

## Submission to the Joint Committee on Justice in relation to "Women's shelters / domestic abuse refuges" - August 2021

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### A. Introduction.

Men's Aid welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Joint Committee on Justice in relation to Women's Shelters / domestic abuse refuges.

Domestic violence service provision is widely acknowledged as an important and vital feature of our society. Whilst true prevalence is unknown it is recognised as an issue of pandemic proportions.

Men's Aid is the expert, principal specialist charity in Ireland dedicated to support men and their families experiencing domestic violence and coercive control. Our organisation collaborates nationally with other organisations, local authorities, Gardai, health services and the broad range of professional services supporting all victims. Men's Aid is also part of a CEO group across Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland and UK, who like ourselves work frontline directly with male victims sharing approaches, data, research and contacts, all with the aim to build safe communities.

We provide a range of specialised services specific to supporting how men experience, communicate and respond to domestic violence. As members of our team have experience supporting both female and male victims, it is our opinion that men's needs are very different and therefore require male specific supports.

Our services include a national Helpline, Monday to Friday 9am – 5pm, outreach clinics across the North East of Ireland, court accompaniment in Dolphin House and Dundalk courts, counselling as well as national advocacy.

Our services are designed to support the vulnerable man and his family through the catastrophic trauma of domestic violence and coercive control. Our counselling team are senior level professionals with extensive and specific experience in supporting vulnerable men with mental health, addiction, homelessness and suicidal issues as well as domestic violence.



In 2020, our service supported **5,500+ contacts**, in 2021 we expect to support approx. **8,000 contacts**. A pattern that will only continue to rise in the years ahead as men start to come forward to NGO's for help, information and support.

Despite our considerable contribution in supporting vulnerable victims across society, our funding is shockingly inadequate. Currently Men's Aid receive €239k from the Dept. of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and €22k from Dept. of Justice. A total **yearly funding of €261k**. This represents **less than 1% of the national funding** for all DSGBV services. The €30m funding is not enough for women's services and we do not wish to take from their funding, national funding needs to be increased and allocated fairly and proportionately.

The current funding level is not viable to support the vulnerable men and their families in 2022 and beyond. In terms of staff resources, our tiny team responding to this national pandemic and high volume of demand consist of only 3 full time and 5 part time working on a rota basis.

Family violence leaves behind unimaginable trauma for all those impacted and also many generations of the family. It is imperative and long overdue that state and society starts to acknowledge and recognise the invisible vulnerable boys and men who need domestic violence service provisions. We do not fight suicide, homelessness, addiction or cancer based on gender because everyone deserves to feel safe from harm. Current funding levels risk prevention of early help and ultimately we risk people's lives.

Our mission is to help any person who seeks information and support in order to ensure they are safe, with specific focus on vulnerable victims with children. Our submission today is aimed at improving resources for female victims and male victims.

To date we have failed as humanity. Legislation, policies, academic papers, language and campaigns have been divisive, causing more silence rather than solutions. All stakeholders in the area of family violence need to be part of a solution and treat victims as human beings.

Men's Aid is working towards the day when no one lives in fear, the day when men, women, children and families are safe and secure in every village, town, farmland and city in Ireland.



## B. Executive Summary.

Domestic abuse should never be a competition between the genders of victims. Systemic bias against male victims and poor funding for domestic violence service provision must be addressed by Government and Society. These vulnerable victims are members of our family, they are our friends, neighbours and work colleagues. Ireland needs cultural change across society and support services in order to reach all vulnerable people. Language matters and language must be gender inclusive in order to reflect the communities across Ireland.

1. Male victims of domestic abuse are largely invisible to society. The public appear unaware that our service exists or needs to exist. Male victims include LGBT+ community, ethnic and minority men, men with disabilities, traveller and roma men, the man in hospital due to domestic violence.
2. **One in three victims of domestic abuse are men.** (COSC 2005 & UK ONS 2020)
3. **Only 5% of male victims report domestic violence to Gardai**, therefore 95% of domestic violence on a male is not 'on our radar', hence the male victim is invisible, lost in our system. (COSC 2005)
4. Best population-based studies show that 20%-50% of all partner violence victims in a given year are men.
5. The nonexistence of accommodation for male victims and their children is because to date they have been invisible. Housing and homelessness is an increasing problem for men, exacerbated through covid.
6. The thousands of children having to live with abusive mothers / step mothers are neglected with having no accommodation option to flee the abusive home. **These children are being discriminated against because of the gender of their guardian.**



7. Istanbul Convention: Ireland is currently in breach for both female and male victims of domestic violence. Section 23, which requires that shelters be accessible and in sufficient numbers to provide a place of refuge for victims. It also requires that shelters reach out pro-actively to victims.
8. Legal considerations: The Domestic Violence Act 2018, Victims of Crime Act 2017, Human Rights Acts, Equal Status Acts 2000 – 2018, Children’s Act, are areas that are often overlooked with male victims experiencing discrimination based on their gender.

