

# The Voices and Views of Women Experiencing Domestic Violence

Gill Hague reflects on domestic violence services and how well they respond to the views and needs of abused women themselves.

After years — indeed millennia — of neglect, domestic violence by men against women is currently in the public view as never before. The abuse of women in intimate and family situations has become a major issue of concern within criminal justice, social policy, social work, child protection, and among many members of the public in the UK, as elsewhere in countries across the globe. The result has been the development of new services, good practice and policy guidance, improved responses within the police, and inter-agency domestic violence forums. This increase in service provision has been welcomed by practitioners and activists in the field and by survivors of domestic violence - sometimes, after so many years of inaction, with a certain measure of disbelief. Much of this new attention has its roots in the women's activist movement against violence and abuse which became particularly active in the 1970s, and has been campaigning, setting up projects and developing good policy and practice ever

since. Thus, activism, backed up by research and service development, has transformed both our understanding of the issue and the practice of many agencies throughout the statutory and voluntary sectors (see e.g. Hague and Malos, 1998). Increased government attention has included many circulars and guidance notes from the Home Office, the Department of Health and the Women's Unit (see Cabinet Office, 1999); a major Home Office review of current knowledge on domestic violence (Taylor-Browne, 2001 forthcoming); and the development of a new funding programme for a range of 'violence against women' demonstration projects within the Home Office Crime Reduction Programme.

## Patchy service

The ESRC Violence Research Programme is currently examining violence of all types across the UK. Three of its projects have focussed on domestic violence against women, and this article draws principally on one of these, which is investigating how much the voices and views of women experiencing violence are being heard by, and are informing, service and policy development. The quick answer to this question, sadly but perhaps unsurprisingly, is 'not much'. In the past, documents in which abused women's voices have been raised refer again and again to inadequate services, to cutbacks, and to the long trek from agency to agency to obtain help (Mama, 1996; Mullender and Hague, 2000). Things have, of course, improved in recent years. However, the majority of women interviewed in the above study felt that their views were overlooked to a considerable extent by service providers and that their needs were not adequately met. They felt silenced, regarded as not important

and unable to achieve the type of service and policy responses which they sought.

Forty-five per cent of the women had not been believed by the agency approached, and nearly half had continued to be unsafe and unprotected over long periods of ineffective service intervention. On the other hand, many also felt that agency practice had improved in various ways over recent years. Improvements, where they had occurred, included increases in services, more understanding or sympathetic officers, innovative partnerships (e.g. between children's charities and refuges) and the now-prevailing orthodoxy that domestic violence is a crime, like any other violence. Interviewees especially identified improvements within the police and probation service, although not in the rest of the criminal justice system, with courts, in particular, failing to meet their needs. There was, however, no straightforward view of police improvements, even though much very creditable effort has been put into policing domestic violence in the last ten years. Despite real transformations in service in many areas, police responses to domestic violence appear to remain extremely patchy overall (Plotnikoff and Woolfson, 1998). On the positive side, domestic violence units or officers (the latter working in vulnerable persons, community safety or child protection / family violence units) were regarded very positively. In fact, almost all of the improvements which the women in the above study had experienced were associated with these specialist agencies - a resounding vote of confidence - and few with the uniformed general service. Importantly, however, specialist police domestic violence services are under threat in many localities.

The agencies which all studies to date have found to best understand women's needs, and which are almost unanimously viewed favourably (despite poor physical conditions in some instances), are refuges and women's outreach services. These agencies, many of which are co-

***On the positive side, domestic violence units or officers were regarded very positively. In fact, almost all of the improvements which the women had experienced were associated with these specialist agencies - a resounding vote of confidence - and few with the uniformed general service.***

## **Women who have experienced domestic abuse want to be consulted about services and believe that, if practice were informed by their feedback and views, more efficient and effective provision would result.**

ordinated by the Women's Aid Federations, have always operated policies of empowerment and often act as advocates on behalf of abused women and their children, both locally and nationally. However, the encouraging response from women survivors of violence in regard to specialist service provision by women's advocacy and support projects needs to be viewed against the background of chronic underfunding of these voluntary sector organisations, which will not be addressed adequately in any way by the new government Supporting People initiative. Thus, the agencies which are viewed most favourably by service users are the ones with the most insecure financial position.

### **Consultation and involvement**

Overall, as a generalisation, women who have experienced domestic abuse want to be consulted about services and believe that, if practice were informed by their feedback and views, more efficient and effective provision would result. It makes no sense if new services continue to develop, unaware of what women survivors of violence say that they need. However, this type of consultation is a difficult matter if it is to be done meaningfully and not merely as a cosmetic exercise. There can be particular complexities in regard to such issues as accountability, equality, commitment — and what to do if women are still 'in the experience'.

Encouragingly, new practice in involving domestic violence survivors in policy development and service provision is currently developing in various areas of the country. These new ideas include domestic violence survivors groups to advise forums and agencies; structured and agreed consultation through Women's Aid; women's focus groups; one-off consultation

methods; use of the internet and community theatre.

Many of these new consultation and participation methods 'flower' for a while and then may die away, to be replaced by another method, and it is important that such an outcome is not regarded negatively. At a personal level, survivor consultation and participation can be individually empowering. Being part of decision-making, and being listened to, can build self-respect and confidence, although there may be many personal matters to be addressed (e.g. cultural and class factors, racism, issues of self-esteem and identity, poverty, and the silencing effects of experiencing violence). In general, though, involving individual survivors of domestic violence in an isolated way in professional committees and forums does not work well, and more imaginative and sensitive measures are required.

Resource shortage may militate against an exploration of these issues. For consultation to be an effective and integrated part of service delivery, it needs to be taken seriously and properly resourced (for example, in terms of payment, compensation, childcare, support and training). It is clear that the difference between participation 'for the sake of it' and real involvement, which is regarded as an automatic part of good practice, and where services are held informally accountable to domestic violence survivors, needs to be addressed to ensure effective improvements. Where the latter is achieved, the experience can be a passionate, deeply human and powerful process for all concerned. Such an outcome can help to lead policy-makers and practitioners forward in their oft-stated commitment to make new history in dealing with domestic violence.

Finally, it is important to highlight an issue which has been consistently overlooked. This is

the dedicated work which has been conducted throughout the development of domestic violence provision by professionals who are themselves survivors of domestic abuse, whether disclosed or (very often) undisclosed. These professionals have often made considerable impact on policies and services, and may have worked quietly for many years, often against the odds, on behalf of other women and children who have experienced violence. It is time to acknowledge these unsung contributions.

**Gill Hague** is Co-director of the *Domestic Violence Research Group*, University of Bristol.

### **References:**

Cabinet Office (1999), *Living Without Fear*. London: Women's Unit of the Cabinet Office and Home Office.

Hague, G., and Malos, E. (1998, 2nd Edition), *Domestic Violence: Action for Change*. Cheltenham: New Clarion Press.

Mama, A. (1996), *The Hidden Struggle: Statutory and Voluntary Sector Responses to Violence against Black Women in the Home*, London: Whiting and Birch.

Mullender, A., and Hague, G. (2000), Briefing Notes. *Reducing Domestic Violence: What Works?* Women Survivor's Views, London: Home Office.

Plotnikoff, J., and Woolfson, R. (1998), *Policing Domestic Violence: Effective Organisational Structures*, Police Research Series Paper 100, Policing and Reducing Crime Unit. London: Home Office.

Taylor-Browne, J. (ed.) (2001 forthcoming), *Reducing Domestic Violence: What Works?* London: Home Office.