

SHINING A SPOTLIGHT ON DOMESTIC ABUSE SUFFERED BY MEN

ALMOST 10 PERCENT OF CALLS TO THE MENS AID IRELAND HELPLINE IN THE PAST YEAR CAME FROM KERRY. **STEPHEN FERNANE** TALKS TO CEO, KATHRINA BENTLEY, ABOUT DOMESTIC ABUSE AMONG MEN, AND WHY IT REMAINS A CHALLENGE GETTING MORE MEN TO COME FORWARD AND REPORT THEIR ABUSERS.

'Men are being belittled, slagged-off and being told that they are useless'

WHILE the Covid-19 lockdown has brought society's problems to the surface, the topic of male victims of domestic abuse is seldom discussed.

This is a real and present danger for many men in Kerry and, indeed, nationally, many of whom suffer in silence due to feelings of stigma, shame, and, in some cases, opting to tolerate abuse for fear of losing access to children in situations where separation occurs.

Kathrina Bentley is the CEO of Mens Aid Ireland, a body that helps men suffering from domestic abuse. Kathrina says that while the problem of male domestic abuse is growing, trying to urge more victims to come forward remains problematic for reasons already outlined.

In the past year alone, upwards of 10 percent of calls to the Mens Aid Ireland helpline came from Kerry. This number may even be higher as most men prefer not to disclose where they are from in the early stages of seeking help, a common trend as they are nervous. No pressure is put on them to reveal this information, however. The important thing is that they step forward and get help and advice.

"We're just trying to get a map of the country to see where the gaps are, who is calling and what is the percentage. We have had calls from every county. The abuse is the same for men regardless of what county they are in. They are naturally nervous. The service we provide is totally confidential," said Kathrina.

A more concerning issue is that only five percent of men come forward seeking support and to report abuse. But Kathrina explains that since the lockdown, all contact is now over the phone. This may encourage some men - who are shy about face-to-face meetings - to contact them.

"They don't have to get into their cars and face us one-to-one. We have helped around 275 emergency one-to-one psychotherapy appointments during Covid. We are specialised in domestic violence, and giving advice on obtaining legal



Men would rather move into the spare room and put up with abuse than risk not seeing their children.

orders, emergency protection orders, barring orders, safety orders, and family law," she adds.

But what are the main triggers when it comes to domestic abuse among men? What shape does it take and how is it most likely to present itself? A report in 2005 found that one in seven men and one in three women experienced domestic violence and abuse in their lifetime. Of domestic violence cases, 1 in 3 is a male.

The research also found that around 29 percent of women come forward and report abuse, but only 5 percent of men report it. In 2020, Mens Aid Ireland received 1000 contacts more than in 2019 (from 4,500 contacts, to 5,500). In the early days of January, Mens Aid Ireland received 35 calls in a single day (the average being 12 to 15).

"That kind of growth is very concerning for us. But it is great that we are here. If we do not get to your call, do call again as it just means our line is tied up," Kathrina says.

"This is where our work really comes in, to try and encourage men to come forward. We will accompany you to a Garda Station and will get you court accompaniment. It is not easy to walk into a Garda Station alone and report that you are being abused if you are male. It is a difficult time, mentally, as men are concerned about losing access and guardianship



Kathrina Bentley, CEO of the Mens Aid Ireland helpline.

to children," Kathrina says.

She explains that men predominantly experience 'coercive control' as they - usually - do not present with broken bones or bruises. Domestic abuse is not necessarily a gender issue or minority/majority one, it is greater given that it impacts on family, community and work life. Kathrina tells me that the behaviour of the female perpetrator is akin to that of a male perpetrator, but the effects on men are different.

"They are being picked on by their wives, girlfriends or partners. They are being belittled, slagged-off and told they are useless. That is all verbal and there is no physical bruising. That chips away at a man's self-esteem and confidence."

Kathrina adds that this is a particularly difficult time of year due to the combination of ongoing lockdowns and emerging from the Christmas period when alcohol is an issue. This increases the chances of

violence and abuse.

"We have definitely had a spike in the reports of hitting, kicking, spitting, and hitting with objects in this time. The children are also experiencing this, which is a key thing for us. The children do not just witness the abuse, they are experiencing it and the tension in the house," she says.

Cases where children are involved makes it doubly hard on men. Kathrina says that Christmas is a time when chil-

dren are often taken from the family home, to the woman's home, leaving the man alone and unable to spend Christmas with his children. This is a huge issue for men. Moreover, there is currently no refuge in Ireland for men to go to with their children.

Parental alienation and false allegations are listed as the most prevalent issues in circumstances where children are involved. In most court cases, the ruling is in the mother's favour.

In relation to new coercive control laws, Kathrina says this poses challenges in terms of training within the legal system. A deeper understanding is needed in cases where just because something is invisible, does not mean it is not 'impactful' and is necessarily always the right decision.

"This isn't always the best scenario for the child. Many fathers will say nothing of the abuse because they fear it will jeopardise their relationship with the children. They would rather move into the spare room in the house and put up with the abuse than risk not seeing their children," Kathrina said.

Another misunderstanding surrounding the abuse of men is the concept of masculinity. That men are somehow immune from domestic abuse from their female partners - because they are physically stronger - is a problem for men coming forward. This situation also comes with a societal taboo attached.

"Men have feelings, too. We have a client who is 6' 4" and when he disclosed that he came forward and told people what was happening, people laughed at him. They said, 'you're 6' 4" and she is only 5' whatever'. Because of the way his friends reacted, he did not come to us until two or three years after.

"We will often get calls from female relatives, sisters, mothers, and neighbours, who contact Mens Aid Ireland on behalf of a victim.

"It is stigma, it is fear, and it is shame. The broad question we sometimes ask is, 'how are things at home?' If a man brings up this, please just listen and believe him, and then signpost him to us," said Kathrina.

Helpline: 01 5543 811.