Irish Government needs to make emergency accommodation accessible to all men, this includes migrant men, men with disabilities, men with mental health issues, men with substance misuse, traveller and roma men and LGBTQ+ men. We support men from ranging from 18 years – 82 years old.

The Irish housing crisis is having a severe impact on the men who are homeless. In the UK, data shows approx. 1 in 6 men who are homeless cite they are homeless due to experiencing domestic violence. As Ireland has no shelter/refuge the men have only the options of attaining legal orders and have to continue to live with their abuser or become homeless.

### Academic.

The most recent academic research we could find is the “Somewhere Safe” *informing Ireland’s Provision of Domestic Violence Emergency Accommodation through an International Lens*, by Abigail Flynn and Dr. Louise Crowley, January 2020.

Whilst it is an excellent piece of research funded by Tusla sadly it only represents women and children. A key recommendation from the research is “*The needs of men as victims of domestic abuse is a topic that should be strongly considered for future research*”.

This research should have included all genders seeking somewhere safe when fleeing abuse.

Irish Government, stakeholders and society must start to keep male victim/survivors of domestic abuse safe, secure and stable including their children and family in practice and spirit, not easy when often they are excluded from national campaigns, strategies and barely exist in national budgets.



## C. Taking each of the particular areas of interest to the Committee

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

- Men disclose intimate terrorism, severe psychological aggression, controlling behaviour, sexual violence, PTSD, depression, heart attack symptoms, isolation, experiencing poverty, homelessness, living with untreated physical injuries, untreated physical illnesses, and mental health issues. In particular, the impact of not seeing their children, the grief and loss when access is denied to spend time with their children by the other parent (parental alienation) has a huge impact on wellbeing. Many men disclose changing and/or losing their jobs due to domestic violence. We have noticed our statistics for suicide ideation triple since covid. Men disclosing the weight of false allegations, legal orders not enforced, administration abuse all exacerbated due to having no refuge / shelter to flee to.
- Fear of not being believed, fear of consequence, shame, stigma are resulting in boys and men not coming forward for help and instead remaining in the abusive home and *'putting up with it'*. Thus leading to mental health struggles.
- Disclosures of girlfriends/wives/partners increase intake of alcohol / substances continues to be a factor in domestic violence. Partners with dependency on alcohol / substances falsely accusing the victim of actions / behaviour are reported to our Helpline daily.
- Fear plays a huge part for all victims in abusive relationships. In particular for male victims, the fear of being homeless because currently Ireland has zero refuge / domestic violence shelter for single men or dads with children fleeing domestic violence.
- Irish Government research from 2005 found that **one in every three** victims of Domestic Violence will be a man. (COSC 2005).
- Recent ONS Data from the UK shows 1 in 4 women and 1 in 6 men will experience domestic violence during their lifetime. (Office of National Statistics 2020).

- Male victims deserve the same access to the complex range of needs required to support them. Key workers are required to manage case load given the broad and complex needs of a single man or dad with children require to start their journey of rebuilding their lives.
- Parenting Support Programmes in Ireland are made only available to “Mum and Children”. Children of abusive mothers are excluded. The CSO recorded over 30,000 lone dads in Ireland. The voice of the child is totally silent and invisible when denied access to support programmes **because of the gender of their guardian.**

## 2. The geographical provision of shelters for domestic abuse.

- There are no shelters in Ireland for any male victims of domestic abuse single men or dad’s and their children.
- No shelters for our transgender community. A transgender client of ours was turned away by a women’s shelter.

## 3. The incidence of domestic abuse in LGBTQ+ relationships.

- Whilst in 2020 only 5% of contacts to Men’s Aid are from LGBTQ+ community, we have noted a significant increase in 2021. The men in gay relationships disclose and produce proof of severe coercive control and violence.
- We are thankful to the RTE summer storyline on Fair City of two men in a relationship, showing the journey when a victim reported his abusive partner and his journey through the criminal justice system. In the TV drama the perpetrator was found not guilty, the reaction from the public and viewers was outrage. The storyline sadly reflects reality for far too many however it resulted in conversation and engagement and we believe the drama may have had an impact on members of the LGBTQ+ community and gave confidence for the men to start coming forward to our service.



