lack of understanding of the dynamics of domestic abuse and of coercive control tactics and their impacts, by key stakeholders in Family Court processes and hearings, including lawyers, judges and Section 32 reporters.
- A lack of understanding that separation does not end domestic abuse, and that the best interest of the child means protecting **both the child and the non-abusing parent** from further abuse.
- The Family Law Court processes are used as yet another tool of abuse by the abuser causing delays and adjournments, not paying Maintenance or making numerous applications for breaches for variation of access. Women are compelled into protracted legal proceedings with the abuser, with significant financial and emotional impacts.
- Access is granted in cases where it puts the children and the non-abusing parent at risk and exposes them to abuse. Most of the time the access is unsupervised, regardless of the level of danger posed by the abuser. In the rare cases when supervised access is ordered by the court, there are no supervised contact facilities, leaving women to supervise the visits themselves and putting their own safety at risk.
- Lack of adequate legal representation for children’s matters litigated in the context of domestic abuse.
- The use of the discredited concept of Parental Alienation (or similar constructs by other names) prevents disclosure of abuse from being made and heard in the Family Court and increases the risk that orders are made in favour of abusive fathers, leaving abused mothers silenced and unable to protect their children.

“I was hopeful when Section 32 was ordered by the court. I thought at last someone would see that this man is not fit to have children overnight. Instead, I was made out to be a crazy, overprotective mother, denying him access. I was blamed for trying to protect my children. I cannot believe that the courts are putting women and children in danger”.

—Geraldine\*, 44





“My husband is very clever and he never has his paper work for court. He has free solicitor and I have to pay because I work. I pay my solicitor a lot of money because if my husband has not got his paper work the court can't go ahead till another time and I have to pay my solicitor again for the next date. I also have to get more time off work and pay for my kids to be minded. I am still paying for a loan to pay my solicitor”.

—Mary\*, 49





## About Parental Alienation

Women's Aid has serious concerns about the use of the term 'parental alienation' in the context of domestic abuse cases. In these cases, the focus should be instead on the **crime of coercive control**, which is the prevailing context in these situations. This should be the primary focus for the understanding and the determination of risk to children and non-abusing parents.

Research shows that when fathers claim alienation, the rate at which mothers lose custody shoots up from 26% to 50% for any abuse allegation. When courts credit the alienation claim, rates of maternal custody losses increase more drastically, from an average of 26% where there is no alienation claim, to 50% where alienation is claimed, to 73% where alienation is credited by the court. That is, fathers' alienation claims roughly double mothers' rates of losing custody; primarily in child abuse cases.<sup>15</sup>

Women's Aid support many mothers every year who are falsely accused of parental alienation and risk losing custody of their children. We also hear from many mothers whose children are taken from them and manipulated through coercive controlling behaviours to ally with the abusive parent.

In both scenarios where 'parental alienation' is offered to identify the problem, the broader context of a power imbalance, and complex abusive tactics may not be taken into account at all. Many survivors feel strongly that parental alienation is used against women and is not helpful, including where fathers have taken and manipulated the children. They feel the Courts do not take into account that the relationship was abusive beforehand and do not consider its relevance. Some are also reporting to us a '**catch 22 situation**' where they were advised by solicitors during the early stages of the separation process not to contest custody or access arrangements and not to mention abuse. Subsequently, when the abusive parent refuses to return the children/makes abuse claims against the mother/ turns the children against her and moves to gain full custody – the mother tries to highlight the abusive history of the relationship but is challenged because she never raised it previously. A lose, lose situation.

### 2.2.1 Overarching Recommendations for Change

The current plans for transformation of the Family Justice system and the establishment of a dedicated Family Law court present considerable opportunities for much needed improvement.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, Family Court Service responses to the Covid-19 emergency can be drawn upon to make the Family Courts more accessible and responsive.

For these welcome reforms to deliver safety to abused women and children, it is essential that domestic abuse is recognised as a prevalent and major issue in Family law and that any reform is designed with a comprehensive understanding the dynamics and impacts of domestic abuse including coercive control at its centre and not as a side issue.

- The reform of the Family Law system must be predicated on a shift that brings the safety of the child and the non-abusive parent to the centre of intervention and decision making when domestic abuse is present.
- The voice of the child must be heard and respected including the child's right to limit or sever contact with an abusive parent.

<sup>15</sup> Meier, J.S. (2020) U.S. child custody outcomes in cases involving parental alienation and abuse allegations: what does the data show? *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law*, 42:1, 92-105

<sup>16</sup> Department of Justice Action Plan 2021, Objectives and 2021 Actions 72-76, [http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Department\\_of\\_Justice\\_Action\\_Plan\\_2021.pdf/Files/Department\\_of\\_Justice\\_Action\\_Plan\\_2021.pdf](http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Department_of_Justice_Action_Plan_2021.pdf/Files/Department_of_Justice_Action_Plan_2021.pdf)

## 2.3 Other Issues of Concern

### 2.3.1 Screening

It is vital that domestic abuse cases are identified early on and reported accurately in the proceedings so they can be prioritised and managed appropriately within the Criminal Justice System. Where there is an order under the Domestic Violence Act 2018, or where there are relevant criminal proceedings, these cases can and should be easily identified. However, a screening process is needed for the many cases where there are no orders or criminal charges.

#### Recommendations

- The Family Law Court should develop a screening process to identify domestic violence and child abuse cases as early as possible.
- Custody and access cases, where domestic violence or child abuse are alleged, should be fast tracked and case managed.

