

August, 2021

Submission to the Joint Committee on Justice on women's shelters/domestic abuse refuges



Women's  Aid

Executive Summary

As a leading frontline responder and social change organisation, Women's Aid welcomes the opportunity to offer our views to the Committee on the important topic of shelters/refuges for women escaping domestic violence and abuse.

This submission makes a number of recommendations, which are summarised below.

Recommendations

- 1) Initiate and start immediate planning for a national domestic abuse prevalence survey
- 2) Carry out further in-depth research to understand the intimate relationship abuse experienced by young people aged 18 to 25 from a larger sample size than the recent Women's Aid research, to learn more about the prevalence, types of abuse that they are experiencing and the impacts of the abuse.
- 3) Plan and carry out urgent research on the prevalence of intimate relationship abuse amongst under 18s to inform prevention and intervention work with minors.
- 4) Provide refuges in counties where there are currently none as part of overall increase in refuge places.
- 5) Increase the number of refuges/refuge places available to meet the Istanbul Convention standard. Refuges should be designed/reconfigured towards independent family units with the communal living model phased out.
- 6) Consider how to best meet the need for refuge of diverse minority groups (such as LGBTQ+, ethnic minorities, marginalised groups, disabled people) through dedicated services and/or enhancing cultural competencies and access to mainstream refuges.
- 7) Consider how to best meet the needs for refuge of victims of other forms of gender-based violence such as prostitution/human trafficking and forced marriage.

- 8) Provide funding for specialist children's supports in all refuges
- 9) Provide adequate statutory funding for refuges and other specialist domestic violence services to meet the increase in demand from women, and to maintain compliance with Covid-19 (and any future public health mandated) precautions.
- 10) Increase funding for the 24hr National Freephone Helpline to provide for additional staff.
- 11) Fund qualified external supervision support for all domestic abuse specialist services workers.
- 12) Measures should be set up within the Department of Social Protection to waive the immediate need for court evidence of non-payment of ordered Maintenance in order to access full social welfare entitlements should be continued as a permanent measure to be responsive to the (often urgent) economic needs of domestic abuse survivors.
- 13) A pro-active and victim-centered approach embodied by Operation Faoiseamh should be continued and become Garda routine procedure, even after the end of the pandemic.
- 14) All members in all sections of the Garda (including the Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) to be briefed on their obligations under the Garda Domestic Abuse Policy. The pro-arrest approach, which is part of the Garda Domestic Abuse policy must be maintained.
- 15) Training on the dynamics and impacts of coercive control should be rolled out to all frontline members of An Garda Síochána, to support their work responding to calls and the effective roll-out of their new risk assessment tools.
- 16) A comprehensive strategy for move on and long term accommodation for victims of domestic abuse needs to be developed. This could include inter alia:
 - a) ensuring that any national homeless/housing Strategy is both gender-sensitive and explicitly inclusive of the specialist and various housing needs of victims of domestic abuse, including children
 - b) maintaining the special access to Rent Supplement for victims of domestic violence, implemented as a response to the pandemic, beyond the end of 2021
 - c) addressing local authorities housing criteria that hinder domestic violence victims accessing priority local housing
 - d) exploring measures to support women to **safely** remain or return to their homes, removing the perpetrator – which may also include mortgage assistance (see [here](#))
 - e) increase the provision of alternative and step-down supported accommodation such as the Safe Home Model and the Transitional Housing model
 - f) increase social housing stock to meet demand

Introduction

1. Women's Aid is a leading national organisation that has been working in Ireland to stop domestic violence¹ against women and children since 1974. In this time, the organisation has built up a huge body of experience and expertise on the issue, enabling us to best support women and share this knowledge with other agencies responding to women experiencing domestic violence. More information on Women's Aid is available on womensaid.ie.

2. Women's Aid appreciates the opportunity to make a submission to the Joint Committee on Justice on women's shelters/domestic abuse refuges. Given our remit, we will respond to the questions in the consultation paper in relation to domestic abuse on women and children only.

3. Women's Aid also acknowledges the work recently undertaken by the Child and Family Agency TUSLA to review emergency accommodation provisions in Ireland for victims/survivors of domestic abuse, and support the inclusion of the substance and recommendations of this review by the Committee in its considerations of this important matter.