- If there were national campaigns for boys and men, we would start to see a better picture of prevalence but also reach so many men who sadly see no choice or way out and decide to go other routes to cope with abuse such as substance, homelessness and suicide. Victims need to recognise themselves in media campaigns.
- Currently we are supporting a number of men in gay relationships through the Criminal Justice System, supporting them to report coercive control, physical assault and rape. These clients have remained living with their abusers as there is no refuge in Ireland.

#### **4. The Istanbul Convention and its impact on the provision of refuge accommodation in Ireland.**

- The Istanbul Convention has had no impact on refuge accommodation for male or transgender victims of domestic violence. There continues to be no shelters or refuge for male victims or members of the transgender community.

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

- Men's Aid have seen an increase of 40% in contacts to our service since Covid 19 restrictions with many of these men seeking refuge or safe accommodation.
- It is widely known that Ireland does not provide refuge for boys and men fleeing domestic violence so male victims rarely request refuge. However, to date in 2021 our data shows 24 men specifically contacted our service requesting refuge / safe accommodation. These men were turned away due to no accommodation option.
- The impact of lockdown and disconnection from wider family supports has increased the volume of men contacting us who are sleeping on the streets or in tents on beaches, in cars and sleeping in garden sheds whilst their perpetrator remains in the home.



- Before Covid callers spoke of sofa surfing in friends and families' homes to escape violence and abuse however this stopped due to social distancing. Covid restrictions left many men and children in unsafe and dangerous situations with nowhere to turn to for safety.
- We witnessed an increase in the older man calling our Helpline through covid. Men in their 60's, 70's, 80's. With national campaigns highlighting Helpline numbers for victims of domestic violence, it appears there was a moment of realisation for many men that they had been in abusive marriages for 20, 30 and 40 years. Evidence of how unaware a victim is when abuse becomes 'the norm' and they know no different. Sadly these elderly men had nowhere to go and still live with the abusers.
- Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland and our colleagues in the UK found statistically suicide soared during lockdown. There was additional risk and yet no accommodation provision made available for victims of domestic abuse who are male.

## **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**

- In 2020 all of our in person support services were restricted due to Covid. We pivoted and provided support via telephone and zoom. In some cases we did have to meet clients in car parks in the fresh air in order to help them with practical support regarding court information, court paperwork. These services are available to women when in refuge, a key worker could help with paper work, applying for legal orders via online. A service not available to victims who are male.
- Due to the increased pressure on Men's Aid team in 2021 Tusla provided temporary additional funding for 2 helpline call handlers. To date the increase pressure on Men's Aid team and increase in calls to the service continues. The additional part time support workers is still not adequate to meet the demand.





- As the demand rises from Q1 to Q3 in 2021 our service is barely coping. Due to a small team and conscious of vicarious trauma, our organisation urgently needs Government to support male victims who are experiencing domestic violence.
- There have been too many days in 2020 and 2021 whereby the frontline team are literally drenched in trauma from the disclosures. The terms and conditions of the frontline team needs addressing in Q4 2021 otherwise we risk losing team members.

## 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.

- Men's Aid has noticed an increase in men contacting with mental health issues and suicidal ideation.
- In January 2021 Men's Aid sought assistance from Gardai to attend 5 serious suicide attempts. This was following Christmas and no supports / refuge available.
- Funding for Men's Aid outreach support is currently restricted to **four counties** – Meath, Louth, Monaghan and Cavan. So the vulnerable male victim outside of these four counties relies on our support by telephone. This is a huge area to focus on for 2022 and beyond. We have been successful in attaining a grant for 12 months to provide outreach support in Co. Waterford, funded by The Community Foundation. However what about the victims in all other counties, starting with Cork, Limerick and Galway. These victims continue to be neglected due to gender and geographical location.



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

- While all calls to Men's Aid increased there was a marked increase to our helpline from distressed dads revealing breaches of legal orders during covid restrictions.
- Breaches of access were being used as a form of abuse to such a level that Minister for Justice Mr Charlie Flanagan released a statement in April 2020 reflecting the position of the Department of Justice - *"Court Orders in relation to access remain in place and should be complied with to the greatest degree possible in the circumstances"*. Whilst policy is in place, sadly reality is very different.
- Men contacting Men's Aid also revealed their concerns for their children's safety and spoke of their partners increased alcohol consumption and drug taking having a negative impact on their children.
- Disclosures of children being neglected, left to their own devices and an increase in verbal, mental and physical abuse towards them.
- Increase in Child Protection Referrals to Tusla made in 2020 and continues in 2021.
- Schools provide refuge for thousands of children living in abusive home environments. The true impact of lockdown is unknown on these children.



