

CHILDREN LET DOWN BY THE SYSTEM

IMPACT REPORT 2018



WOMEN'S AID
Listening. Believing. Supporting.

2018 IN BRIEF



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DIRECTOR'S INTRODUCTION



The Women's Aid Impact Report for 2018 is a powerful and moving illustration of the very real and harmful impacts of domestic abuse on women and children. Each year our report provides a snapshot of the abuse of women by their

current or former boyfriends, partners or husbands which remains largely hidden in Irish society. **Last year there were 19,089 contacts made with our direct services during which 16,994 disclosures of domestic violence against women were made¹. We also heard 3,728 disclosures of abuse against children.** Behind these stark statistics there are thousands of women who have shared their story with Women's Aid. They tell us of how they are trapped in abusive relationships where they are unable to see a way out. They talk about not understanding how they have become so isolated, alone and at the mercy of their controlling and abusive partners. They tell us of their darkest fears and the impact the abuse is having on themselves and their children.

Women's Trust

For over 40 years, Women's Aid has held a trusted role for the women of Ireland. Women know that if they are being abused, feel alone and ashamed that they can call us at any time. If a woman is concerned about her sister, friend, mother or workmate, she knows that she can put them in touch with Women's Aid as a way to offering practical help and that she can call us herself for support. Women know that we will listen to them, not judge them nor blame them and help them on their path to safety and freedom from abuse. **Listening, believing, supporting - three very powerful words at the heart of our organisation.**

Women's Human Rights

Domestic violence is an abuse of a woman's human rights. The right to live a life, in private and public, free of fear and violence. **For one in five women in Ireland this human right is denied every day.** Women's Aid understands that violence against women is both a cause of and manifestation of women's inequality and we have worked for decades to improve the status of women to help bring an end to this persistent human rights abuse. Human rights are the cornerstone of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention). Ireland's ratification of the Istanbul Convention on International Women's Day 2019 is a major milestone in tackling domestic, sexual and gender based violence. **The four pillars of Prevention, Protection, Prosecution and Monitoring establishes a framework for governments to ensure robust action to prevent, investigate and prosecute, and ultimately, eliminate violence against women and girls.**

Women's Safety

At the heart of any progress there must be the increased safety and protection for women and their children affected by domestic violence. **Only effective implementation, including resourcing, of the Istanbul Convention will make a real difference.** Now that we have comprehensive and binding legal framework, there is no reason not to prosecute and properly sanction offenders. An Garda Síochána will have to respond to calls for help, collect evidence and assess the risk of further violence to adequately protect victims. Judicial proceedings will have to be carried out in a manner that respects the rights of victims at all stages of the proceedings and that avoid secondary victimisation. And the State will have to account for progressing this implementation of the Convention through a monitoring system that sees a key role for NGOs in providing information on change. **Making the change real for women and children and increasing their safety should be the most important priority.**

¹ Important note on data collection: Quantitative Data for calls to the National Helpline is captured on our telecommunications system, SpliceCom, and all other data is recorded manually on our in house database. The sample available is denoted by n= throughout the report. The information collected relates to details and facts disclosed by women in the process of their contact with Women's Aid. As the primary aim of our services is to provide confidential support and information to women, Women's Aid does not solicit information for statistical purposes. For this reason, only partial information is available to us on the majority of women, particularly in relation to the extent of the abuse being experienced and the barriers to seeking help. The value of statistics is that they build a picture of women's experiences and of their need for protection and support. The Women's Aid Direct Services include: 24hr National Freephone Helpline and its Dublin based One to One Support Service (including the HRSP), Court Accompaniment Service and the Dolphin House Support and Referral Drop In Service (run in partnership with Inchicore Outreach Centre). A 'disclosure' of abuse refers to the specific incident spoken about during our contact with women. There may be overlapping types of abuse and incidents referred to by a woman in any one contact. This should not be taken to mean the number of calls or number of women supported by Women's Aid in 2018.

Women's Voices

Listening to women's voices informs our frontline practice and our actions for social change and justice. Their experience informs all our work. In addition to our National Helpline and Dublin based frontline services, our Women's Testimonies project has given voice to women previously silenced by stigma and shame. **By sharing their stories in their own voice, these courageous women challenge the victim blaming culture that exists in Irish society; they build an understanding of the impact of domestic abuse; and encourage other women to find their voice and to seek support.** Last year's launch of our Impact Report was a very proud moment for Women's Aid when two very brave women spoke about their experience of being abused by an intimate partner and the impact it had on them and their children. In doing so they lifted the lid on what happens in homes around the country and made the nation aware that domestic violence can happen to any woman, regardless of her age, her profession or her social or ethnic background. Their eloquence and courage was inspirational and more voices are following their lead.

Women's Understanding and Awareness

Women's Aid has led the way from our early campaigns on Zero Tolerance to our most recent Too Into You awareness campaign in raising awareness and providing information to women experiencing domestic and dating abuse, their families and friends, their communities and our wider society. Since 2003 our annual statistics reports have recorded data on the number and type of contacts made with Women's Aid and included insights into the forms of abuse women experience, whether it is physical, sexual, financial or emotional, along with their relationship with their abuser. Our work is vital in understanding the nature and prevalence of domestic abuse, particularly in the absence of good, reliable and robust official State data. **Our campaigns have also challenged the victim blaming culture which is deeply embedded in Irish society and thrives where little is said or done to shame and sanction abusive men.**

Women's Solidarity and Support

Since 1974 Women's Aid has worked to keep women and children safer by providing direct services and by working towards social change and justice.

For the last 16 years it has been my privilege to steward this work as Director. Our twin approach is a hallmark of our work and is deeply embedded in our culture. While Women's Aid has been challenged by a decade of cuts, our strength has always been the quality, commitment and loyalty of our staff, volunteers and Board Members. We are so thankful for the support of our funders and our donors which allows us to do what we do best.

The power of this work is captured in the following quote:

"I still think of that day – the day I called Women's Aid – as they day my life changed forever."

I wish the organisation every success in the future and know that while domestic violence doesn't stop, Women's Aid won't stop listening, believing and supporting women each and every day.



