

National Federation of Women's Institutes-Wales

Report of stakeholder event - Gender-based violence: the impact on children and young people and the challenges for the new Welsh Government and Senedd

18 October 2021

Eirian Roberts, Chair of NFWI-Wales - opening comments

The Not in my Name Campaign, set up in 2012 in partnership with Joyce Watson MS, involved WI members across Wales recruiting male ambassadors from their communities to speak out against violence against women.

Tragic events, such as the murders of Sabina Messa and Sarah Everard, had highlighted that much more needed to be done to end violence against women. There was much to do to achieve a culture change where violence against women was not tolerated by society and where women and girls were able to live their lives free from the fear of violence, harassment and abuse.

Men and boys had to be part of the solution in ending violence against women. Men and boys needed to be engaged in changing behaviours and in challenging the inequalities and attitudes that contributed to violence against women.

Joyce Watson MS – opening comments

The public service of Sir David Amess MP, who had tragically lost his life in service to his constituents, was remembered. Our thoughts went out to his family and friends.

Many situations had been worsened by lockdown with whole families behind closed doors together.

Domestic abuse always impacted on children either directly or indirectly. It impacted on their development, educational outcomes and their mental health. Being exposed to domestic abuse in childhood was domestic abuse. There was a need to ensure that children could access the specialist support that they needed.

Now more than ever, we needed men to step up and speak up. At least 112 women had been killed by men so far this year in the UK.

Seventeen years ago, Joyce Watson had organised the first Candlelight Service in Llandaff Cathedral. In 2007, following Joyce's election to the Senedd, this work continued and the following year, the first ambassador was recruited namely Welsh international rugby player Derwyn Jones.

Kate - Welsh member of Girlguiding's advocate panel

Girlguiding UK's report It Happens All the Time included the findings of a survey of more than 400 girls and young women aged 13 - 18 across the UK about their experiences of sexual harassment.

Girls were on the receiving end of unwanted attention and comments and physical harassment and abuse all the time. Harassment was widespread in all parts of country and all areas of girls' lives including in schools, public spaces and online.

Feeling safe when outside was a major issue for many girls and young women. This increased amongst girls surveyed who were people of colour or identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer or questioning. 80% of all girls surveyed did not feel safe when they went out alone due to the fear of being harassed. Young women from the age of 13 were already

aware of sexual harassment and were taking extra steps that they felt necessary to keep themselves safe. This included not going out alone after dark, taking a less convenient route because it was safer and letting people know where they were going. This suggested the burden fell on the individual and what they needed to do to keep themselves safe.

Public sexual harassment and its effects were detrimental to girls' wellbeing and it negatively affected their freedom and opportunities. Girlguiding UK wanted to see more done to address the safety concerns of girls and young women. They supported Plan UK's calls to make public sexual harassment a criminal offence.

Regarding sexual harassment experienced in school, 67% had experienced sexual harassment in school from another student. 43% of 13-16 year olds had received unwanted comments which increased to 20% amongst girls aged 17-18 years. 23% of 17-18 year olds experienced unwanted touching. Schools needed to take a zero tolerance approach to sexual harassment and prioritise effectively implementing sex and relationships education.

Whilst young women surveyed were concerned about their public safety, the findings showed that boys were not as aware of the issue or had enough understanding. 53% of girls felt that boys did not understand what was and was not appropriate behaviour towards girls. Girlguiding UK believed that education was key to tackling these issues and changing behaviours by making sure that young people were taught about respecting others, gender equality and sexual consent.

In Girlguiding's latest Girls' Attitudes Survey, 71% of girls surveyed aged 7 - 21 years had experienced some form of online harm in the past such as sexist comments, harassment and unwanted sexual images. Girlguiding UK was calling on the UK Government's Online Safety Bill to include consequences for online platforms that failed to tackle online harassment to protect girls and young women when online.

The culture of harassment needed to be tackled in all areas of girls' and women's lives to enable them to lead their lives to the fullest.

Jane Hutt MS, Minister for Social Justice

VAWDASV was a societal problem and it required a societal response. Violence and abuse not only affected the victim but also their children, families and all of those around them as well as having a negative impact on society as a whole. We had to challenge attitudes and change behaviours of those who behaved abusively.