### 2.3.2 Safety and Support

Once domestic abuse cases are identified, Women's Aid believe there should be a risk assessment and management process, carried out by trained specialists, with the safety of children and the non-abusive parent at the centre.

The court should be provided with an expert assessment on the safety and welfare of the child, the risk the abuser may pose in any arrangement that is being considered (including emotional abuse due to witnessing domestic violence) and the voice of the child. This assessment should be provided a timely manner to guide the Court in making its recommendations.

Linkages with the Criminal Courts and child protection agencies is critical to ensure the Family Law Court has all relevant information, regarding other legal proceedings that may be in-train, in relation to the family in both the Family and the Criminal Justice Systems.

#### Recommendations

- The Family Law Court should have sufficient numbers of **trained and regulated child assessors** to provide free reports for cases where domestic violence or child abuse are present. They should be trained in the dynamics of domestic abuse including coercive control, the impact on children of being directly targeted or exposed to domestic violence - as well as how to ascertain the views of the child.
- A scheme to provide Family Law Courts with specialist domestic violence advocates should be established, to provide support, safety-planning, risk-assessment and management and referrals to long-term support as needed. This could be modelled on the Domestic Abuse Information and Support service in Dolphin House Family Law Court.
- Linkages between the Family Law Court, the Criminal Law Court and Child Protection need to be developed to identify how they can collaborate to maximise the safety of children and the protective parent.
- Children should be linked with specialist child advocates to assist them in relation to the child's involvement in relevant proceedings.
- State funded Child contact centres should be established to support safe contact between children and parents where risk, or vulnerability is a factor.

### 2.3.3 Training

Many women report to us that key professionals in the Family Law Courts do not understand the dynamics and impact of domestic abuse on themselves and their children and this lack of understanding impacts negatively on many decisions. Training of all professionals, including the judiciary, solicitors, mediators, child assessors and court personnel is urgent and essential. Training on hearing the voice of the child is also needed. Children are still mostly invisible in proceedings. Decisions that have a significant impact on their lives are made within a system that **does not hear** them. We know, however, that children want to have a voice. They want to be listened to.<sup>17</sup>

#### Recommendations

- Appropriate training is provided to all professionals working in the Family Law Courts. Such training needs to include a clear understanding of the dynamics and impacts of domestic violence including coercive control, post-separation abuse, risk-assessment and how children experience domestic abuse.
- Professional Training on hearing the voice of the child and different methods to do so according to the child's age, capabilities and wishes, should also be provided.

### 2.3.4 Remote access to the courts

Access to the courts can be difficult for many women due to disability, geographical isolation, lack of transport, childcare or lack of money. For some, even the court premises can be unsafe as they risk coming into contact with the abuser in the waiting areas or coming/leaving the Court. The Family Court response to the Covid-19 emergency has included innovative responses, such as online proceedings. These could provide a very valuable option for women for whom travelling to court may be unsafe or unfeasible. Such improvements are welcomed and should continue to be built upon even when the Covid-19 emergency has passed.

#### Recommendation

- Drawing on the Courts' response to Covid-19, increase remote access to the courts, including online applications and remote hearings.

<sup>17</sup> Barnados Conference, op cit.

## 2.3.5 Maintenance

Seeking and enforcing Maintenance from an abusive partner is stressful, costly and at times dangerous<sup>18</sup>.

Abusers often do not pay the agreed amount or pay erratically and partially. When women try to enforce Maintenance through the courts, abusers find myriad ways to delay the process on purpose. Adjournments and appeals may mean that enforcement proceedings are protracted and, in the meantime, no maintenance is paid. Women have to keep going back to the court, which is costly both emotionally and financially.

For many women, trying to enforce Maintenance through the courts is a stressful, costly and prolonged process, which they may have to go through time and again and which often only brings partial and temporary relief.

Many women simply give up, even with the consequence of struggling financially. Women's Aid believes that maintenance enforcement should not rely on individual women having to go to court. It should be the state's role to hold parents responsible for their maintenance obligations to their children.

### Recommendation

- The Government should establish and fully resource an independent Statutory Maintenance Authority, separate from the family courts, to manage and enforce payments of maintenance.

## 2.4 Conclusion

For almost five decades Women's Aid has been listening to, and supporting thousands and thousands of women whose experiences paint **a picture of a system that does not hear them and does not see the harm abusive fathers continue to cause to children after separation.**

When the Family Law system dismisses women and children's experiences of abuse and prioritises the right to contact of abusive fathers over the right to safety of children, this can be utterly devastating. Mothers feel they are unable to protect their children and that they cannot really end the abuse, even after leaving.

At this moment in time the many initiatives underway to reform both the Family and the Criminal Law systems present an unprecedented opportunity.

**There is a chance to radically improve the experiences and outcomes of women and children going through the difficult and dangerous process of separating from an abuser.**

The system can and should act to help break the coercive bond that has controlled them. We need to listen to their voices and finally put **safety first** in Family Law.

More detailed information on Women's Aid position in regards to Family Law Reform is available on our website.

<sup>18</sup> Women's Aid, Submission to the Child Maintenance Review Group, March 2021, available at [https://www.womensaid.ie/assets/files/pdf/child\\_maintenance\\_review\\_group\\_submission\\_womens\\_aid\\_march\\_2021.pdf](https://www.womensaid.ie/assets/files/pdf/child_maintenance_review_group_submission_womens_aid_march_2021.pdf)

The background is a solid dark blue color. In the top right corner, there are several thin, curved pink lines that resemble a stylized feather or a fan. On the left side, there are several overlapping, semi-transparent light blue shapes that look like stylized leaves or petals. At the bottom, there are thick, light blue curved lines that form a stylized, abstract shape, possibly representing a flower or a leaf.