Margaret Martin

Director
April 2019

OVER A DECADE OF PROGRESS

1

Listening, Believing, Supporting women through our 24hr National Freephone Helpline

- Quality assured
- 44 calls a day
- A gateway to refuge and ongoing face to face support around the country
- Support available in 170+ languages
- Deaf text service



2

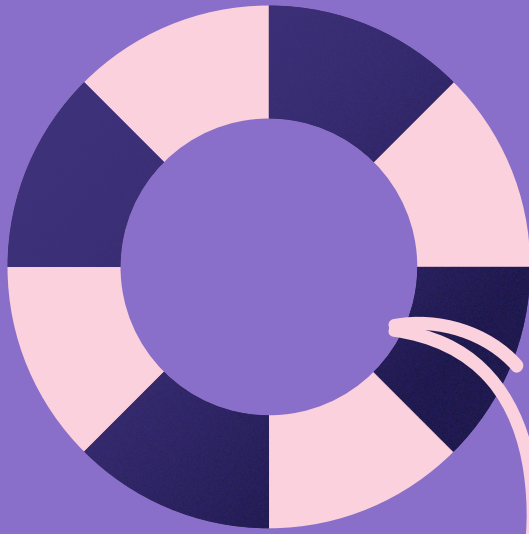
Supporting women face to face and at court throughout Dublin

- One to one support and outreach clinics in locations across Dublin
- Drop in Support and Referral Service at Dolphin House
- Law Clinic with McCann Fitzgerald
- High Risk Support Project partnering with Gardai and the Vodafone Foundation

3

Improving responses to women by training Gardai, Health professionals, Helpline volunteers and other key points of contact for women experiencing abuse





4

Giving survivors a voice through our Women's Testimonies project

5

Providing a lifeline, online, at www.womensaid.ie

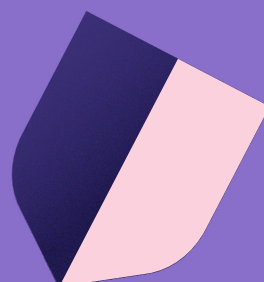
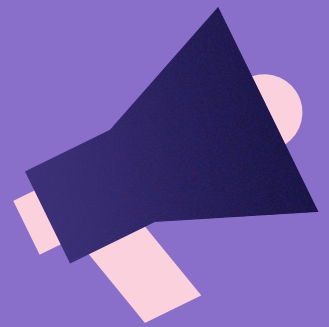
- Translated into 8 Languages and available in Irish Sign Language
- Speech, reading, and translation on our website facilitating access and participation for people with dyslexia, low literacy and those with mild visual impairments

6

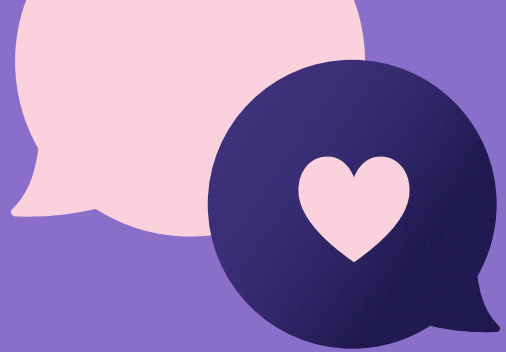
Public Awareness campaigns on dating abuse, sexual violence within relationships, challenging myths and victim blaming and the links between Femicide and domestic abuse.

7

Extensive policy and lobbying initiatives to improve systemic responses to and increase protections for victims. We also argued for guidelines for Domestic Violence Orders, the recognition of intimate relationships being an aggravating factor and pushing for the signing and ratification of the Istanbul Convention.



SECTION 1: LISTENING, BELIEVING, SUPPORTING



DOMESTIC ABUSE DISCLOSURES TO WOMEN'S AID IN 2018

11,112 disclosures of emotional abuse

Emotional abuse disclosed in 2018 included verbal abuse, being threatened with violence, being stalked both physically and online, women and children being locked out of their homes overnight; being isolated from friends and family, being in fear of their lives because abusers threaten them with guns, knives and with injury due to speeding in cars.

Within this figure, we also noted **561 disclosures of digital abuse and stalking and 898 threats to kill the woman, the children, her family or to self-harm.**

3,816 disclosures of physical abuse

Physical abuse disclosed in 2018 included women being beaten, having their hair pulled, being smothered, strangled and being hospitalised. Women also reported experiencing physical abuse during pregnancy. Within these figures we noted disclosures of women being choked, beaten and threatened with weapons and smothered. We also had **141 disclosures of abuse while the woman was pregnant**, with a number of women experiencing miscarriage because of the abuse.

526 disclosures of sexual abuse

Sexual abuse disclosed in 2018 included women being raped by their partners, women being coerced into sexual activity, women having intimate videos and photos taken and shared without their consent and being raped while pregnant or after childbirth. The sexual abuse figure includes **226 disclosures of rape within intimate relationships.**

1,540 disclosures of financial abuse

Women disclosed that they were being denied access to the family income, that their own salaries/ social welfare payments were being stolen or controlled by the abuser. Women disclosed that their abuser made them account for every penny spent and often left them with inadequate funds for the family's needs. Women also disclosed financial abuse continuing after separation including the hiding of family assets and the non-payment of child maintenance.

WHAT IS COERCIVE CONTROL?

Coercive control is a persistent pattern of all or some forms of domestic abuse (emotional, physical, financial, sexual including threats) by a boyfriend, partner, husband or ex. It traps women in a relationship, and make it impossible or dangerous to leave.

This can have a serious impact including the fear of violence, cause serious alarm and distress and can result in a woman giving up work, changing her routines, losing contact with family and friends.

Coercive control can damage a woman's physical and emotional well-being.

Since 1st January 2019 Coercive Control is a crime in Ireland. For more information see the Women's Aid Guide to Coercive Control in Ireland.

Download at www.womensaid.ie/help

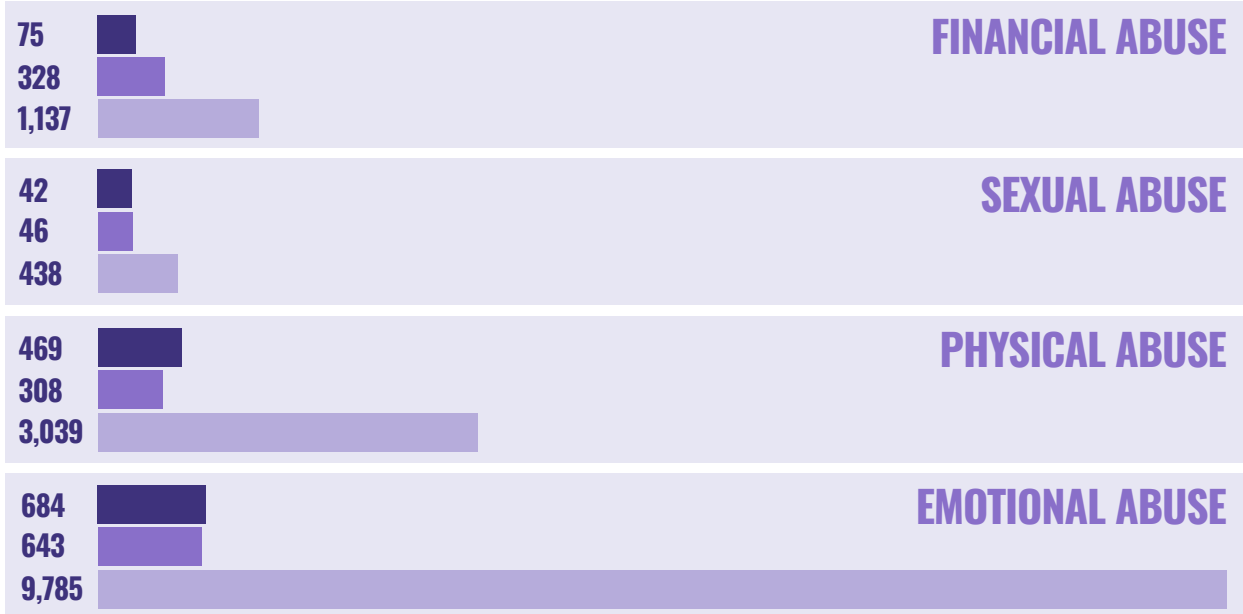


Chart 1: 16,994 disclosures of abuse against women in contact with Direct Services (n=15,521)

THE ABUSER

84% of the women who contacted us in 2018 were being abused by a current or former male intimate partner. 16% disclosed abuse from a non-intimate male family member or another person.