It was not for women and girls to modify their behaviour but for abusers to change theirs. We had to have a societal approach. This was the only way to end the pattern of violence, not just for the current generation, but for our children and their children too. Violence affected children's wellbeing, educational attainment, peer relationships, and ability to enjoy healthy respectful relationships in the future. During the Covid-19 pandemic, increasing numbers of children and young people had experienced or witnessed violence at home.

The Welsh Government had an ambition to end VAW. The VAWDASV Act in 2015 and National Strategy launched in 2016 had pushed the agenda in many areas of government to support a drive to end violence against women. One of 6 key objectives was to increase awareness in children and young people of the importance of safe equal relationships and that abusive behaviour was always wrong. The first phase was coming to an end and Welsh Government would shortly be consulting on the strategy for the next 5 years. The Welsh Government was widening the parameters of the next strategy to push the agenda further than before and it would include violence against women in the street and workplace as well as the home.

The Welsh Government was serious that it wanted Wales to be the safest place in Europe to be a woman. Alongside this, the Minister questioned how the cultural ground for our young people could be changed. We could only achieve our goals with a cross-sector commitment. Educating children and young people on equality, respect and consent was crucial to stop VAWDASV. Relationships and Sexuality Education would be a statutory part of the new curriculum for all young people. The Welsh Government was also considering how best to support learning in other settings. VAWDASV guidance for higher education was published in March 2020 and revised in November 2020.

Around a quarter of a million people had accessed training through the National Training Framework since its launch. The Live Fear Free campaign continued to raise awareness of stalking, harassment, abuse and violence against women and girls in all aspects of life including the streets and public spaces. It was noted that many had been afraid to go out on their own for exercise or sporting activities during lockdown.

There was a need to learn from women and girls about how practical advice could be provided and also to continue to work with specialist services to raise awareness of inequality and safety issues faced by women and girls. As the Minister had responsibility for crime and justice, as well as equality, she was working with Welsh police forces, PCCs, Public Safety Boards and the Crime Prosecution Service to focus on instilling confidence in victims to report incidences of violence and to hold those who abused to account.

A collective effort was needed. We could not, as women and men, tackle VAWDASV alone - we had to tackle it in society and tackle it through government. It was not just for women to take ownership of these challenges. We needed men to never commit condone or remain silent about violence against women. The Minister hoped that we would see more men prepared to come forward as White Ribbon Ambassadors this year. By empowering men to challenge these behaviours at an earlier stage, we could and had to stamp out the harmful and wide ranging impacts of VAWDASV. Together we could make Wales the safest place in Europe to be a woman and Wales would not be bystander to abuse.

Vivienne Laing - Policy and Public Affairs Manager, NSPCC Cymru

Vivienne Lang focused on the impact of parental domestic abuse on children.

Children and young people were not just passive victims of parental domestic abuse. They were right in the middle of it. They were experiencing it alongside their non-abusing parent. Children, along with the non-abusing parent, were controlled, threatened and lived in fear.

Children living with parental domestic abuse were recognised as victims in both the Wales VAWDASV Act and the England and Wales Domestic Abuse Act.

NSPCC research had found that 1 in 5 children were being exposed to domestic abuse. Public Health Wales research found that 16% of adults in Wales grew up in a house with domestic abuse. NSPCC research had found that a third living in homes with parental domestic abuse also experienced another form of abuse. 27% of children in Wales were in receipt of care and support due to parental abuse.

A harrowing case study of a young man who lived in South Wales was shared highlighting the impact of living with parental domestic abuse.

The impact on child victims could include mental health problems; acute feelings of betrayal, powerlessness, guilt; experiences of flashbacks or intrusive thoughts, nightmares; poorer school performance and achievement; and increased likelihood of negative coping mechanisms such as heavy drinking or substance use. These impacts could last long into adulthood and affect intimate relationships as an adult.

Not all women and children survived domestic abuse. The Femicide census 2009-18 found that, on average, a woman was killed by a man in the UK every 3 days but only a few of the tragic killings made the headlines. Most commonly women were killed at home by their husband, partner or ex-partner. In many cases the perpetrators also killed the victim's children or killed their mother in front of the children. In a third of cases, it was known that the woman killed had a child or children under the age of 18 at the time. In almost a fifth of cases, it was unknown whether the victim had children.

The Women's Aid Federation England's report '19 Child Homicides' also detailed harrowing findings of children murdered by their father or father figure due to unsafe child contact arrangements.

