

# The public health approach to preventing gender-based violence

## Note of first advisory group meeting

Monday, 12 June 2023

### Background

1. Seven members of the advisory group met with the Committee for the first time during a private session at the Senedd on Monday, 15 May 2023. Six members of the advisory group attended in-person with one member contributing online, via Zoom.
2. The purpose of this initial discussion was to consider the views of the advisory group on the main themes which emerged from responses to the consultation, which ran from Wednesday, 8 March 2023 – Friday, 28 April 2023.
3. The following themes emerged from the discussion.

### Themes

#### **Theme 1: The role of schools**

4. Schools have a key role to play in teaching boys and girls what healthy relationships look like, starting with primary school aged children (i.e., from year 6). In addition to embedding Relationship and Sexuality Education in Curriculum for Wales, the importance of healthy relationships needs to permeate the culture at schools.
5. Growing up in a household where abuse is commonplace will often mean girls are ill-equipped to identify abusive behaviour as adults, as they may never have had a reference point for healthy relationships. It is crucial to empower girls with the tools to recognise abusive behaviour before it escalates.



- 6.** There is often a disproportionate focus on how girls should and should not behave, as opposed to teaching boys about respectful behaviours (i.e. an understanding of the behaviours that can make girls feel uncomfortable and fearful). There is a need to teach girls and boys to call out disrespectful behaviour and put boundaries in place.
- 7.** Schools may often turn a blind eye to bad behaviour which emboldens the perpetrator to continue their behaviour. It is important to support the teaching profession to recognise the signs and symptoms that children may be experiencing gender-based violence, as children may portray the characteristics of trauma in different ways. There is a need to upskill and empower the profession to equip them with a set of communication skills to act.
- 8.** A view that the current 'Ask and Act' duty does not empower professionals to act. There is a fear about how to handle a disclosure and the responsibility that individuals will have for managing the risk. Consideration should also be given to safeguarding those to whom the disclosure is made, due to the potentially traumatic/triggering nature of the disclosure.
- 9.** Schools need to build strong relationships with the families involved.
- 10.** There is a role for experts/ survivors in co-producing training, which should include challenging the teaching profession about their own unconscious bias.

## **Theme 2: Intergenerational violence and trauma**

- 11.** Serious concerns were raised about the impact that witnessing domestic abuse and/or sexual violence, adverse childhood experiences and early trauma can have on children and young people.
- 12.** There were concerns about the lack of specialist support services for children who witness domestic abuse and/or sexual violence. Children are struggling to access mainstream services such as Child Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), which were described by one contributor as “utterly ill-equipped” to understand the impact of domestic abuse and/or sexual violence on children.
- 13.** The need to embed trauma informed practice in public services was a strong theme. There were concerns that women and children must retell their story repeatedly to many different professionals to access support services, which can be re-traumatising. There also needs to be an understanding that building

trust with the individual to enable them to feel comfortable to share their experience before making a referral, is crucial.

**14.** Concerns were shared that an intervention is more likely where there is evidence of physical abuse, which can often mean that signs of emotional abuse are overlooked.

### **Theme 3: Online safety and social media**

**15.** Social media was described as an “untamed beast”, with group members explaining that children and young people need to be educated on what abuse looks like so that when people are exposed to it, they will choose not to engage with it.

**16.** There needs to be support for parents to help them better understand the harmful content their children may be exposed to online and to equip them with the skills to support their children to stay safe online.

**17.** Awareness-raising is needed to help parents recognise the signs and symptoms that their children may be at risk of harm/ experiencing abuse or harassment online. There is a role for schools in promoting safe internet use.

**18.** Concerns were shared about a lack of control about what appears in young people’s social media feeds, exposing them to harm. There is a role for regulators and the social media industry to protect young people and censor harmful content.

**19.** Honest dialogue about the dangers associated with pornography is important. It is a subject which is often considered taboo but is becoming increasingly accessible. Children and young people need to understand that pornography does not reflect a normal sexual relationship/experience.

### **Theme 4: Awareness-raising campaigns**

**20.** Whilst some group members were positive about the effectiveness of Welsh Government funded awareness-raising campaigns, it was felt that their impact was limited due to the relatively short length of time campaigns were run. There was a call for campaigns to run for a longer period to maintain momentum and embed key messaging in the public’s consciousness.

**21.** It is crucial that campaigns are not diluted to seem more palatable for the public. Domestic abuse and sexual violence is traumatic and the reality for women living those situations should be portrayed accurately.

**22.** Similarly, bystander interventions were seen to be effective, but their impact is limited because they tend to be short term interventions, with campaigns running for several weeks only.

**23.** An intersectional lens needs to be applied to awareness-raising campaigns to ensure they meet the needs of all women and girls (including disabled women, women from ethnic minority backgrounds and women with no recourse to public funds).