1. The impact and incidence of domestic abuse against women, children and men respectively

4. Domestic abuse is highly prevalent in Ireland and it has serious, long-lasting and multi-faceted impacts on women and children, as summarised below.

¹ While recognising that the legal term in Ireland is 'domestic violence' we acknowledge that many victims/survivors identify more with the term 'domestic abuse' or 'intimate partner violence' or 'intimate relationship abuse'. Women's Aid uses these terms interchangeably in this submission to refer to the same set of abusive behaviours perpetrated by current or former intimate partners (including emotional, physical, sexual and financial abuse and coercive control).

Incidence of domestic violence

5. The FRA European Union-wide survey on violence against women² has found that in Ireland:

- 31% of women have experienced some forms of psychological violence by a partner since age 15. This includes: 23% of women experiencing controlling behaviour, 10% economic violence, 24% psychologically abusive behaviour and 6% threats to /abuse of children. Many women experienced more than one forms of abuse.
- 12% of women in Ireland have experienced stalking since age 15. In 50% of these cases the perpetrator was a partner or former partner.

6. The FRA report also included limited data about women with children:

- Of the women who have experienced violence by a current or a previous partner, 73 % indicated that their children were aware of the violence³.

In 2020, like in previous years, the great majority of the women who used Women's Aid one to one services for the first time had children. We know from the FRA report above that children are often aware of the violence experienced by their mothers and therefore we can confidently assume that a number of children in Ireland are aware of their mothers being abused physically, emotionally, sexually and financially by her partner or ex, who is often their father. **This is a recognised form of emotional abuse of children.**

7. Note that the FRA report was published in 2014, with data collected in 2012. The data is therefore nearly 10 years old. It is essential that a national domestic abuse prevalence survey is planned and carried out in Ireland urgently.

² European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Violence Against Women: an EU-wide survey Main results, 2014 Tables 2.1, 2.3 and 4.2. For detailed forms of psychological abuse see the data explorer, <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/data-and-maps/survey-data-explorer-violence-against-women-survey>

³ Unfortunately, this data is at EU level and is not disaggregated by member states.

8. More recent data on young people's (18 to 25 years old) experiences of intimate partner abuse was collected and published by Women's Aid in 2020⁴. Our research found:

- 1 in 5 young women and 1 in 11 young men have suffered intimate relationship abuse
- 1 in 6 young women and 1 in 13 young men have suffered coercive control by a partner or ex-partner
- 51% of young women affected experienced the abuse when they were under the age of 18.

Recommendations

- 1) Start immediate planning for, and initiate a national domestic abuse prevalence survey
- 2) Carry out further in-depth research to understand the intimate relationship abuse experienced by young people aged 18 to 25 from a larger sample size than the recent Women's Aid research, to learn more about the prevalence, types of abuse that they are experiencing and the impacts of the abuse.
- 3) Plan and carry out urgent research on the prevalence of intimate relationship abuse amongst under 18s to inform prevention and intervention work with minors.

Impacts on women

9. Domestic abuse has serious impacts on **women's mental and physical health**. Women may suffer a range of injuries, from bruises and scratches to broken bones, internal injuries, concussion, miscarriages. Some of these injuries may have irreversible impacts, such as nerve damage, loss of hearing and disfigurement.

⁴ Women's Aid, 2020, One in Five Report: <https://www.womensaid.ie/about/policy/publications/one-in-five-women-report-experience-intimate-relationship-abuse-womens-aid-2020/>



10. Tragically for some women, domestic abuse ends in their murder. Women’s Aid latest femicide report⁵ found that 236 women died violently between 1996-2020 in Ireland. Of the resolved cases, 55% were killed by a partner or ex-partner.

11. Women also suffer severe mental health impacts, which may include loss of self-confidence, isolation, depression, severe anxiety, difficulties in sleeping or concentrating, PTSD, substance misuse/, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts.