Where the abuse was being carried out by a current or former male intimate partner, 57% of women were being abused by a current boyfriend, partner or husband while 27% were being abused by a former boyfriend, partner or husband.

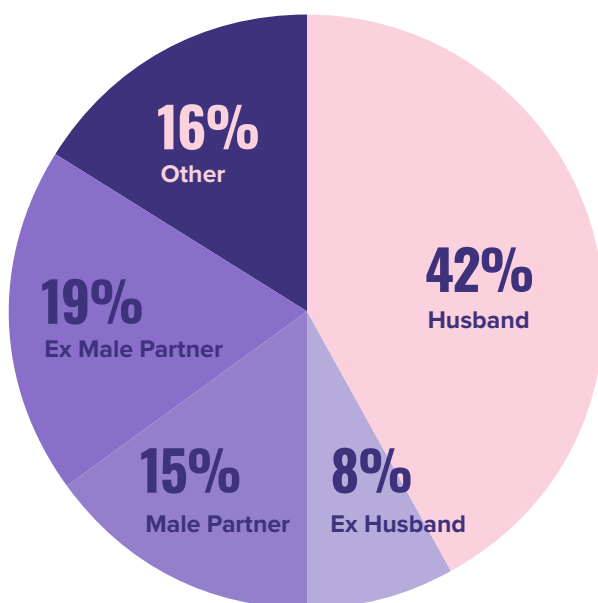


Chart 2: Relationship status of the abuser as disclosed by women in contact with our direct services (n=9,219)

IMPACT OF ABUSE ON WOMEN

The mental and physical impacts of domestic violence on a woman’s health and well-being are significant, 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 2018 included:

- Panic attacks, post-traumatic stress, anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, attempted suicide, feeling exhausted and having low self-esteem and self-doubt as a result of the abuse.
- Being isolated from friends and family members, from their community and in some cases from their children.
- Reproductive health issues including lack of access to family planning, STIs, or experiencing unplanned pregnancy due to rape and sexual coercion, miscarriage due to physical assault.
- Alcohol and substance misuse.
- Loss of consciousness due to strangulation, hospitalisation, scarring and facial disfigurement.
- Broken arms, legs, teeth, broken jaw, bruising to the face and body, head injuries and internal injuries due to physical assault and rape.
- Loss of job, becoming homeless, experiencing poverty and hardship as a lone parent due to the payment of maintenance being used as a controlling tool by ex-partners.

WHO WE SUPPORTED

95%

of callers were women

35%
undisclosed
location

34%
from Dublin

5%
were men

31%
from other
locations in
Republic
of Ireland

responded to
527 Helpline
emails and 93
initial contacts
via social media

202

calls facilitated
in another language
through our Language
Line service

16%

were hang up calls,
administration
and indirect
support calls

84%

of calls to the National
Freephone Helpline
were support calls

5,362 uses of
the Browse Aloud
Web Software.
786 views of the
ISL information
videos

74% of women were
first time users while **26%**
were repeat users of either
the Helpline or our other
services

549

women supported
with One to One
Support visits

153

women supported
in our Court
Accompaniment
Service

752

women supported
at our at our Dolphin
House service. (inc via
telephone support)

RESPONDING TO WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES, MIGRANT WOMEN AND TRAVELLER WOMEN

In 646 calls to the 24hr National Freephone Helpline women identified that they were Migrant women, Traveller women and/or women with disabilities. The biggest group were migrant women at 89% followed by women with disabilities (8%) and Traveller women (3%).

In 2018, 202 Helpline calls were facilitated in 25 languages. 68% of callers who used the Telephone Interpretation Service spoke a range of EU languages while 32% spoke other non-EU languages.

19% of the women we saw for the first time in 2018 in our One to One and Dolphin House services were Migrant women. Just over half, 55% were from non-EU member states while 45% were from EU member states.

Women's Aid works with organisations such as the Immigrant Council of Ireland and the Migrant Rights Centre to address any additional barriers migrant women may face.

WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF THE LEGAL SYSTEM

45% of the information, referral and advocacy work by the Helpline and one to one service in 2018 was in support of women accessing and negotiating the legal system for protection. This included information and support on legal options, how to access expert legal advice and representation as well as contacting the Gardaí.

In 2018 Women's Aid face to face services supported women engaging with the legal system. We attended court 257 times with 153 women and we met with 752 women at our Dolphin House drop in service at our Dolphin House service.

In our court accompaniment service, **49% of cases were child related matters within the context of domestic violence. 42% of cases were for domestic violence orders under the Domestic Violence Act** with 56% of women having an order granted. **The experience of going to court can be very disempowering. We also find that the granting of orders can be inconsistent and we welcome the introduction of guidelines for the granting of orders which is included in the new Domestic Violence**

Legislation. Proceedings can be drawn out, costly and often do not end up increasing the safety of women and their children.



Chart 3: Court Accompaniment 2018 (n=257)

Response from An Garda Síochána

Many of the women we work with tell us they have had to call on the Garda 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.** At times children are also the target 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, Garda response to victims of domestic violence can vary from negative to excellent, among and even within, Garda stations. **On 793 occasions last year callers to the 24hr National Freephone Helpline disclosed that they had rang the Gardaí.** 118 women were noted as having rang the Gardaí more than once.

61% of the women who rang the Gardaí found their response was helpful. 39% found them unhelpful.