**Section 3**

**2020  
Highlights**

# A Special Thank You to our Volunteers

Women's Aid would like to thank our volunteers for the outstanding work that they do. Women's Aid recruits volunteers, who undertake extensive specialist training to work alongside our staff on 24hr National Freephone Helpline. We also have a number of committed volunteers who are a part of the Women's Aid Charity Shop Team.

The amazing volunteer contribution for 2020 amounted to **1,831 hours worked on the Women's Aid 24hr National Freephone Helpline** and **536 hours worked in the Women's Aid Charity Shop** in Dundrum, Dublin 14. During what was a very challenging year for many, our volunteers remained committed to supporting women subjected to domestic violence and abuse. They went above and beyond and we are truly grateful for all of their hard work and commitment. THANK YOU!

## 3.1 Training and Development

### 3.1.1 In total, Women's Aid ran 24 training events to a total of 230 participants in 2020<sup>19</sup>

The delivery of training was impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic and this resulted in a reduction in the number of training events we could run and the number of people we could reach in 2020. All scheduled training had to be cancelled from March to May as the Training and Development Department adapted to a world without the classroom and moved to converting our training to an online format. This required desk-based research on what platforms we could use (and how to use them), the creation of new training materials and the adaptation of training methodologies to suit the virtual world. We still wanted our training to be interactive, participatory and based on experiential learning so we had to think creatively. Training had to be shorter and done in smaller groups to allow for some level of meaningful participation.

In June we ran our first online training session. The half-day session, '**Domestic Violence Awareness Online Training**', was very well received and the feedback was positive. In 2020, we trained staff from the local area drugs taskforce groups, youth services, family resource centres, community-based addiction services, home school community liaison services, homeless services, children's services, counselling support services, Citizens Information Services and banking personnel.

Domestic violence and abuse training became more important and more sought after as the year progressed and workers got used to the 'new normal' which included the adapting of their services due to lockdowns and staff working from home. There was an increased awareness of domestic violence and abuse and how the pandemic was impacting those at risk of suffering abuse.

<sup>19</sup> We acknowledge the funding support we received under the Scheme to Support National Organisations (SSNO), administered by Pobal on behalf of the Department of Rural and Community Development, without which much of this work would not be possible.



In 2020 we also ran our online training with a group of prospective volunteers for the **Women's Aid 24hr National Freephone Helpline**. All nine of the Helpline training modules converted to an online delivery format. One advantage of the online format is that participants can access the training from different parts of the country without the need to travel and this gives Women's Aid a wider reach in volunteer recruitment.

Although 2020 was a tough year, the Training and Development Department managed to respond to the need for domestic violence training thus contributing to safer and better-informed services for women who are subjected to abuse in the home. As one training participant put it, **"Fantastic and eye opening. A must for anyone dealing with the public as situations are nuanced and sensitive. One right move by one person could make so much difference to the person suffering this kind of abuse."**

## 3.2 Communications and Campaigns: Raising Awareness and Providing Hope

In 2020, Women's Aid continued to lead the way in raising awareness and providing information on domestic violence and abuse to victims and survivors, their families and friends and their wider communities. Our annual public awareness campaigns and communications activity are a vital way to highlight the prevalence, nature and impact of domestic violence/ intimate relationship abuse in Ireland. We also engage with the media to promote the 24hr National Freephone Helpline and other specialist support services. **Women's Aid featured in over 300 media items in 2020 including on national TV, local and national radio, national and local newspapers and on many online news sites.**



## 3.2.1 Highlights



Artist Kinmx applies the finishing touches to the Women's Aid Too Into You Mural at Curve Street, Dublin 2 in November 2020. (Pic: Sharpix)

At the beginning of the year, we launched our **Manifesto for the 2020 General Election**, providing a list of our top ten priorities for the forthcoming government to protect the women and children of Ireland from domestic violence and abuse. We also launched an **Ask Your Candidate leaflet** with four key questions for voters to ask their candidates related to domestic violence and abuse.

We launched our **Too Into You National Public Information and Awareness Campaign** on Valentine's Day 2020 which is aimed at raising awareness of intimate relationship abuse against young women. The campaign ran from the 14<sup>th</sup> of February to **International Women's Day** on the 8<sup>th</sup> of March. The campaign signposted young

women to a number of tools and resources including a **Guide to Safety Orders in Intimate Relationships**, the **Ten Key Signs of Intimate Relationship Abuse** and an **Online Safety Guide**. The campaign highlighted the Women's Aid **Instant Messaging Support Service** available at [womensaid.ie](http://womensaid.ie) and [toointoyou.ie](http://toointoyou.ie)

On International Women's Day, we also ran our **8 Facts for March 8 campaign** across our social media channels to raise awareness of the prevalence and nature of domestic violence/intimate relationship abuse and the help available through the Women's Aid 24hr National Freephone Helpline and Instant Messaging Support Service.

One week into the **Covid-19 emergency** restrictions in March, Women's Aid sought to focus minds on the reality of life for women trapped at home with abusive partners during the Covid-19 pandemic. We ran radio, print and online advertisements nationally and locally to promote the availability of the 24hr National Freephone Helpline and other specialist support services for anyone subjected to domestic violence and abuse during this time. All media was generously provided free of charge by the radio stations and publishers.