**24.** The first contact a woman has when disclosing her experience of domestic abuse or sexual violence is the most important. It's essential that first disclosure is handled appropriately and with empathy (this is often to a GP, health visitor, midwife, or to a police officer).

**25.** Believing a woman who discloses her experience of domestic abuse and/or sexual violence was considered key. Some explained that in the absence of any visible signs of physical abuse and where the woman may appear well-presented and articulate, doubt is often cast by those to whom the disclosure is made. This, in turn, impacts upon the trust women have in support services.

**26.** Similarly, when a woman reports domestic abuse and/or sexual violence, they may be in a heightened state of emotion. This can mean that some details are omitted, which can impact upon whether the woman's account is believed ("She didn't say that on the night.").

**27.** It is also important that support services are already in place to allow professionals to make a referral (i.e., it is ineffective/dangerous to encourage women to come forward without adequate support being in place).

### **Theme 5: Gender-bias and victim blaming**

**28.** There was a view that shrewd men can manipulate 'the system', convincing professionals that they are not a risk and depicting their partner as 'unstable'. Conversely, articulate women are seen to be "too educated to be abused" (professionals often do not believe they are victims). Some felt that if certain terms, described by one contributor as "buzz words" are used, they are less likely to be believed.

**29.** Women feel they are often seen as 'neurotic' or a 'nuisance' to services. They feel their views are not heard and their concerns are often dismissed or ignored. It is difficult for survivors to trust the services that are meant to support them

because they have been let down so many times (or survivors see them as taking the perpetrator's 'side').

**30.** There is a systemic culture of victim blaming where survivors feel they are the ones needing to “prove” their children are safe to be with them. A fear that survivors will have their children taken into care if they ‘speak up’ is silencing many victims and preventing them from reaching out for support.

**31.** The onus is on survivors to advocate for themselves and learn to navigate a complex system (i.e., the police, family court, social services etc.) to keep themselves and their children safe. Survivors often do so under extreme stress and trauma, and against the backdrop of an uncertain housing and financial situation.

**32.** Some women are more educated and capable than others of navigating the “chaos”. However, concerns were raised about the women who may not have the confidence, ability, or capacity to do this. What’s happening to them?

**33.** It was suggested some women may be prevented from seeking mental health support because they fear their medical records will be shared inappropriately.

## **Theme 6: Holding perpetrators to account**

*Many of the issues raised here are matters reserved to the UK Government.*

**34.** Survivors lack confidence in perpetrator programmes and raised concerns about their effectiveness and creditability. One advisory group member described some perpetrator programmes as akin to “incel groups.”

**35.** Serious concerns were raised about the family court and how traumatising the experience can be for survivors and children.

**36.** Concerns were raised about repeat victimisation (i.e. men move on to the next relationship and the same pattern of violence is repeated). A particular concern is that organisations and services do not share information beyond their geographical boundaries (i.e. local authorities, police etc).

**37.** Too many men are ‘allowed’ to get away with it – punishments are not harsh enough, few cases reach court, pleading guilty to a lesser offence reduces sentence length etc.

**38.** How the police handle incidences of gender-based violence needs improving, with one contributor describing the police response to her situation as “shocking”. The police do not always take reports of violence against women seriously (especially if there is no evidence of physical violence). There is a culture of victim blaming, and poor practices in terms of information sharing and data recording.

### **Theme 7: Post-separation abuse**

**39.** There is a lack of awareness, understanding and recognition of the dangers related to post-separation abuse across the public sector (i.e. there is a misconception that if the survivor no longer lives with the perpetrator, they are no longer at risk. However some described post-separation abuse as far worse).

**40.** The landscape a woman must navigate post-separation abuse is complex. Conflicting messages are received from different services (i.e. social services advise to stay away from the perpetrator, the family court will encourage contact, the police are trying to prosecute), which exacerbates an already stressful situation.

**41.** There are no support services in place for survivors experiencing post-separation abuse.

### **Theme 8: Other key issues**

*Due to time constraints, some questions were not explored in great detail. We await further contributions from the advisory group on the following areas.*

**42.** Workplace interventions are needed:

- to support survivors and;
- call out sexual harassment.

**43.** Concerns about a lack of refuge support for disabled women who are victims of domestic abuse or sexual violence. Concerns were also shared that the needs of, and risks to, disabled women are being overlooked, particularly when perpetrators are their carers.

**44.** Issues around the use of temporary housing when women (and their children) are forced to flee the family home, especially where women may be the victim of financial abuse.

- 45.** A view that support services do not work collaboratively because they are competing for the same pot of funding and/or have limited resources. A whole systems approach is needed. Some shared the view that some organisations “gatekeep” their survivors so information is not shared and services work in silos.
- 46.** MARAC (Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference) working needs to be more transparent.
- 47.** Youth workers play a key role but resource and capacity are impacting upon their effectiveness.
- 48.** There is a need to work with the business sector and the night-time economy to reduce the risks to women and girls.