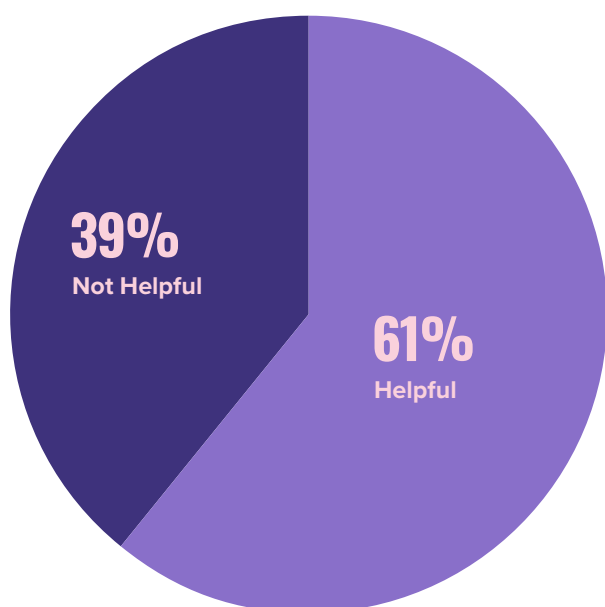


Chart 4: Callers experience of the Gardaí. (n=638)

64 women (38%) said that the Gardaí did not enforce an existing protective order while 104 women (62%) said that they did. (n=168)

INFORMATION, REFERRAL AND ADVOCACY

In addition to being a **listening and support service**, the Women's Aid 24hr National Freephone Helpline, One to One service and the Dolphin House drop in service provide a valuable source of **information, onward referral and advocacy** for women experiencing domestic violence. **There were 18,532 referrals, provision of information and/or advocacy made during contacts with Women's Aid.** The areas

covered are outlined in chart 5. We also support women **by safety planning and risk assessment** to support them in their efforts to keep themselves and their children as safe as possible.

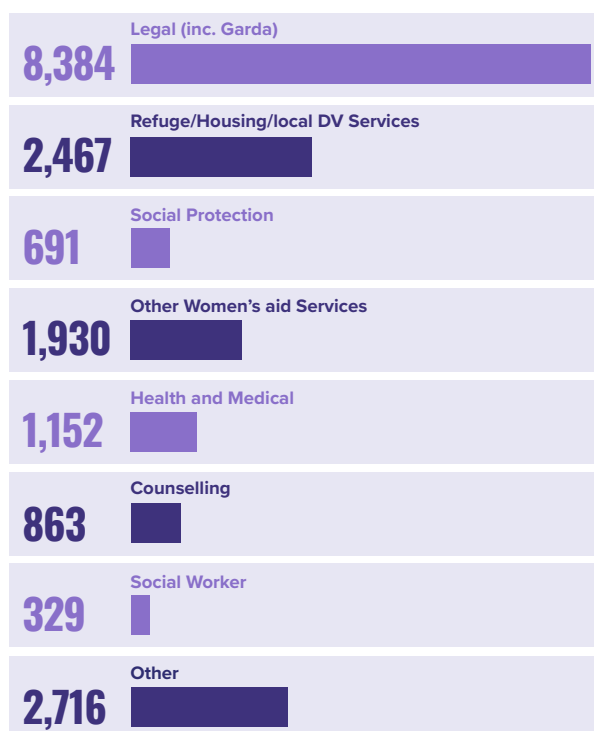


Chart 5: Support, information and advocacy by Women's Aid in 2018 (n=15,522)

SECTION 2: SPOTLIGHT 2018



CHILDREN LET DOWN BY THE SYSTEM

The link between child abuse and domestic violence has been clearly established with domestic violence being a very common context in which 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 children².** It has also been found that the more severe the domestic violence, the more severe the abuse of children in the same context³.

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 well-being, even when the child is not directly targeted by the perpetrator of violence.

Children are often aware of the violence perpetrated against their mother either by witnessing it directly or by observing the aftermath of assaults. The 2014 FRA report on violence against women found that in Europe 73% of women who have experienced physical or sexual violence by a current or a previous partner indicate that their children have become aware of the violence⁴.

In 2018 there were **3,728 disclosures of abuse of children in the context of domestic violence made to Women's Aid**. The abuse of children disclosed included children being physically, sexually and emotionally abused as well as witnessing the abuse against their mothers.

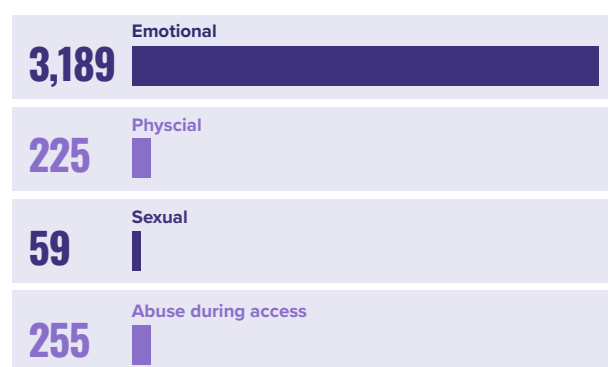


Chart 6: 3,728 disclosures of child abuse to Women's Aid in 2018 (n=15,521).

Where women indicated that they felt their child/ren were at risk of physical, sexual and/or abuse during access the Helpline recorded on **432 calls that there was a Social Worker involved in the case**.

From our own frontline work, we know that 72% of the women using our one to one services for the first time in 2018 had children. (see chart 7)

2 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

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

4 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), 2014, Violence against women: an EU-wide survey Main results, page 134. No country specific data available.

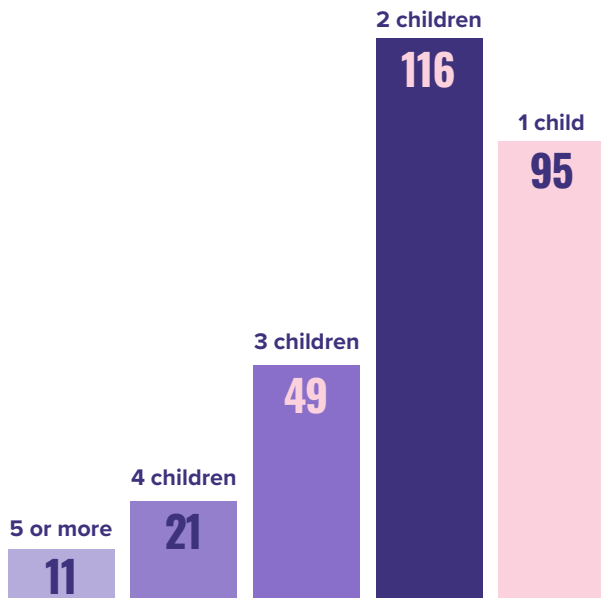


Chart 7: No of women using our One to One Service for the first time in 2018 who had children (n=292)

The abuse disclosed in 2018 includes:

- Children witnessing verbal, physical and sexual abuse against their mother.
- Children being physically hurt, slapped punched, locked in rooms.
- Children being called names and shouted at.
- Children and their mothers being threatened with murder.
- Children being sexually abused.
- Children being emotionally manipulated and used against their mother including being told lies.
- The mother-child bond being deliberately targeted and broken by abusive fathers.
- Women assaulted when holding their baby in their arms.
- Women and children made homeless by the perpetrator.

Despite the range and severity of the impact of domestic violence on children, they are often the forgotten victims, with limited services and protection available.

WHAT DOES THE ISTANBUL CONVENTION SAY ABOUT CHILDREN?