A key part of the Women's Aid communications strategy at this time was to use social media to reach out to **women facing additional barriers in seeking help**. We produced informational videos for social media including one for deaf and hard of hearing women in Irish Sign Language, another highlighting the interpretation service on the 24hr National Freephone Helpline and a specific message for Traveller and Roma women subjected to domestic violence and abuse.

The impact of this communications strategy quickly became evident with significant media coverage and sharing of the content on social media. The issue of domestic violence and abuse was placed firmly on the political agenda and has thankfully remained to the fore of the Irish people's hearts and minds throughout the emergency. Women's Aid partnered with the Department of Justice and other frontline service providers on the **'Still Here'** initiative aimed at informing victims and survivors that services are still open and available during the crisis.

In our **Annual Impact Report 2019** launched on the 20<sup>th</sup> August 2020, we showcased our work for 2019 alongside a special Covid-19 supplement: **When Home is Not Safe**. The supplement outlined the effect of Covid-19 restrictions on women and children across Ireland subjected to domestic violence and abuse. **Over 650 people attended the launch** which heard from Roderic O'Gorman, T.D., the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. Other panellists included Garda Commissioner Drew Harris and Justice Colin Daly, President of the District Court.

Women's Aid commissioned **new research on intimate relationship abuse against young people in 2020**. The project was carried-out in partnership with RED C Research and Marketing and included a nationwide survey conducted with 500 young men and women across Ireland and a number of in-depth focus groups. The research findings, published in November 2020, showed that: **1 in 5 young women had been subjected to intimate relationship abuse and that 51% of the women had been under the age of 18 when the abuse started.**<sup>20</sup> The report also showed that **one out of two of the young women who had been abused, were abused online using digital technology**. Young women found this tactic of abuse to be particularly draining and felt almost inescapable due to the 'always on' nature of online life.

The Report was launched on the UN Day Opposing Violence against Women on the 25th of November with over 900 people attending our online seminar. Michael D. Higgins, An Uachtarán, gave a special address to the gathering highlighting the important work of Women's Aid and other organisations working to support victims of domestic abuse.

**“I welcome the opportunity to commend most warmly Women's Aid on the new Report which you are launching today, shining a light as it does on a particular, and perhaps less researched, aspect of gender violence, that of relationship abuse among younger women.”**

**—Michael D. Higgins, Uachtarán na hÉireann**

The event marked the beginning of our **new look Too Into You Campaign**. Minister for Justice Helen McEntee, T.D., launched the Report. Other panellists included Senator Ivana Bacik and Professor Clare McGlynn from Durham University, an expert on image-based sexual abuse and Clare Austick, Vice President for Welfare at the Union of Students of Ireland.

### **3.2.2 Femicide Watch**

In 2020, we continued our **Femicide Watch** project by tracking the killing of girls and women by men in Ireland in order to illustrate the dangers of domestic violence and abuse and to increase protections for women and children. **In 2020, 3 women died violently**. This means that **since we began tracking figures in 1996 until 2020, 236 women have died violently**. In 2021, we will continue this work to bring to light the extent and impact of men's fatal violence against women in Irish society.<sup>21</sup>

### **3.2.3 Women's Aid Online**

There were **290,586 visits to the Women's Aid website in 2020**. With a monthly average of 24,215 visits. In 2020, 86% of visitors were first time users of the website. Our stand-alone website on dating abuse **TooIntoYou.ie received 19,742 visits**. We continue to use social media to highlight the issues of domestic violence and abuse and engage with supporters. By the end of 2020, we had a community of over **19,700 followers on Twitter** and over **37,400 followers on Facebook**. We also had almost **7,000 followers on our Instagram account** and **7,200 followers on LinkedIn**.

<sup>20</sup> the research also showed that 1 in 11 young men were subject to intimate relationship abuse

<sup>21</sup> Women's Aid, Femicide Factsheet, 2020, available at: [https://www.womensaid.ie/assets/files/pdf/womens\\_aid\\_femicide\\_factsheet\\_2020.pdf](https://www.womensaid.ie/assets/files/pdf/womens_aid_femicide_factsheet_2020.pdf)



## 3.3 Fundraising: A Lifeline of Support

Women's Aid was **overwhelmed in 2020 by generous support from individuals, groups and companies** who responded to the call to help women and children subjected to domestic violence abuse during the Covid-19 emergency. When everyone was going through a very difficult time, when we didn't know what was coming next, many people's first thought was to help others. We successfully ran two virtual walking challenges in February and July with over **5,000 people across the country walking 80KM in their own time and in their own way** to raise vital funds and awareness of our 24hr National Freephone Helpline and other work to combat domestic violence and abuse. The annual **VHI Women's Mini Marathon** still went ahead, albeit **virtually**, and as always, we had amazing supporters participating for Women's Aid.