Women in Ireland reported the following long term impacts of abuse to the FRA survey ⁶:

Depression	33%
Anxiety	35%
Panic attacks	18%
Loss of self confidence	55%
Feeling vulnerable	49%
Difficulty in sleeping	36%
Concentration difficulties	18%
Difficulties in relationships	31%
Other	1%

Table 1: Long term psychological consequences of the most

12. Domestic abuse has also significant impacts on women’s **financial situation, employment prospects, risk of poverty and homelessness.**

⁵ [womensaid.ie/assets/files/pdf/womens_aid_femicide_factsheet_2020.pdf](https://www.womensaid.ie/assets/files/pdf/womens_aid_femicide_factsheet_2020.pdf)

⁶ Fundamental Rights Agency of the EU, Gender-based violence against women survey explorer 2012, <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/data-and-maps/survey-data-explorer-violence-against-women-survey>

13. Many women experience economic abuse as part of the overall experience of coercive control. They may have no access to the family money and assets and the perpetrator may incur debts in their name, affecting their credit rating. When separating, women may accept unfair division of property and assets due to coercion, fear of the perpetrator or lack of accurate knowledge about the family's financial assets.

14. They are prevented from working, or their work is disrupted and sabotaged by the perpetrator, with the abuse affecting their attendance and productivity. "Domestic violence has been shown to cause disrupted work histories, high rates of absenteeism, lower personal incomes, frequent changes

15. Women may have to leave the home for their safety. If remaining in the home without the perpetrator they may be unable to continue paying the mortgage or rent. Domestic abuse is a key driver of women and children's homelessness. The housing crisis has made finding affordable accommodation increasingly difficult for women and children escaping domestic abuse.

16. Costly, protracted and stressful legal proceedings (both in the Family and the Criminal court) continue to have a negative impact on women after separation both mentally and financially. A recent Safe Ireland report estimates the aggregated cost of domestic violence over a woman's journey to safety (which may last years) at €113,475 per woman, with lost income/productivity as the largest economic cost⁷. The report also found that women faced significant challenges in relation to homelessness and housing.

⁷ NUI Galway and Safe Ireland (2021) Assessing the Social and Economic Costs of DV:
<https://www.safeireland.ie/nearly-e113500-over-20-years-the-high-cost-of-domestic-violence-to-a-woman/>

17. It is worth noting that separation does not always end the violence but whether the abuse ends or not after separation, **the impacts on the woman's health, employment prospects, housing and financial security often persist for the long term.**⁸

18. For some migrant women, domestic abuse may impact on their ability to remain in Ireland legally.

19. For the young women in our 2020 research, the impacts mentioned were: losing self-esteem, suffering anxiety and depression, withdrawing from family and friends, stopping attending work or college, suicidal thoughts/attempting suicide, needing treatment for physical injuries and living in fear.

Impacts on Children

20. The link between child abuse and domestic violence has been clearly established. Domestic violence is very common in settings where child abuse takes place. International research demonstrates both the co-occurrence of child abuse with domestic violence and the impact of domestic violence on the developmental needs and safety of children⁹. It has also been found that the more severe the domestic violence, the more severe the abuse of children in the same context¹⁰.

⁸ See ANROWS Domestic violence and women's economic security: Building Australia's capacity for prevention and redress: Final report, October 2016

⁹ See for example Hogan, F. and O'Reilly M. (2007) Listening to children: Children's stories of domestic violence. Office of the Minister for Children/Department of Health and Children. Dublin
S. Holt et al, "The impact of exposure to domestic violence on children and young people: A review of the literature", Child Abuse and Neglect 32 (2008) 797–810).

The Australian Domestic & Family Violence Clearinghouse and The University of New South Wales for the Benevolent Society, The Impact of Domestic Violence on Children: A Literature Review, 2011

UNICEF Child Protection Section, Behind Closed Doors the Impact of domestic violence on children, 2006
Barnardos, 2016, What's the harm? A child-centred response to domestic abuse

¹⁰ M. Hester et al., Making an Impact - Children and Domestic Violence: A Reader: 2nd edition, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2007

21. Between 1996 - 2020, **18 children were killed** alongside their mothers in intimate partner femicide cases with a further **134 children being left to cope with the death of their mother.**

22. Exposure to domestic violence is recognised as a form of emotional abuse, as acknowledged in Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children. These guidelines recognise that **being exposed to domestic violence is in itself a form of child abuse** and is detrimental to the child's emotional wellbeing, **even when the child is not directly targeted** by the perpetrator of violence.