The Istanbul Convention, which Ireland has recently ratified, is quite clear that children who experience or witness domestic abuse suffer a negative impact and that children's needs and rights must be taken into account. In particular two articles deal specifically with children:

Article 26 – Protection and support for child witnesses

1. Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to ensure that in the provision of protection and support services to victims, due account is taken of the rights and needs of child witnesses of all forms of violence covered by the scope of this Convention.
2. Measures taken pursuant to this article shall include age appropriate psycho-social counselling for child witnesses of all forms of violence covered by the scope of this Convention and shall give due regard to the best interests of the child.

Article 31 – Custody, visitation rights and safety

1. Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to ensure that, in the determination of custody and visitation rights of children, incidents of violence covered by the scope of this Convention are taken into account.
2. Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to ensure that the exercise of any visitation or custody rights does not jeopardise the rights and safety of the victim or children.

ACCESS TO REFUGE AND LONGER TERM SUPPORT

Child witnesses to domestic abuse have a right to emergency and long term services, and their needs must be taken into account in victim service provision. **These needs however are rarely met.** In 2016 more than 3,685 children received support from specialist domestic violence services of these 1,165 were less than 5 years old. In total there were 2,206 child admission to refuge⁵. However, many children seeking emergency accommodation with their mothers were not accommodated as the refuges were full. In 2016 domestic violence refuges were unable to meet 3,981 requests from women, many of them with children. More recent data from Women's Aid National Freephone Helpline confirms this worrying trend. **In 2018 the National Helpline made a total of 244 calls to Refuges and on 126 occasions the refuges said they were full (52%).** According to the Council of Europe, Ireland only has one third of recommended refuge space.

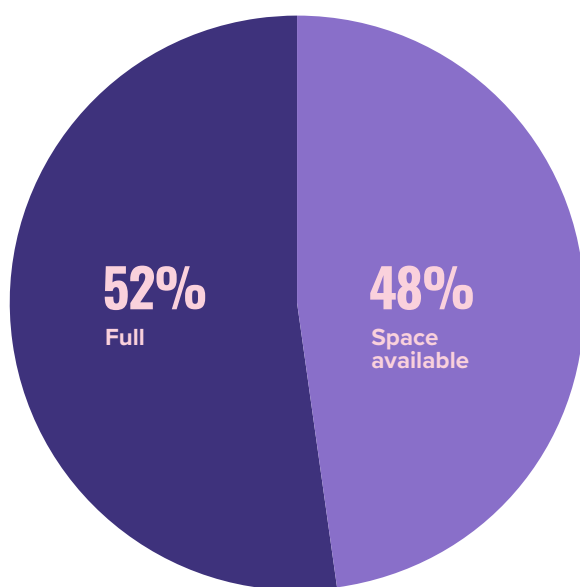


Chart 8: Calls made to local refuges by Women's Aid Helpline workers on behalf of women needing emergency accommodation (n=244).

Barring a perpetrator from the home works well in some cases, but sometimes it is not the safest option, or it is not possible. **In some cases the mother is only eligible for a short Emergency Barring Order lasting 8 days maximum, so if the mother and children cannot stay in the home nor access refuges, they may become homeless.** A Focus Ireland survey of

70 families experiencing homelessness in March 2016 found 16% listed domestic abuse as the primary reason they became homeless⁶.

Even when families do get into a refuge, long term affordable and adequate accommodation is very hard to obtain, and **without a secure and safe home it is very hard for children and their mothers to rebuild their lives.**

Long term support and counselling to overcome the impact of domestic abuse should be available for children. However these services are scarce, most are provided by refuges and very few are available for children outside of refuges. Successful programs such as the TLC Kidz program are not widely available.

Mothers have reported to Women's Aid how difficult it is to find suitable therapy for their children by counsellors specifically trained on domestic violence. Moreover private counsellors can be very expensive and not affordable for women escaping domestic violence. Often the consent of the perpetrator is needed for the children to access therapeutic services, and abusive fathers often deny it.

SAFE CONTACT OR NO CONTACT - DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND FAMILY LAW

A long term area of concern for Women's Aid is unsafe access and custody arrangements after separation from an abuser⁷. **Women regularly report to Women's Aid that in Family Courts there is little or patchy understanding of the dynamics of domestic violence and particularly of its impact on children and of the way abusive fathers continue their abuse and control through access.**

It is often wrongly assumed that since the parents are separating the abuse will cease or that it is an issue between the parents that has nothing to do with children. In fact not only **domestic violence does not necessarily end with separation but at times separations escalates the abuse.**

⁵ Safe Ireland, Domestic Violence Services National Statistics 2016, <https://www.safeireland.ie/policy-publications>.

⁶ Quoted in Barnardos, (2016) What's the harm? A child centred response to domestic abuse.

⁷ Women's Aid, Child Custody and Access in the context of Domestic Violence: Women's Experiences and the Response of the Legal System", 2003.

While in theory, access to their parents should be **the right of the child**, in practice it is exercised as the right of the parents, in this context specifically of the abusive father. There is a pro-contact assumption that often trumps considerations regarding the risk to the children and their mothers, as well as sometimes the stated wishes of children not to be forced to go on access.

As a result often **Custody and Access arrangements ordered by the courts are dangerous and/or detrimental to the safety and the well-being of children and their mothers and allow the abuse to continue.**

Children may be directly abused or neglected by the perpetrator during the time spent with them. Children are also emotionally abused when forced to witness the abuse of their mother during change over and by the undermining of the relationship and bond with their mother, which is critical to their healing⁸.

In 2018, we heard 483 disclosures from mothers that their ex-partners were using access visits to abuse them, often in front of their children. It was disclosed on 255 occasions that children were being directly physically, emotionally and/or sexually abused during access visits with their fathers.

This abuse during access includes:

- Children are abused by the father during access, including physical, sexual, emotional abuse and neglect.
- Women and their families are abused physically, verbally and emotionally during change over or when they have to supervise access.
- Abuser not collecting or returning the children on time.
- Non-payment of maintenance is used to continue financial abuse of the woman and children.
- Access is used to send threats to the mother through the children and to force contact with her.
- Children are manipulated to blame the mother for the separation or for the perpetrator been arrested, or to excuse for his violent behaviour.
- Children are forced to go on access when they clearly do not want to go as they are in fear. While the child is forced to go to access, the abusive father is not forced to turn up, demonstrating that,

in practice, it is not the child who has a right to the relationship, but the abuser.

- The impact on children includes being distressed when going and returning from access, living in fear, impact on school and ability to concentrate, feeling their mother cannot protect them

THE CHILDREN AND FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS ACT 2015

The Children and Family Relationships Act 2015 introduced positive changes, in particular:

- The focus on the best interests of the child and the inclusion of the views of the child.
- The requirement on the court to have regard to any family violence and its impact on the safety of the child and other family members when determining the best interest of the child.