The support available for child victims in Wales was discussed. The Wales VAWDASV Act aimed to harness agencies' collective efforts to improve prevention of VAWDASV and improve protection and support for victims. The key provisions in the Act to achieve these improvements include a duty on Welsh Ministers to publish and implement a National Strategy. A new Strategy was due to be launched for consultation. There was also a requirement on local authorities and local health boards to publish and implement a local VAWDASV strategy.

The Welsh Government had also adopted the UNCRC (the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child). Article 19 of the UNCRC stated that child victims should be protected and Article 39 stated that child victims should be supported to recover from violence.

Sadly children were not getting the protection and support they needed in Wales. In the first round of strategies, produced 5 years ago by the Welsh Government nationally and by regional partners locally, no child victims were consulted about their needs and many of the local strategies did not mention or acknowledge the needs of child victims.

Welsh Women's Aid's Children Matter report in 2019 estimated that 18,500 experienced domestic abuse in the home in the past year in Wales and that 4,263 children and young people were known to access some form of specialist VAWDASV support. They concluded that over 14,000 (77%) of child and young people had received no support.

The pandemic had exacerbated problems of violence in the home. Both Childline and NSPCC Adult Helpline saw an increase in the number of people worried about domestic abuse and its impact on children and young people. In the first lockdown (23 March - 17 May 2020), the number of people contacting the NSPCC Helpline about domestic abuse, rose from an average of 140 contacts to an average of around 185 contacts a week. In the same period, Childline delivered over 500,000 counselling sessions to children and young people worried about domestic abuse. This was an increase from an average of around 50 a week earlier in the year to an average of around 65 a week during lockdown.

In terms of the action needed this Senedd term, the Welsh Government's National Strategy was crucial. The new strategy had to make clear that children were victims in their own right.

The objective about support services had to clearly state 'provide victims, both adults and children, with equal access to (services)'. Children were not included in Objective 6 of the current strategy. In addition, secure and sustainable funding had to be put in place for specialist services.

At a national and local level, needs assessments carried out by Regional Partnership Boards and Local Service Boards should include violence against women as a key priority. It was also vital that victims, both adults and children, were consulted when developing strategies/services. The shortfall in service provision for children and young people victims had to be addressed across Wales.

Lara Snowdon, Public Health Lead, Wales Violence Prevention Unit

Lara Snowdon focused on children and young people's experiences of gender-based violence in their own relationships.

The role of the Wales Violence Prevention Unit, which took a public health approach to violence prevention, was introduced. A range of organisations were involved and included a core team that were involved in violence prevention including Public Health Wales, the police, prison and probation and associate partners including Welsh Government, WLGA, a range of voluntary sector partners and some commissioned services.

The Wales Violence Prevention Unit undertook a range of work on VAWDASV with a focus on public health and an evidence-based approach. Some recent work had included a systematic evidence assessment of approaches to preventing VAWDASV, experiences of bystanders of domestic violence and abuse during the Covid-19 pandemic and a bystander toolkit for the night-time economy.

Statistics from the Crime Survey for England and Wales, found women aged 16 - 19 years were significantly more likely to be victims of any domestic abuse in the last year than women aged 25 years and over. A significant amount of violence and abuse had been seen during the pandemic and the Violence Prevention Unit had worked to monitor these trends. Early on in the pandemic, the UN introduced the term 'shadow pandemic' to describe the pandemic of violence and abuse in the home that was perhaps more invisible than the Covid-19 pandemic.

There had been significant increases in helpline demand in response to violence and abuse online, children and young people as victims of parental domestic abuse or young people reaching out about domestic abuse in their own relationships. Webchat facilities were also being accessed.

The Violence Prevention Unit monitored administrative data - police, health and ambulance service data – as key indicators of violent trends in society. They had found in the last few months a disturbing increase in young people (under 18 and 18-24) attending A&E in South Wales for domestic-abuse related assault in their own relationships. Spring and summer data 2021 from multiple sources including the police schools programme, had shown evidence of increases in violence among children and young people.

During April - July 2021, there had been a significant increase, and almost a doubling, in assault attendances at A&E Departments where the reporting location was school or school bus.

Another disturbing trend was sexual harassment in schools and public spaces. UN Women UK had conducted a survey last year that found that 86% of young women (18-24) had been sexually harassed in a public space. 91 Welsh schools were named on the Everyone's Invited website. Estyn had announced that it would be undertaking a review of sexual harassment in schools in Wales.