23. The impacts on children recorded by Women's Aid in our work with mothers include: injuries, feeling guilty, insecure, anxious; lowered sense of self-worth, having difficulties in sleeping, bed-wetting, experiencing difficulties in school, and the mother-child bond being undermined. Children may also be impacted by: the instability of having to relocate, losing friends, changing schools, lack of secure accommodation/homelessness, and by poverty and deprivation due to the perpetrator financial abuse during the relationship and after separation.

2. The geographical provision of shelters for domestic abuse

24. Currently the following counties do not have a refuge: Carlow, Cavan, Laois, Leitrim, Longford, Monaghan, Offaly, Roscommon and Sligo.

25. It is important that women and children are provided with emergency accommodation in their county/ local area. Being able to access refuge locally means that women and children are able to maintain employment, school and contact with family, friends and community, thus reducing the disruption to their lives of having to leave their home. However, women and children may need to go to a refuge in another county for confidentiality or safety reasons, for example if they need to physically distance themselves from the perpetrator, and they should be able to do so without restrictions.

Recommendation

4) Provide refuges in counties where there are currently none as part of overall increase in refuge places

3. The incidence of domestic abuse in LGBTQ+ relationships

26. We are not aware of any data regarding the prevalence of domestic abuse in LGBTQ+ relationships in Ireland. Research from other countries however, suggest that the LGBTQ+ community experience a high rate of domestic abuse and face additional barriers to reporting abuse and accessing services.

27. For example, a recent GALOP report¹¹ summarises prevalence data in the UK as follows (note that 'domestic abuse' includes intimate partner abuse **and** family members abuse):

More than one in four gay men and lesbian women and more than one in three bisexual people report at least one form of domestic abuse since the age of 16.

Lesbian women report similar rates of domestic abuse to that of heterosexual women.

Bisexual women are twice as likely to disclose intimate partner violence compared to heterosexual women.

Gay and bisexual men might be twice as likely to experience domestic abuse compared to heterosexual men.

Prevalence rates of domestic abuse may be higher for transgender people than any other sections of the population.

¹¹ M. Field & J. Rowlands. Commissioning for inclusion: Delivering services for LGBT+ survivors of domestic abuse. Galop.London.2020 Available at <https://galop.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/LGBT-Commissioning-Guidance-final-2.pdf>

28. SafeLives¹² highlights that the LGBTQ+ community is not accessing services at the same rate of the non LGBTQ+ population and when they do, they have more complex needs. They recommend both specialist LGBTQ+ domestic abuse support services and ensuring cultural competence in mainstream services so that they are more accessible and responsive to the LGBTQ+ community.

4. The Istanbul Convention and its Impact on the provision of refuge accommodation

29. 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).

Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to provide for the setting-up of appropriate, easily accessible shelters in sufficient numbers to provide safe accommodation for and to reach out pro-actively to victims, especially women and their children.

Article 23 – Shelters

30. The Explanatory Report to the Convention makes it clear that shelters need to be specialist women's shelters as they provide much more than a safe place to stay. Generalist homeless shelters are not equipped to provide the necessary support and empowerment¹³. In terms of defining sufficient numbers, the report states:

135. This provision calls for shelters to be set up in sufficient numbers to provide appropriate temporary accommodation for all victims. Each type of violence requires a

¹² SafeLives, 2018, Free to be safe: LGBT+ people experiencing domestic abuse, <https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Free%20to%20be%20safe%20web.pdf>

¹³ Council of Europe, Explanatory Report to the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence—CETS 210 – Paragraphs 133 and 134

different kind of support and protection, and staff need to be trained to provide these. The term “sufficient numbers” is intended to ensure that the needs of all victims are met, both in terms of shelter places and specialised support. The Final Activity Report of the Council of Europe Task Force to Combat Violence against Women, including Domestic Violence (EG-TFV (2008)6) recommends safe accommodation in specialised women’s shelters, available in every region, with one family place per 10 000 head of population. However, the number of shelter places should depend on the actual need. For shelters on other forms of violence, the number of places to be offered will again depend on the actual need (emphasis added).