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

- During Lockdown some men revealed Gardaí were contacting them and completing welfare checks, while others complained of seeking assistance from Gardaí but no Gardaí attending even when a domestic violence order was in place.
- The name “Faoiseamh” was a barrier to victims with no Irish language. In 2020 we supported men from 25 countries, hence they would not recognise this word.
- We keep in regular contact with members of AGS and met in person with Assistant Commissioner Anne Marie Cagney and Chief Supt. Declan Daly as well as local AGS across Ireland. We are experiencing an increase in referrals from AGS to our service.
- The “Go Purple” campaign was a huge success in that we experienced an increase in calls. Awareness events like these are imperative to break down silence and for victims to be encouraged to reach out to AGS especially considering the low reporting levels.

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

- Although men using Men’s Aid services reveal an increase in violence when their abuser consumes alcohol these calls increased during lockdown in both incidents and severity of violence.
- 1 in 5 calls to our Helpline disclosed reference to “She’s drinking more at home”.
- Callers speak about alcohol being consumed daily which increased already volatile and dangerous situations.



## D. Recommendations

- Given the high volume of male victims Ireland needs a specific strategy for boys and men experiencing partner abuse.
- Action the recommendation from Dr. Louise Crowley's research and carry out the "Somewhere Safe" report for male victims. A need's assessment to gather a holistic list of safe accommodation options nationally, ensuring there are sufficient supports to meet the needs of different demographics (male, LGBT+, ethnic minorities, older men, men with a disability). Safe accommodation options reviewed: Refuge, specialist safe, dispersed accommodation types. The Courts Service, Tusla, An Garda Siochana to assist in the research.
- Agencies working in the space of accommodation and housing such as Peter McVerry Trust, Simon Community and addiction service Tiglin share their approaches with Domestic Violence services working with male victims. These agencies support vulnerable people and thus are not bias towards gender.
- Lease buildings from housing authorities for use as refuge. Reviewing housing level options of a) refuge, b) assisted living or c) peer support accommodation.
- Fund Men's Aid to expand the team to offer key workers, case workers to run and manage the refuge service.
- Northern Ireland is currently the only region in the UK with a gender inclusive strategy to tackle domestic and sexual violence. Engagement with the service providers to understand how they approach the same issues and outcomes.
- Prevention measures – National campaigns graphically showing what coercive control is and the use of all genders in the messaging, in particular a female perpetrator and gay partnerships.
- Healthy and unhealthy relationships being part of the school curriculum without gender approach.



- The impact of prevention measures will in decades to come impact less need for refuge as the victim should be remaining in the home and the perpetrator removed / sentenced.
- We would suggest a female perpetrator programme be available asap so society learns the dynamics of the female abuser. Both Men's Development Network and MOVE Ireland offer excellent programmes for male perpetrators, we see a need for female perpetrators also.
- A national media campaign encouraging men to come forward so they know they will be supported and are not alone.
- Any legislation going forward to be gender inclusive.
- We call for urgent research and training in all the areas including child protection, criminal justice system, family law courts, training for a wide body of individuals who interact with family including the judiciary, solicitors, individuals who prepare s47 s32 reports, individuals employed at child contact centres, the mediation process and the mediator.
- Samaritans Ireland and Men's Aid would like to collaborate and commission research around domestic violence and suicide. Ireland's suicide rates amongst men is of grave concern and the sooner we have research on the area the sooner we can save lives.
- An accommodation service such as Peter McVerry Trust / Focus Ireland need to collaborate to research how many men are sleeping rough because of partner abuse.
- The Irish State must give a commitment and commence working towards supporting male victims of domestic violence and coercive control.
- Find pathways to support men to access safe accommodation. Not all men will contact a domestic violence service, services such as A&E, GP's, Gardai to play their part in recognising the male victim so they can respond and refer to the most suited service.



Hopefully, it is time to stop using divisive, discriminatory language and to come together to build a system that recognises and protects all victims and their children, regardless of gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, religion, disability or social and workplace position. We must work towards supporting all victims and all perpetrators in order to build a safe community.

Thank you for your time reading our submission.

**ENDS.**

**20<sup>th</sup> August 2021.**