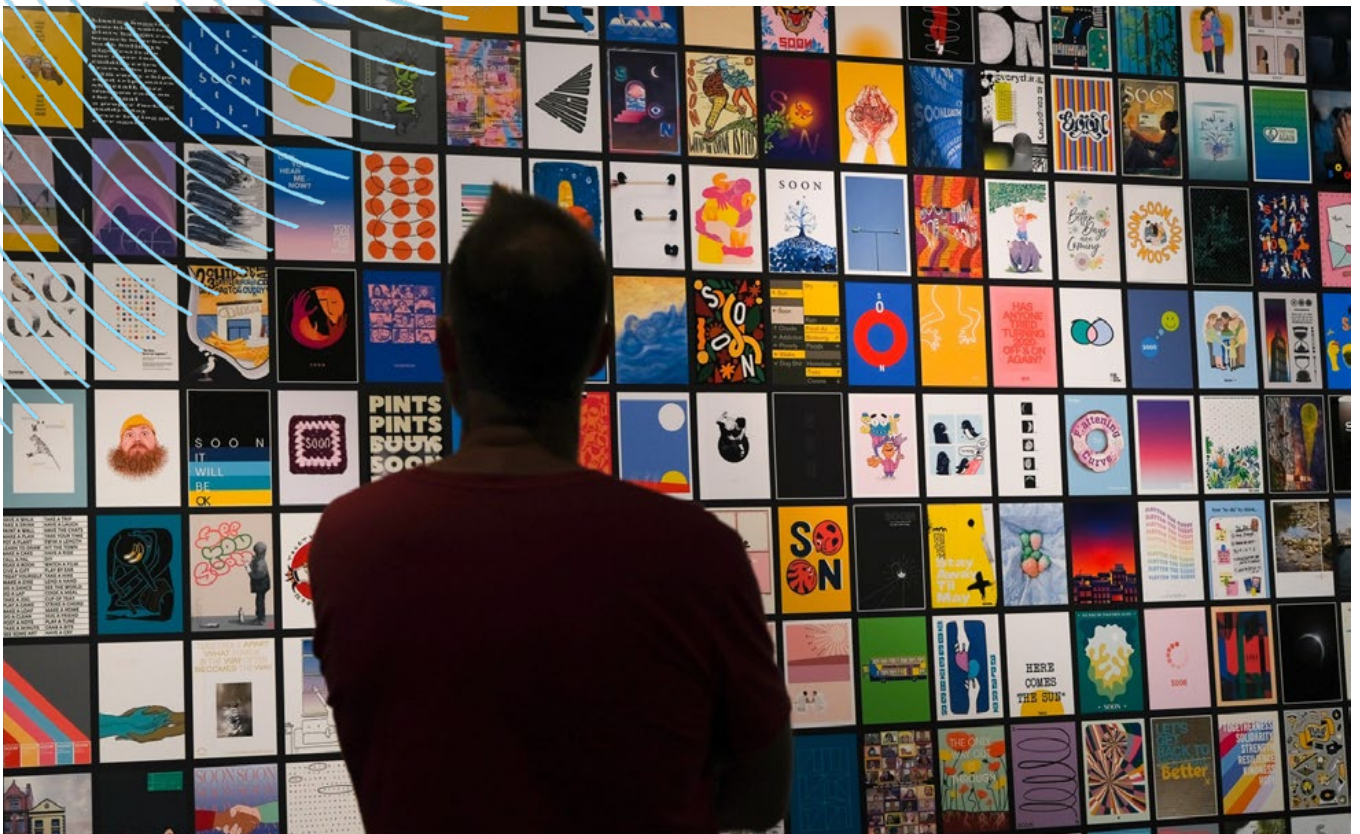


During lockdown our supporters got **creative with their fundraising** and we had multiple **yoga classes, songs, dance classes, head shaves, bingo, online quizzes, raffles and even a Malin Head to Mizzen Head walk** in support of Women's Aid. **Creatives against Covid, Meitheal na mBan**, a song by **Mick Flannery** and performance by **Lisa Hannigan** at the National Art Gallery of Ireland, the **An Post #SendLove** fundraising campaign were among highlights of a very difficult year.

We were honoured to receive a number of **legacy donations** and are moved by the fact that a number of people chose Women's Aid to entrust a portion of their estate to after their death to in order to support our ongoing work to increase safety and protection for women and children.

**Once-off and regular donations** and grants by individuals, companies, foundations and groups of people in the community continue to be the backbone of our organisation. Their commitment and generosity make a huge difference.

The incredible support received by Women's Aid in 2020 is supporting the delivery of our essential frontline services such as the **24hr National Freephone Helpline**, our **Instant Messaging Support Service and other Face-to-Face Support Services**. It also supports the **Women's Aid Legal, Security and Emergency Fund** and has helped the organisation establish a **Covid-19 Emergency Fund for 2021** which will offer assistance to women and children who are accessing support from our colleagues delivering refuge and domestic violence services across the country.



Creatives against Covid Exhibition 2020 showcasing some of the fantastic original artwork which raised money for Women's Aid and ISPC Childline.

This public support has helped Women's Aid to begin new and innovative projects in 2021. These include: an exciting **three-year project with maternity services** to increase support and referrals of pregnant women subjected to domestic violence and abuse; a 2-year plan to further enhance and **expand awareness of the Too Into You resources and support pathways for younger adults**; working to adapt several of our other **training offerings** to an online format; building on the Women's Aid testimonies **project to enhance survivor, support engagement and collaboration; strategic research** opportunities and much more.

None of this would be possible without the extraordinary support and trust of each person and organisation that donated to us in 2020.

**To each and every one of our supporters we say THANK YOU.**



## 3.4 Working for Justice and Positive Government Action



Launch of the Women's Aid Election Manifesto February 2020 at Leinster House, Dublin 2. (Pic: Sharpix).

Women's Aid works with Government to share our frontline expertise and provide recommendations on improving systemic responses and protections for women and children experiencing domestic violence and abuse. In addition, Women's Aid brings the concerns and issues of women experiencing domestic violence and abuse to a number of national and local fora.