31. Women’s Aid would argue that Ireland does not meet this standard for the following reasons:

- the number of family places available is 145 in 22 refuges. According to WAVE this represents only 30% of the places that should be available for the population of Ireland¹⁴.
- the Explanatory report states that “the number should depend on actual need”. Women’s Aid has noted with alarm for a number of years that refuges are often unable to take in women needing emergency accommodation, because they are full. For example, 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 on which we have data, 68% of the times the refuge said that they were full¹⁵.

Safe Ireland has highlighted for years the number of women and children who cannot access refuges due to lack of places. In 2018 they counted **3,256 unmet requests** because the services were full¹⁶. This problem predates the Covid-19 pandemic and points to the fact that there are not enough refuges to meet “actual need”.

¹⁴ Wave Country Report 2019: https://www.wave-network.org/wp-content/uploads/WAVE_CR_200123_web.pdf

¹⁵ Women’s Aid Annual Impact Report 2020: https://www.womensaid.ie/assets/files/pdf/womens_aid_annual_impact_report_2020.pdf

¹⁶ Safe Ireland, Election 2020, Manifesto for a Safe Ireland for all: <https://www.safeireland.ie/policy-publications/>

- Some counties do not have a refuge, denying women and children emergency accommodation in their community, as discussed above.
- There are not specialist refuges to accommodate women victims of all types of violence covered by the Convention, such as FGM or forced marriage or specialist refuges for minority groups.

32. Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the limitations of the communal living model of refuges: this model is not fit for purpose, as compliance with the national social distancing guidelines only served to minimise capacity and deny access to safety for hundreds of families. This model had previously been criticised due to lack of privacy and difficulty of access for women with older boys. The Pandemic has given us insight into what is working well and what is not in appropriate refuge provision: we should take the opportunity to reconfigure refuges moving away from communal living and towards independent family units.

33. Innovative solutions to face the Covid-19 pandemic, such as the partnership between Airbnb, Safe Ireland and Women's Aid to provide free emergency accommodation through Airbnb with support provided by specialist domestic violence services, is a welcome but temporary stopgap and not a long term solution to the lack of refuge spaces and other alternative accommodation solutions in Ireland.

Recommendations

- 5) Increase the number of refuges /places available to meet the Istanbul Convention standard. Refuges should be designed/reconfigured towards independent family units with the communal living model phased out.
- 6) Consider how to best meet the need for refuges for diverse minority groups (such as LGBTQ+, ethnic minorities, marginalised groups, disabled people) through dedicated services and/or enhancing cultural competencies and access to mainstream refuges
- 7) Consider how to best meet the needs for refuge of victims of other forms of gender-based violence such as prostitution/human trafficking and forced marriage.
- 8) Provide funding for specialist children’s supports in all refuges.

5. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and of the recommendations to stay at home during periods of lock-down on incidences of domestic violence/ the numbers of people seeking refuge from domestic violence

34. The Covid-19 pandemic does not directly cause domestic abuse, but it has certainly exacerbated it. Women’s Aid has seen an unprecedented increase in disclosures of abuse in the last year:

Disclosures of abuse	2019	2020	Comparison
Total disclosures	24,049	30,841	+28%
Abuse Against Women	19,258	24,893	+29%
Emotional Abuse	12,742	17,321	+36%
Physical Abuse	3,873	4,792	+24%
Economic Abuse	2,034	1,925	-5%
Sexual Abuse	606	855	+41%
Abuse against Children	4,791	5,948	+24