In a context of domestic violence the courts should consider the safety of the child and the non-abusive members of the family, the impact of the violence on them, the perpetrator's risk to the child and his ability to care for the child. Moreover the voice of the child should be heard in the proceedings.

Our experience as outlined above is that the presumption that the child's best interest is served by having a relationship with both parents overrides the safety and welfare of children and their mothers. Women's Aid believes **that the best interest of the child is a life free of domestic violence for themselves and their mothers** and that legislation and practice should reflect this principle.

The Children and Family Relationships Act was commenced in 2016. It is time to evaluate the impact of the Act for families separating in the context of domestic violence and if in practice it meets the requirements of Article 31 of the Istanbul Convention.

⁸ See in particular Bancroft and Silverman, *The Batterer as Parent: Addressing the Impact of Domestic Violence on Family Dynamics*, 2002, Sage Publications. For Irish research see 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

In the meantime guidelines should be developed and applied to ensure the exercise of any access or custody rights does not jeopardise the rights and safety of the victim of domestic violence and their children.

Interim Custody and Access orders and links with orders under the Domestic Violence Act

When a couple separates in a context of domestic violence it is vital that any interim orders made do not put the child or the non-abusive parent at risk. In our experience abusive fathers may use courts proceedings to continue to abuse the ex-partners, and proceedings may be particularly protracted as delay tactics are deliberately used.

It takes months or even years for orders to be finalised, particularly if reports are sought. In the meantime children and their mothers may be at risk of continuing abuse if interim orders are made that disregard the impact of domestic violence on the child and the non-abusive parent.

In certain cases when a couple is separating, an order under the Domestic Violence Act 2018 has already been granted. This means that the court has already found, on the balance of probabilities, that there is a significant risk to the welfare and safety of the applicant. As discussed above, domestic violence and child abuse often co-occur and exposing a child to domestic violence is in itself a form of emotional abuse.

SURVIVORS' EXPERIENCES OF THE FAMILY LAW PROCESS

In a consultation with Women's Aid in October 2018⁹, survivors of domestic abuse disclosed **their fears about the physical safety and the psychological well-being of their children and believed that they are often not heard in the Family Law process. Women felt that their own safety was not considered at all.** Common themes emerged during our conversations, including:

- Criminal behavior is not taken into account in the Family Court even when there is a sentence for serious offences against the mother or a sibling of the child such as assault or sexual assault if the offence was not against the child for whom access is sought. This fails to acknowledge the impact of

witnessing abusive against another and the risk of further abuse.

- Similarly orders under the Domestic Violence Act are not taken into account as domestic violence is considered a "separate issue".
- Children are not heard and believed when they report abuse during access to Tusla.
- Some S32 reporters are not adequately trained, do not understand domestic violence and its impact on children, are easily manipulated by the abuser.
- Access is granted in cases where it puts the children and the mother at risk and expose them to abuse. Most of the time the access is unsupervised, regardless of the level of danger posed by the abuser.
- When supervised access is ordered, there are no facilities to support it, with the result that abused women or their family have to supervise access with the perpetrator, thus jeopardising their safety.

RECOMMENDATIONS: IMPROVING PROTECTION AND SERVICES FOR CHILDREN EXPERIENCING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Women's Aid supports women every day in their efforts to keep themselves and their children safe.

Through this experience, **Women's Aid recommends that:**

Provision of Services

1. Refuge provision needs to be increased to meet demand and be in line with recommendations from the Council of Europe and the Istanbul Convention.
2. Refuges must be resourced to provide appropriate and specific child support services.
3. Social housing must be provided for families with children escaping domestic violence.

⁹ The consultation with 20 women was held as part of the Women's Aid Sentencing Watch Project looking at the Criminal Justice System's response to domestic violence. The report will be published in September 2019. However, matters relating to family law matters naturally came up during the consultation and we have included common themes in this year's Impact Report.



4. Group and individual therapy/counselling services for children exposed to domestic violence need to be rolled out across Ireland. These services should be free of charge.
5. Legal provisions must be enacted to enable children to access domestic violence counselling without needing the perpetrator's consent.
8. That training on the impact of domestic violence on children is provided to all Family Law practitioners, including S32 assessors and judges.

Guidelines, Training and Research

6. That guidelines are developed for judges in Family Law to provide that Custody and unsupervised Access with a child should not be granted to a parent who is a perpetrator of domestic violence unless the Court is wholly satisfied that the child would be safe from abuse while in the custody of or unsupervised access with such parent, including safe from emotional abuse caused by exposure to domestic violence.
7. That research is carried out on:
 - » The impact of the Child and Family Relationship Act on the safety of children and the non-abusive parent in child custody and access cases where there is domestic violence.
 - » How domestic violence and its impact on children are taken into account in practice when determining the best interests of the child.
 - » How the voice of the child is heard in such proceedings.
9. That a network of supervised contact centres is put in place, to facilitate safe access when the court has assessed that the perpetrator should not have unsupervised contact with the children.
10. In interim child orders proceedings where domestic violence is alleged:
 - » The case should be fast-tracked.
 - » The order should be stayed until the allegations of domestic violence are resolved.
11. When making interim Access and Custody orders in cases where an order under the Domestic Violence Act is already present, unsupervised Access or Custody is not granted to the perpetrator until the court is in a position to give full consideration to any risk the perpetrator of the violence may pose to the child, including emotional harm from exposure to domestic violence.
12. Conversely when granting a Barring Order, the Court should consider the safety and well-being of any children of the relationship and take interim measures for their protection while Custody and Access proceedings are pending.

These changes are urgently needed to prevent further harm to children experiencing domestic violence and their mothers.

SECTION 3: WORKING FOR JUSTICE AND SOCIAL CHANGE



WOMEN'S AID TRAINING FOR PROFESSIONALS

Training on domestic violence is essential for staff who work in an agency where they may receive a disclosure of domestic violence. The moment of the disclosure should not be the first time they have grappled with the issue of domestic violence. Training gives staff an opportunity to deepen their understanding of what is going on in abusive relationship, to interrogate how an abuser controls his partner (current or former) and the impact of this on women and their children. **Women's Aid training explores good practice responses that workers can use to enable them to respond appropriately and safely to victims/survivors of domestic violence.**

There are some workplaces where knowledge about domestic violence is vital and training on the dynamics of abuse is of paramount importance. **Members of An Garda Síochána play a vital role in protecting women and their children and holding the perpetrator to account for his actions.** Women's Aid training gives Guards the opportunity to analyse incidents of abuse as being part of a pattern of behaviour which is about the coercive control of a person and restricting their freedom. Women's Aid delivers training to all Probationer Gardaí in the Garda College on the dynamics of domestic violence and how it impacts on women and their children.

“Very informative training. Very beneficial for role as Garda in helping and also in investigating these crimes.”

Healthcare professionals, social workers, social care workers, community workers, family support workers, counsellors, housing & homeless support workers, substance misuse support workers, lawyers and probation officers are all categories of workers

who need to be able to access training on domestic violence.