As part of our **submission to the programme for Government 2020**, we campaigned for increased support in the workplace for women subjected to domestic violence. Women's Aid is now engaging with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth Affairs, to ensure the introduction of **statutory paid Domestic Violence Leave** through new legislation.

Our work towards **reforming and resourcing the Criminal Justice System** to meet the needs of domestic violence survivors also continued in 2020. We did so in the form of a Submission to Public Consultation on the Criminal Justice Sectoral Strategy last summer. We also made a Submission to the Review of Part IV of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017.

We submitted feedback on the O'Malley Report review in September 2020. As part of the implementation of the Report, we are working towards ensuring the provision of **training on responding to victims of sexual and domestic violence crimes** for all key stakeholders. We are part of a Department of Justice subgroup on specialist training (legal and otherwise) for those engaging with victims of sexual crimes and vulnerable witnesses, on another working to improve the victims journey through the Criminal Justice System.

In parallel to the work on statutory paid leave, we are engaging with **private employers** to assist their **development and roll out of Employee Domestic Violence Policies**. Our aim is to make workplaces safer and more responsive to staff suffering domestic abuse.

In 2020, we continued our advocacy calling for reform and resourcing of the **Family Law Court System** so that family law proceedings are conducted in safe and appropriate circumstances especially in relation to domestic abuse.

Women's Aid, as national leaders on the issue of domestic violence and abuse, have contributed to the **Citizen's Assembly on Gender Equality**. In March 2020 we made submission to the Assembly on the causal links between domestic violence and gender inequality highlighting the connections between domestic violence, unpaid care work, women in leadership and economic inequality.



Women's Aid also contributed to the **government audit on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence (DSGBV)** and we hope to work with government to review the current structures in place to manage policy responses to DSGBV.

Making a number of submissions, Women's Aid helped to shape the **Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020 (Coco's Law)** which commenced on the 9th of February 2021. The Act created three new offences in relation to image-based sexual abuse and harmful communications. This new legislation is a vital step towards increasing protections for women, and young women in particular, from abuse and harassment online. During 2020, we were also delighted to collaborate and make a range of joint submissions with colleagues from the domestic violence, sexual violence and children's organisations.



## 3.5 Representation and Membership

In 2020, we continued our **representation roles** at:

- Barnardos' Childhood Domestic Violence Project: Advisory Committee
- Children and Young People's Services Committee
- Consultation on Training for Prosecutors in Relation to Vulnerable Victims
- Focus Ireland Research Advisory Group
- Familicide and Domestic Homicide Review Study: Advisory Group
- Legal Aid Board External Consultative Panel
- National Monitoring Committee on the Strategy to Combat Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence
- The SAVE Forum
- Steering Group on Education and Learning for Domestic Violence Workers
- Tusla Accommodation Review Advisory 2020 – 2021
- Tusla Service-user Consultation Advisory

And our **membership roles** at:

- Irish Observatory on Violence against Women and Girls
- The National Women's Council of Ireland
- SAFE Ireland
- St. Mary's Community Employment Project<sup>22</sup>
- Women Against Violence Europe (WAVE)
- The Wheel

<sup>22</sup> We are delighted to have a number of colleagues join us under a CE Scheme on the St. Mary's Community Employment Project.

The background features a vibrant pink and purple color palette. In the upper right, there are overlapping circular shapes with a speckled, textured appearance. A large, dark blue scribble is positioned in the lower right quadrant. The overall design is modern and abstract.

**Section 4**

**Financial and  
Administration  
Information**

## 4.1.1 Objectives and Activities

### The main object for which the company is established is:

Women's Aid is the leading national organisation that has been working in Ireland to stop domestic violence against women and children since 1974. We work to make women and children safe from domestic violence by offering support to women and their families and friends, providing hope to those affected by abuse and working towards justice and social change. The Women's Aid Constitution sets out the main objectives for which the Company was established:

1. To provide a range of high quality, specialized, integrated, domestic violence services to protect and assist women and children experiencing domestic violence. These high-quality specialised services to include but not limited to the operation of a helpline, a court accompaniment service, a training unit and a one-to-one service enabling women experiencing domestic violence to attend for a meeting with a staff member of Women's Aid.
2. To be a centre of excellence for the provision of training to frontline responders to the issue of domestic violence.
3. To bring the experiences, needs, concerns and requirements of women and children experiencing domestic violence to the legislative and policy making fora and to continue to lobby for changes in domestic violence legislation in order to keep in step with ever changing social and political times.
4. To be a centre of excellence for the development of professional and organisational responses to women and children experiencing domestic violence.
5. To articulate the reality of domestic violence, the impact of domestic violence on women and children and the community and the need and opportunities for change.
6. To use the expertise, knowledge and experience of the organisation to promote the protection and welfare of children of all ages and teenagers living with or at risk of domestic violence.
7. To be an informed organisation responsive to the needs and interests of women and children experiencing domestic violence.
8. To hold fundraising events for the purpose of raising money for the organisation in order to assist it in achieving its stated objectives and goals.

## 4.1.2 Financial Summary 2020

Women's Aid is a company limited by Guarantee not having share capital.