Table 2: Comparison of disclosure of abuse to Women’s Aid 2019-2020

35. The impact of the lock-downs include the following:

- There were more opportunities for the abuser to monitor, control and harass victims/survivors **all the time**.
- Women and children were locked in the home with the abuser without the respite that would normally be provided by the abuser leaving the home for work, shopping or socialising or by the woman herself being able to do so.
- The continuous presence of the perpetrator made it more difficult and risky for women to access support through either formal and/or informal networks.
- The pandemic has provided an excuse for abusers to justify and minimise their actions by putting them down to stress, lack of work, or lack of money due to the pandemic restrictions. It also provided a new tool to abuse women, especially vulnerable ones, with the perpetrator refusing to follow Covid-19 precautions, spitting on them and putting them at risk.
- Women found it more difficult to leave their abuser, with emergency accommodation being extremely difficult to access. Many refuges had to reduce capacity to comply with Covid-19 prevention measures. Safe Ireland report that between March and August 2020, 1,352 requests for refuge could not be met because there was no space, an average of 8 per day¹⁷. Between September and December 2020, unmet requests for refuge's were 808, an average of 7 per day¹⁸.
- Staying with family or friends or 'couch surfing' was also unfeasible during lock-down when people were supposed to isolate.
- Increased difficulties in shared parenting with the perpetrator after separation, with the abuser not adhering to Covid-19 restrictions during Access visits and Maintenance not paid.
- Courts restricted and adjourned many family law proceedings, in order to manage Covid-19 precautions. These included cases related to child custody, access and maintenance payments (including breaches of maintenance orders), which left many without resolution to very challenging situations for long periods.

¹⁷Safe Ireland, 2020, Tracking the shadow pandemic a report on women and children seeking support from Domestic Violence Services during the first 6 months of Covid-19, <https://www.safeireland.ie/policy-publications/>

¹⁸Safe Ireland, 2021, Tracking the Shadow Pandemic Lockdown 2 <https://www.safeireland.ie/policy-publications/>

6. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on services provided to those suffering from domestic abuse, including how these services are coping with the increase in demand during Covid-19

36. Domestic violence services, including Women’s Aid, continued to provide support mostly by phone or online, or at reduced capacity in case of refuges. During 2020 there was a huge increase in demand for Women’s Aid services as shown below¹⁹.

	2019	2020	Comparison
Contacts with Women’s Aid	20,763	29,717	+43%
24hr National Freephone Helpline (includes calls responded to, Instant messages & Helpline emails)	18,446	26,400	+43%
Impact of Covid on Helpline Calls responded 12th March – 30th December	15,058	20,782	+38%
Face-to-Face Services (one to one, court accompaniment & Dolphin House drop ins.)	2,933	3,317	+13%
Visits to womensaid.ie	256,871	290,586	+13%

Table 3: Comparison of disclosure of abuse to Women’s Aid 2019-2020

37. Similar increases have been seen by other services and by An Garda Síochána²⁰.

¹⁹ Women’s Aid, Annual Impact Report 2020, op. cit. Page 13

²⁰<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/crime-and-law/domestic-violence-is-worsening-amid-covid-19-pandemic-garda-figures-show-1.4425582>

The impact of the increase in demand on Women's Aid

38. Demand for all our direct services has been unprecedented. The 24hr National Freephone Helpline has continued to work hard to meet the huge increase in the demand with available resources. Staff were supported to work from home, which helped with their peace of mind as they didn't have to travel to work which could potentially expose them to contracting Covid-19. The Helpline team has had more frequent meetings (online), to maintain contact and support morale, and had external group supervision which was facilitated online.

39. The Helpline team has noted an increased level of graphic disclosures not experienced before, with increased levels of physical and sexual violence. The team have found external Group Supervision very useful to deal with this and external supervision should be available to frontline workers in all specialist services to combat vicarious trauma.

40. Additional to the National Helpline, the Services Team has seen an unprecedented level of demand for all of the front-line face to face services it offers. Despite the strict lock-down conditions, Support Workers continued to provide outreach meetings, court accompaniment, court drop in visits and access to the High Risk Support Project throughout, though there was an adaption to telephone support for many women during 'level 5' restrictions. Support Workers have spent thousands of hours supporting women via telephone, when it was safe for the woman to do so. The level of demand for Outreach appointments has been such that the waiting list has had to be suspended twice in 2021.

41. Due to Covid-19, delays in hearing Family Law cases has meant that women require support for longer. For example, currently the waiting time from ex-parte application for a Domestic Violence Order to hearing can be up to six months, which is double the time it would have taken before Covid-19. Similarly, applications for Maintenance or varying of Access are taking many months to be heard. Legal Separations and Divorces proceedings are taking up to 12 months to be heard, which leaves women in a kind of limbo, making it difficult to move on with their lives.