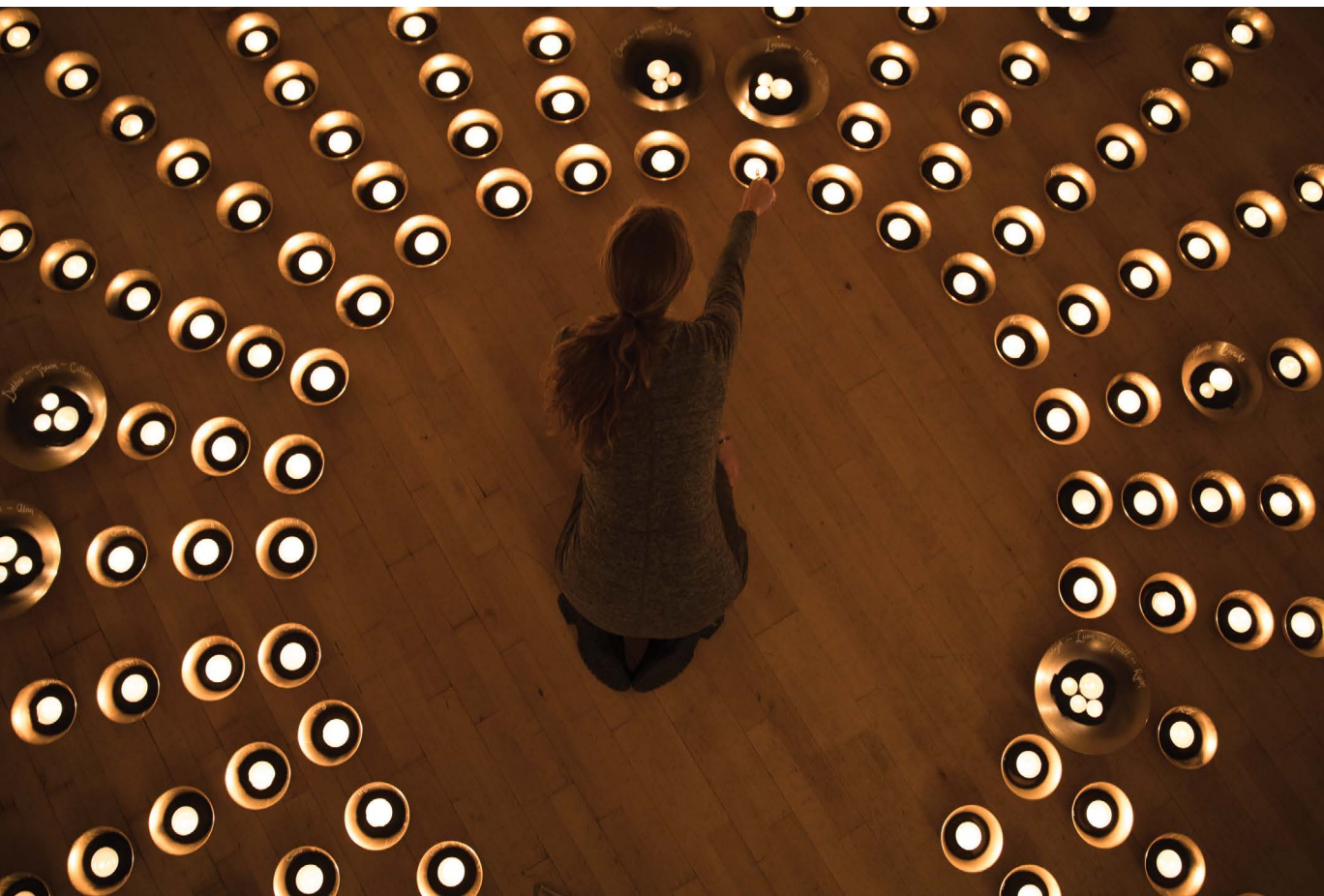
Women's Aid training is continually informed by our direct one to one support and helpline work with women experiencing abuse and their experiences of seeking safety and support. Our training is grounded by the voice of the woman and her experience as the guiding light for meaningful intervention.

“Overall course very beneficial, interactive and thought provoking.”

In 2018 we continued to deliver specialised training and organisational support on responding to domestic violence to key personnel working in organisations in the community and voluntary sector and statutory agencies throughout the country. Highlights of the year included:

- Training delivered for the Probation Service in Dublin, Cork, Portlaoise and Sligo.
- Training 526 Probationer Gardaí in the Garda College, Templemore.
- Delivering training to mixed groups of professionals on Women's Aid calendared training events in our offices in Dublin 2.
- Training a wide variety of staff who work in the community and voluntary sector, e.g. drugs and alcohol services, homeless support services.

In total **Women's Aid ran 40 training events to a total of 992 participants** in various locations around the country, including Dublin, Tipperary, Waterford, Cork, Sligo and Laois. The funding we receive under the Scheme to Support National Organisations (SSNO), administered by Pobal on behalf of the Department of Rural and Community Development, is essential in order to allow us to continue to provide essential training to service providers who work with disadvantaged target groups, in particular.



Remembering 225 women and 16 children at the Women's Aid Seminar on Femicide and Domestic Violence, November 2018.

Evaluations of Women's Aid training events indicate that there is a high level of satisfaction with the content and training delivery expertise with the vast majority of training participants finding the training highly relevant and beneficial to their practice. Ultimately high quality training on domestic violence gives workers the knowledge and skills to respond appropriately to women experiencing domestic violence and contributes to keeping women and children safe.

RAISING AWARENESS AND PROVIDING HOPE

In 2018, Women's Aid continued to lead the way in raising awareness and providing information on domestic violence to women experiencing abuse, their families and friends, their communities and the wider society. Our annual public awareness campaigns and communications activity are a vital way to highlight the prevalence, nature and impact of domestic and dating abuse in Ireland. We also engage with the media to promote our 24hr National Freephone Helpline and other support services.

Highlights in 2018 included:

- Women's Aid generated over **200 pieces of media coverage on domestic violence in 2018** ranging from local radio interviews, online news stories, opinion pieces in national print media and interviews with TV news and national radio.
- In February, we relaunched our **Too Into You campaign** on dating abuse with Norah Casey and Blathnaid Treacy.
- In May we launched our Impact Report highlighting the issue of the **barriers to safety** women face when trying to escape domestic abuse and the increased protections needed.
- In October **we took over the façade of Liberty Hall with our Stand Up against Dating Abuse banner** as part of the Autumn Too Into You campaign. We were also the charity for the Irish Tatler Women of the Year Awards.
- In November we ran our very successful **purple ribbon & 16 Days of Action** campaign with over 100 groups taking action to highlight domestic violence across Ireland.