The impact of gender based violence included short and long-term health consequences across the life course and inter-generationally. These included physical, reproductive, sexual and psychological consequences.

Why was violence a public health issue? Violence had a significant impact on health and was both a cause and a consequence of inequality. Violence was predictable and preventable. Some of the tools and approaches used in public health could be used to complement existing criminal justice and specialist service responses, skills and expertise.

A public health approach to VAWDASV prevention was a systematic approach, took a whole society perspective and critically was about co-producing the approach in a multi-agency fashion with partners, communities and victims and services. It would be preventative and focused on the root causes of VAWDASV as well as being data-led and evidence-based. Public health approaches would also be empowering and asset-based.

The Violence Prevention Unit had published a report on a whole-system approach to the prevention of VAWDASV. A review had been undertaken of all academic research published over last 7 years on preventing VAWDASV. Key findings found that overall the prevention of VAWDASV was increasingly feasible and effective. There was a strong wealth of evidence on preventing VAWDASV with new evidence of effective practice emerging all the time.

It had been found that stand-alone interventions simply won't work. We had to take a whole society approach. The development of 'eco-system' approach of VAWDASV prevention was being proposed. Some of the programmes recommended that had a very strong evidence base were highlighted. The strongest area of evidence was around children and young people and working with adolescent age groups to build skills around health relationships, transform the more traditional views about gender norms and harmful gender norms, working with children and young people to transform those and support them. Examples around working around transforming harmful gender norms were Real Consent and Coaching Boys into Men in colleges, schools, sports clubs, online and universities. Programmes in schools to prevent VAWDASV included adolescent dating violence. These used a combination of methods including healthy relationships knowledge and skill development and bystander training, always as part of a peer-led whole school approach.

Other areas of evidence identified which needed further work included theatre interventions, empowerment approaches and social norms marketing campaign. Some areas that needed further investment due to a limited evidence base or gaps in the evidence included workplace interventions, implementation of preventative programmes with diverse communities, exploitation and trafficking, VAWDASV among older age groups and so-called honour based abuse.

Challenges for the new Welsh Government and Senedd were highlighted. There was a need for commitment and investment in prevention. This critically had to be ring-fenced and focused on evidence-based practice, building in the voices of survivors, communities and specialist services in order to create programmes in and for Wales. There was a need for recognition of VAWDASV in children and young people's own relationships and the systemic levels of gender-based violence. The development of an eco-system of violence prevention which challenged gender-based violence across our society should be considered. There was also a need to build back from Covid using a trauma informed approach and to develop a society that was more resilient to gender based violence.

Discussion session

Issues raised during the discussion session included the below:-

The tendency for new school building developments to include mixed toilet facilities.

The importance of the ACE hub. Lara explained that the ACE hub had a central place at Public Health Wales and that they had led a lot of work on the development of kindness and compassion in public policy. The ACE hub was taking on some of the findings of the work of Wales Violence Prevention Unit.

An observation was made that less than a quarter of the people who had joined the stakeholder event were men. The help of men was needed in this arena. Next year, it would be good to have an even balance of men and women at the events.

The new curriculum would not come into place until next year and some secondary schools were deferring its introduction until 2023. The roll-out would not be completed until 2026. Why could we not press for the new RSE code to be implemented as soon as it was published?

There had been a rise in the number of reported incidences of abuse but the number charged had reduced. Should we be encouraging the police to take reported cases more seriously and follow up more charges?

There was a need for more men to be part of this stakeholder event as well as more trade unions, universities and the NUS. Female students at Cardiff University had expressed feelings of being unsafe on the streets.

Girlguiding provided a safe environment and girls had trust in their leaders. Some young people, such as students moving to a new area, may not always have an organisation that they felt that they could reach out to and trust.

There had been cases of the police encouraging victims to apply a restorative justice approach instead of taking cases further. A trauma-centred approach was needed.

There was a need for a more inclusive approach with engagement of black and ethnic minority men.

Joyce Watson MS - closing comments

Men needed to be given the confidence to speak out. Not all people who stayed silent wanted to stay silent. Very often people remained quiet because they didn't feel empowered to speak out.

Eirian Roberts - closing comments

The speakers were thanked for their powerful contributions.

On 22 November, NFWI-Wales would be hosting an online stakeholder event and a candlelight vigil on the steps of the Senedd to show solidarity with victims and survivors of violence against women across the world.