42. Below is a snap shot of the Women’s Aid Outreach Service data comparing the first **six months** of 2020 and 2021.

Indicator	2020	2021	% Change
Support Visits Meetings	115	519	351.3%
Support Visits Women	99	248	150.5%
Court Accompaniments Number	35	69	97.1%
Court Accompaniments Women	30	54	80.0%
Communications, text, email, phone totals	704	1196	69.9%
Communications, text, email, phone women	192	265	38.0%

Table 4: Women's Aid Outreach Service data, comparing the first six months of 2020 and 2021

43. The increase in demand for services caused by the Covid-19 pandemic is going to continue for the foreseeable future. To continue to respond to the increased number and complexity of calls the Women’s Aid National Freephone Helpline needs additional staff and support services need to be adequately funded.

Recommendations

- 9) Provide adequate statutory funding for refuges and other specialist domestic violence services to meet the increase in demand from women, and to maintain compliance with Covid-19 (and any future public health mandated) precautions.
- 10) Increase funding for the National Freephone Helpline to provide for additional staff
- 11) Fund qualified external supervision support for all domestic abuse specialist services workers

7. The impact of isolation and disconnection from family and community supports due to the pandemic on victims of domestic abuse and on their ability to access support

44. As outlined in point 5, being in lock-down with the abuser impacted on women being able to access both formal and informal supports. Women reported to us that they felt extremely trapped, suffocated and that the abuse was escalating and becoming more intense with no respite. The mental health impacts of coercively controlling domestic abuse for women has 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 retraumatising memories of being abused and controlled.

45. Even for women who had left, isolation from family, friends and community took away vital sources of support in their recovery. The lockdown also made it more difficult to access vital services such as the courts, Community Welfare Officers, social housing providers, financial advice, counselling, etc. While the courts continued to operate for emergency matters such as ex-parte orders, other critical matters such as hearings for barring and safety orders, access and custody, maintenance, separation and divorce were adjourned, which has a huge impact on women and children practically, emotionally and financially. In short all steps to recovery were slowed down or put on hold.

Recommendation

12) Measures set up within the Department of Social Protection to waive the immediate need for court evidence of non-payment of ordered Maintenance in order to access full social welfare entitlements should be continued as a permanent measure to be responsive to the (often urgent) economic needs of domestic abuse survivors.

8. The impact of school closures on access to support for children suffering from domestic abuse

46. For children suffering from domestic abuse school can be a place of respite and normality, sometimes it is the only opportunity to escape the constant abuse directed at them and/or their mother. Schools are also important referral sources to Child Protection for children when neglect or abuse is noticed.

47. School closure meant that children suffering from domestic violence became more invisible to the systems that should protect them, just when the abuse may have been intensifying at home because of having to be with the abuser all of the time.

9. The assistance of Gardaí and the impact of Operation Faoiseamh in handling cases of domestic abuse during the pandemic

48. Women's Aid appreciates Operation Faoiseamh and its positive impact on women and children experiencing domestic abuse, whereby individuals in the Garda system for previous DVA call-outs were proactively contacted to check their wellbeing and offered Garda support if required.

49. Women also reported to us that they found it easier to move to safety outside their local area (for example to go stay with family or friends) once they were informed that it was sufficient to tell the Gardaí at the checkpoints that they were leaving their county due to domestic abuse and they did not need a letter or other document to prove this. This approach of believing women proved to be very useful and welcome.

50. Service users of Women's Aid emphasise that the follow-through of Gardaí to arrest and charge domestic abuse perpetrators for breaches of protective court orders is critical to ensure that they act as a meaningful deterrent and protection for victims/survivors. We know that when this is done it builds trust and confidence in the justice system, and when Gardaí fail to follow through on breaches it undermines this seriously. Maintaining a pro-arrest policy and victim-centered approach when protective orders are breached is therefore vital.

Recommendations

- 13) A pro-active and victim-centered approach embodied by Operation Faoiseamh should be continued and become Garda routine procedure, even after the end of the pandemic.
- 14) All members in all sections of the Gardaí (including the Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD)) to be briefed on their obligations under the Garda Domestic Abuse Policy. The pro-arrest approach, which is part of the Garda Domestic Abuse policy must be maintained.
- 15) Training in the dynamics and impacts of coercive control should be rolled out to all frontline members of An Garda Síochána, to support their work responding to calls and the effective roll-out of their new risk assessment tools.