Income and Expenditure	2020	2019
<b>Annual Funding</b>		
Tusla	744,114	702,648
Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform	126,895	114,500
Department of Community and Rural Development (POBAL)	89,975	84,925
Vodafone High Risk Support Project	24,031	24,031
Other Grant Income	195,667	42,625
Trading Activities (Charity Shop and Training)	104,241	185,852
Donations / Fundraising	2,257,964	653,565
<b>Total Income</b>	<b>3,542,887</b>	<b>1,808,146</b>
<b>Total Expenditure</b>	<b>(1,896,245)</b>	<b>(1,628,242)</b>
<b>Operating Surplus for the year ****</b>	<b>1,646,642</b>	<b>179,904</b>

Balance Sheet	2020	2019
<b>Fixed Assets</b>		
Tangible Assets	618,078	615,946
<b>Current Assets</b>		
Debtors	207,332	89,410
Cash at Bank and in hand	3,032,410	1,470,003
	<b>3,239,742</b>	<b>1,559,413</b>
<b>Creditors: amounts falling due within 1 year</b>	<b>(356,689)</b>	<b>(320,870)</b>
<b>Net current assets</b>	<b>2,883,053</b>	<b>1,238,543</b>
<b>Total assets less current liabilities</b>	<b>3,501,131</b>	<b>1,854,489</b>
<b>Funds of the charity:</b>		
Restricted Reserves	19,214	-
Unrestricted funds - designated	2,611,974	1,395,462
Unrestricted funds - general	869,943	459,027
<b>Total Funds</b>	<b>3,501,131</b>	<b>1,854,489</b>

Unrestricted funds - Designated	2020	2019
6 months operational costs plus costs of closure	1,258,788	1,258,788
Essential works to Women's Aid head office	398,068	106,674
Website and strategic planning	37,500	30,000
Women's Aid COVID 19 Fund	300,000	-
Women's Aid (Internal) Legal, Security and Emergency Fund	102,000	-
Maternity Outreach Project ( Year 2 & 3 Costs)	269,000	-
Too Into You Project costs (over 2 years)	121,894	-
Survivor Engagement /Power to Change Programme ( over 2 years)	124,724	-
<b>Total Designated Funds</b>	<b>2,611,974</b>	<b>1,395,462</b>

\*\*\*\* While the 2020 surplus indicated above is €1,646,642, the board have designated €1,216,512 of these funds to designated funds for specific initiatives, bringing this fund to a total of €2,611,974. Therefore the actual surplus for 2020 after designation of funds is €430,130. COVID-19 has affected both demand and funding for the charity sector. Women's Aid in particular is facing increases in demand for our services. There is reason to believe that this demand will only increase in the coming months. Based on the Boards consideration of the current economic situation due to COVID 19 and the effects that this may have on the future funding of Women's Aid, the Board believe that the level of unrestricted reserves after designation is satisfactory and are approaching next year with caution. The board will continue to monitor the level of reserves on a monthly basis.

## Remuneration of Staff

Numbers of staff in receipt of in excess of €60,000 per annum

€60,000 - €70,000: 1 person

€80,000 - €90,000: 1 person

## 4.1.3 Independent Auditors Report

### Opinion

We have audited the financial statements of Women's Aid Company Limited by Guarantee for the year ended 31 December 2020 which comprise the Statement of Financial Activities, Statement of Comprehensive Income, the Statement of Financial Position, the Statement of Cash Flows and the related notes. The relevant financial reporting framework that has been applied in their preparation is the Companies Act 2014 and FRS 102 The Financial Reporting Standard applicable in the UK and Republic of Ireland. In our opinion the financial statements:

- give a true and fair view of the state of the company's affairs as at 31 December 2020 and of its surplus for the year then ended;
- have been properly prepared in accordance with FRS 102 The Financial Reporting Standard applicable in the UK and Republic of Ireland; and
- have been prepared in accordance with the requirements of the Companies Act 2014.

### Basis for opinion

We conducted our audit in accordance with International Standards on Auditing (Ireland) (ISAs (Ireland)) and applicable law. Our responsibilities under those standards are further described in the Auditor's responsibilities for the audit of the financial statements section of our report. We are independent of the company in accordance with the ethical requirements that are relevant to our audit of financial statements in Ireland, including the Ethical Standard issued by the Irish Auditing and Accounting Supervisory Authority (IAASA), and we have fulfilled our other ethical responsibilities in accordance with these requirements. We believe that the audit evidence we have obtained is sufficient and appropriate to provide a basis for our opinion.

### Conclusions relating to going concern

In auditing the financial statements, we have concluded that the directors' use of the going concern basis of accounting in the preparation of the financial statements is appropriate. Based on the work we have performed, we have not identified any material uncertainties relating to events or conditions that, individually or collectively, may cast significant doubt on the Company's ability to continue as a going concern for a period of at least twelve months from the date when the financial statements are authorised for issue. Our responsibilities and the responsibilities of the directors with respect to going concern are described in the relevant sections of this report.



## Other information

The directors are responsible for the other information. The other information comprises the information included in the annual report, other than the financial statements and our auditor's report thereon. Our opinion on the financial statements does not cover the other information and, except to the extent otherwise explicitly stated in our report, we do not express any form of assurance conclusion thereon.

In connection with our audit of the financial statements, our responsibility is to read the other information and, in doing so, consider whether the other information is materially inconsistent with the financial statements or our knowledge obtained in the audit or otherwise appears to be materially misstated. If we identify such material inconsistencies or apparent material misstatements, we are required to determine whether there is a material misstatement in the financial statements or a material misstatement of the other information. If, based on the work we have performed, we conclude that there is a material misstatement of this other information, we are required to report that fact.

We have nothing to report in this regard.

## Opinions on other matters prescribed by the Companies Act 2014

Based solely on the work undertaken in the course of the audit, we report that in our opinion:

- the information given in the Director's Report is consistent with the financial statements; and
- the Director's Report has been prepared in accordance with applicable legal requirements.