- We also launched our **Femicide Report for 2018** with an important seminar which continued to raise the issue of Femicide, the need to implement domestic homicide reviews and better risk assessment to prevent further loss of life due to fatal domestic violence. National and international experts spoke as well as family members and survivors of abuse. Each woman in our report was remembered at the event.
- The Femicide Report also included **Women's Aid guidelines for the media when reporting Femicide and domestic violence.**
- We continued our **Women's Voices Testimony Project** which encourages and facilitates survivors of domestic violence to tell their stories safely and in a way that helps create better awareness and change.

PROVIDING A LIFELINE, ONLINE

There were **183,209 visits to the Women's Aid website in 2018**. With a monthly average of 15,268 visits, we know that we provide vital information to women experiencing domestic violence as well as to the general public. 80% of visitors were first time users of the website. Our stand alone website on dating abuse www.ToolIntoYou.ie received over 32,000 visits. We continue to use social media to highlight the issues of domestic violence and engage with supporters. We have a community of over 15,000 followers on Twitter and over 27,000 followers on Facebook.

WORKING FOR JUSTICE AND POSITIVE GOVERNMENT ACTION

Women's Aid works with government to provide solution based recommendations on improving legal and systemic responses and protection for women and children experiencing domestic violence. In addition, Women's Aid brings the concerns and issues of women experiencing domestic violence to a number of national and local fora.

In 2018, this work included:

- Briefings throughout the year on the **Domestic Violence Bill**.
- Submission to the **Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland (January 2018)**.
- Responding to the **Law Reform Commission issue paper on knowledge or belief concerning consent in rape law (October 2018)**.



Women's Aid joins with fellow members of the Irish Observatory on Violence against Women to welcome Ireland's ratification of the Istanbul Convention on International Women's Day March 2019.

Continued representation and membership role at: the monitoring committee of the Second National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence; the Irish Observatory on Violence against Women; Safe Ireland; the National Women's Council of Ireland; Southside Addressing Violence Effectively (SAVE); Legal Aid Board External Consultative Panel; Family Law Court Users Panel; Garda National Crime Victims Forum; Women Against Violence (WAVE); Tusla Domestic Violence Needs Assessment North Dublin; Focus Ireland research on Domestic Violence and Family Homelessness advisory group; SAFER project external evaluation board and Women's Aid was a platform member of the Together For Yes campaign.

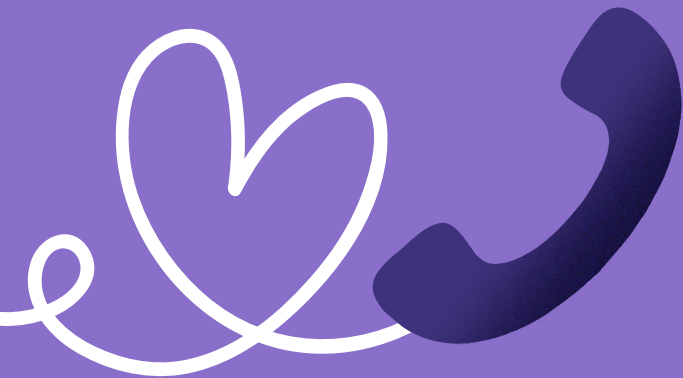
THANK YOU

Women's Aid would like to thank all of our Helpline volunteers, supporters, funders, corporate partners and donors who make our work possible. A special thanks to our Charity Shop staff and volunteers who raise much needed funds to keep our services operating.

We appreciate the support and strong working relationships with other domestic violence services and refuges around Ireland and other networks acting to bring about real change and protection for women affected by domestic violence.

ABOUT WOMEN'S AID

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 for justice and social change.



24hr National Freephone Helpline 1800 341 900

Our 24hr National Freephone Helpline provides a listening ear, emotional support and practical information to women experiencing abuse from their current or former male partners. It responds to 44 calls per day. It is the only free, national, domestic violence helpline with specialised trained staff, fully accredited and quality assured by The Helplines Partnership. It has a Telephone Interpretation Service facility covering 170 languages for callers needing support in their own language. We also provide a text service for deaf and hard of hearing women. The Helpline is a gateway into our Dublin based face to face and court support services and to other local independent support services and refuges around the country.



One to One Support

The Women's Aid One to One Support Service provides in depth information and support to women experiencing domestic violence in locations across Dublin city and county. This ongoing face to face support can include Safety Planning with the woman and we can offer the woman a wide range of advocacy and referral support to external organisations and agencies such as Refuges, Housing, Social Welfare, Immigration, Gardaí, Family and Criminal Courts, Social Services and Health agencies. A snapshot of our advocacy and referral work includes accompanying women to the local Gardaí to make statements; assisting women to make Legal Aid applications; supporting a woman to regularise her immigration status because of domestic abuse; advocating to Housing Authorities for women who are no longer safe in their homes or supporting a woman to access local refuges. It also includes accompaniment to family and criminal courts.



Court Accompaniment

The Women's Aid Court Accompaniment Service provides support for women availing of legal options regarding abuse by a current or former husband or partner. Women's Aid Support Workers have expert knowledge and understanding of the family law system and of the legal options open to women living with domestic violence. We provide emotional support, both before, during and after the court proceedings; support women as they face their abusive partners, clarify legal terminology, safety planning and explore further options. We support women with the following applications and hearings in the context of domestic abuse: Domestic Violence Orders, Access, Maintenance, Divorce and Separation.



Dolphin House Support and Referral Drop In Service

Based in the Dolphin House Family Law Court, the Support and Referral Service is a free and confidential drop in service for women who are experiencing domestic violence. This can include emotional, physical, sexual or financial abuse. The service provides support and information on legal options, safety planning and links women in with domestic violence services for ongoing support. Women's Aid runs this service in partnership with Inchicore Outreach Centre.

High Risk Support Project

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

Women's Aid Law Clinic

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

Specialised Training

Women's Aid is a Centre of Excellence for Training and Development of professional and organisational responses to women and children experiencing domestic violence. We provide support to local and national organisations throughout Ireland, both statutory and non-statutory, to promote best practice responses to women and children experiencing domestic violence. All Women's Aid training is informed and guided by over 40 years of experience of direct work supporting women and by international models of best practice.



Public Awareness and Campaigns

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

Influencing Government and Policy

Women's Aid provides solutions based recommendations on improving legal responses, systems and protections for women and children experiencing abuse and we bring the concerns of women experiencing abuse to a number of national and local forums. We make submissions and meet with Government ministers, policy makers and members of the Oireachtas to discuss a range of issues and collaborate with other agencies and organisations to bring about political and social change.

SUPPORT OUR WORK

Visit www.womensaid.ie/donate to make an immediate and secure donation.

Text the word **ACTION** to **50300** to donate €4 to Women's Aid.

100% of your donation goes to Women's Aid across most network operators. Some operators apply VAT which means that a minimum of €3.25 will go to Women's Aid. Service Provider: LIKECHARITY. Helpline: 0766805278.

Our 2018 Financial Statements will be available on our website in June 2019.



WOMEN'S AID

Listening. Believing. Supporting.

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Registered charity number 6491

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