10. The impact of the increased consumption of alcohol and drugs during the pandemic on the incidence of domestic abuse

51. While it is important to emphasise that alcohol and drugs do not directly cause domestic abuse, their consumption can act as a dis-inhibitor and may exacerbate it by increasing the number and the severity of incidents.

52. During the pandemic, **home** consumption of alcohol and drugs increased, which increased opportunities for perpetrators to abuse and decrease victims/survivors ability to escape because they were in the home together. Women told us that they were very frightened about the increased levels of alcohol misuse during lock-downs, waiting and watching for the warning signs of escalation, with heightened vigilance on managing the situation for themselves and the children. Women tried to keep out of the perpetrator's way so as not to become a target, which was very difficult if living in a confined space. Substance misuse can also be used by the perpetrator to justify and minimise the abuse.

11. In addition to the above specific areas, the committee welcomes any views that you may have on this matter

53. Women's Aid would like to clearly highlight the fact that Ireland needs **not only** additional refuge spaces but a **wider range of accommodation and support options** to meet the diverse needs of domestic abuse survivors in the short, medium and long term.

54. Not all women need the intense support and high security of a refuge and some women simply do not wish to go to a refuge. Other options should also be available. For example, the Safe Home model²¹ provides houses or apartments in the community with a Visiting Support Outreach Worker attached to it offering support through home visits. Local Gardaí would be aware and generally agree to prioritise any call outs to those specific addresses. Safe Home allows women and children space and time to be away from their home/abusive partner and either obtain a domestic violence order, or apply to go on a housing list while receiving support to deal with the impact of abuse. Generally, this model works for women who are at a low to medium risk, while women at high-risk would need traditional refuge.

²¹ See for example <https://www.domesticabuse.ie/our-services/safe-home/>

55. More Transitional Housing is also needed. This is another form of supported housing, usually provided as a 'step down' from refuge, though not necessarily. It consists of 18 month tenancies in small estates, where there are support staff for women and support staff for children, Monday to Friday, 9 to 5 and good security through CCTV cameras and support from local Gardaí.

56. There is an urgent need to address the lack of move on/ long term accommodation for women and children escaping domestic abuse. Safe Ireland reports that between September and December 2020 an average of 59 women per month who are ready to move on cannot do so because there is no suitable accommodation available²². For the March - August 2020 period this number was 51 per month²³.

57. Having women and children staying in refuges when they are ready to leave not only keeps scarce refuge places occupied, but prevents them from moving on and can undo any progress towards an independent and violence free life. Having to remain in a refuge for too long (anything between 4-6 months) for lack of moving on options can damage the woman's confidence and self-esteem, heighten her sense of depression, and failure, make her doubt her decision to leave in the first place and increase her fear of reintegration into the community (fear of feeling lonely and isolated) having spent an excessive amount of time in communal setting with 24/7 care/support.

²² Safe Ireland, 2021, Tracking the shadow pandemic lockdown 2 <https://www.safeireland.ie/policy-publications/>

²³ Safe Ireland, 2020, Tracking the shadow pandemic, op cit.

Recommendation

- 16) A comprehensive strategy for move-on and long-term accommodation for victims of domestic abuse needs to be developed. This could include inter alia
- a) ensuring that any national homeless/housing strategy is both gender-sensitive and explicitly inclusive of the specialist and various housing needs of victims of domestic abuse, including children.
 - b) maintaining the special access to rent supplements for victims of domestic violence, implemented as a response to the pandemic, beyond the end of 2021.
 - c) addressing local authorities housing criteria that hinder domestic violence victims accessing priority local housing
 - d) exploring measures to support women to **safely** remain or return to their homes, removing the perpetrator, see [here](#) (this may also include mortgage assistance)
 - e) increase the provision of alternative and step-down supported accommodation such as the Safe Home Model and the Transitional Housing model
 - f) increase social housing stock to meet demand

Conclusion

58. Women's Aid is grateful for the Justice Committee's consideration of this submission and would be very pleased to discuss our recommendations in more detail with the Committee members directly, should this opportunity be available.