We have obtained all the information and explanations which we consider necessary for the purposes of our audit. In our opinion the accounting records of the company were sufficient to permit the financial statements to be readily and properly audited, and the financial statements are in agreement with the accounting records.

## Matters on which we are required to report by exception

Based on the knowledge and understanding of the company and its environment obtained in the course of the audit, we have not identified any material misstatements in the directors' report. We have nothing to report in respect of our obligation under the Companies Act 2014 to report to you if, in our opinion, the disclosures of director's remuneration and transactions specified by sections 305 to 312 of the Act are not made.

## 4.1.4 Respective Responsibilities

### Responsibilities of directors for the financial statements

Responsibilities of director for the financial statements. As explained more fully in the Director's Responsibilities Statement, the director is responsible for the preparation of the financial statements and for being satisfied that they give a true and fair view, and for such internal control as the directors determine is necessary to enable the preparation of financial statements that are free from material misstatement, whether due to fraud or error.

In preparing the financial statements, the director is responsible for assessing the company's ability to continue as a going concern, disclosing, as applicable, matters related to going concern and using the going concern basis of accounting unless the director either intend to liquidate the company or to cease operations, or have no realistic alternative but to do so.

### Auditor's responsibilities for the audit of the financial statements

Our objectives are to obtain reasonable assurance about whether the financial statements as a whole are free from material misstatement, whether due to fraud or error, and to issue an auditor's report that includes our opinion. Reasonable assurance is a high level of assurance, but is not a guarantee that an audit conducted in accordance with ISAs (Ireland) will always detect a material misstatement when it exists. Misstatements can arise from fraud or error and are considered material if, individually or in the aggregate, they could reasonably be expected to influence the economic decisions of users taken on the basis of these financial statements.

A further description of our responsibilities for the audit of the financial statements is located on the IAASA's website at: [http://www.iaasa.ie/Publications/Auditing-standards/International-Standards-on-Auditing-for-use-in-Ire/International-Standards-on-Auditing-\(Ireland\)/ISA-700-\(Ireland\)](http://www.iaasa.ie/Publications/Auditing-standards/International-Standards-on-Auditing-for-use-in-Ire/International-Standards-on-Auditing-(Ireland)/ISA-700-(Ireland)). This description forms part of our auditor's report.

The purpose of our audit work and to whom we owe our responsibilities.

This report is made solely to the company's members, as a body, in accordance with section 391 of the Companies Act 2014. Our audit work has been undertaken so that we might state to the company's members those matters we are required to state to them in an auditor's report and for no other purpose. To the fullest extent permitted by law, we do not accept or assume responsibility to anyone other than the company and the company's members as a body, for our audit work, for this report, or for the opinions we have formed.

**Ian Lawlor for and on behalf of:**

**JPA Brenson Lawlor**

**Chartered Accountants, Statutory Audit Firm**

**Argyle Square, Morehampton Road, Donnybrook Dublin 4, D04 W9W7**

**Date: 19<sup>th</sup> May 2021**



## 4.1.5 Sources of Funding

Approximately 50.7% of expenditure was funded by statutory funders in 2020. This funding was used to support the organisation in the delivery of frontline services, training delivery and strategic public awareness raising.

The statutory sources were as follows, and as specified in the financial pages of this audit report:

- Tusla, Child and Family Agency
- The Department of Justice (Commission for the Support of Victims of Crime)
- Department of Community and Rural Development (POBAL)

The funds received from all statutory sources are restricted for a fixed period.

The remainder of Women's Aid expenditure in 2020 is funded through fundraising donations and non-statutory grants.

## 4.2 Reference and Admin Details

Women's Aid is a Company Limited by Guarantee with a registered Office at 5 Wilton Place, Dublin 2, D02 RR27.

Women's Aid is also a charity (Charity Reg No. 20012045).

The Company Registration Office number is 58035 and the CHY number is 6491.

### 4.2.1 Board Members in 2020

Ailbhe Smyth

Temenuzhka Raycheva Yonkova

Rachel Mullen

Maura McLaughlin

Jennie O'Reilly (Appointed 20<sup>th</sup> May 2020)

Suzanne Handley (Appointed 17<sup>th</sup> June 2020)

Niamh Ni Dhomhnaill (Appointed 6<sup>th</sup> November 2020)

Ursula Regan (Resigned 17<sup>th</sup> June 2020)

Mary Troy (Resigned 18<sup>th</sup> March 2020)

Bethany Lynch (Resigned 17<sup>th</sup> June 2020)



## 4.2.2 Governance

The company conducts an annual appraisal of its own performance, that of its Board and other Committees, and that of individual Board members. Particular emphasis is given to delegation of responsibilities, communication channels and methods, skill sets and skill gaps, training needs and relevant external factors (such as changes in legislation and regulatory frameworks).

A comprehensive Governance Document is in place to support the operations of the Board, in conjunction with the Women's Aid Constitution.

During 2020 Women's Aid completed a compliance report in accordance with the Charities Governance Code.





**TÚSLA**  
An Ghníomhaireacht um  
Leanaí agus an Teaghlach  
Child and Family Agency



Rialtas na hÉireann  
Government of Ireland



An Roinn Dlí agus Cirt  
agus Comhionannais  
Department of Justice  
and Equality

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[womensaid.ie](http://womensaid.ie)

24hr National Freephone Helpline 1800 341 900  
Registered charity number 6491  
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